The Learning & Teaching Office

Monthly Digest

ISSUE No. 24    July 2012

The Monthly Digest is produced by Ryerson University’s Learning and Teaching Office for distribution via the LTO’s Teachnet mailing list. It highlights new scholarly publications in learning and teaching, as well as recent news from the world of higher education.

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Teaching Sociology

Stakeholder Meetings as a Means of Engaging Student Learning of Complex Social Problems
By Richard N. Pitt and Joshua R. Packard

“A traditional debate format, in which a small group of students is given the task of presenting arguments for or against a particular issue, can promote pro and con dualism that is both incomplete and counter to developing a sociological imagination. In this article, the authors describe their efforts to avoid this kind of dualism through the development and implementation of a set of stakeholder meetings. They first examine the rationale for developing this method and then describe a particular classroom application of this type of debate. Next, the authors describe their assessment of the exercise both independent of and relative to traditional debates. They conclude by identifying some potential difficulties and make suggestions about the transferability to other academic settings.”

Intercultural Education

Academic Controversy: a cooperative way to debate
By George Jacobs

“The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explain a cooperative learning technique, Academic Controversy, also known as Cooperative Controversy, Structured Controversy and Structured Academic Controversy. This technique has potential for use in intercultural education and has support in both research and theory. Briefly, the technique involves a cooperative form of debate in which groups of four, divided into pairs, take turns representing two opposing views on an issue before attempting to reach a consensus on the issue. The present paper begins with a brief review of the potential educational benefits of controversy. Next, the Academic Controversy technique is described. In the final part of the paper, variations to the technique are discussed, with some of these variations informed by cooperative learning principles.”

Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology

Debate as a Teaching Strategy in Online Education: A Case Study
By Caroline Park, Cheryl Kier, and Kam Jugdev

“This reflective case study was based on our independent use of the debate as an online instructional approach and our shared interest in teaching strategies. In an interdisciplinary manner, using narrative inquiry and action research, we melded our

The Monthly Digest is compiled by Michelle Schwartz
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data sources and analyzed the findings, including our individual experiences with the technique. Our paper contributes to the field of research on faculty self-evaluations of teaching strategies, specifically debates. The topic will be of relevance to those who teach online. The findings suggest that examining faculty perceptions and views on the use of debates in text-based paced and un-paced courses at the online undergraduate and graduate levels can be a valuable undertaking. The process enabled us to benefit from our mutual reflective discussions on the use of debates to understand how each of us used the strategy. Despite our different approaches to the debate, we share many commonalities regarding debate as a teaching strategy.”

**Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education**

*Teaching Argumentation and Scientific Discourse Using the Ribosomal Peptidyl Transferase Reaction*

By R. Jeremy Johnson

“Argumentation and discourse are two integral parts of scientific investigation that are often overlooked in undergraduate science education. To address this limitation, the story of peptide bond formation by the ribosome can be used to illustrate the importance of evidence, claims, arguments, and counter-arguments in scientific discourse. With the determination of the first structure of the large ribosomal subunit bound to a transition state inhibitor came an initial hypothesis about the role of the ribosome in peptide bond formation. This initial hypothesis was based on a few central assumptions about the transition state mimic and acid-base catalysis by serine proteases. The initial proposed mechanism started a flurry of scientific discourse in experimental articles and commentaries that tested the validity of the initial proposed mechanism. Using this civil argumentation as a guide, class discussions, assignments, and a debate were designed that allow students to analyze and question the claims and evidence about the mechanism of peptide bond synthesis. In the end, students develop a sense of critical skepticism, and an understanding of scientific discourse, while learning about the current consensus mechanism for peptide bond synthesis.”

*International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*

*Assigned Positions for In-Class Debates Influence Student Opinions*

By Emily Lilly

“In-class debates are frequently used to encourage student engagement. Ideally, after researching both sides of the debate, students will form their own opinions based on what they have learned. However, in a large course of Environmental Science, opinions of students, when surveyed after the debate, were remarkably consistent with the position that they had been assigned. This study aimed to determine whether an assigned debate position influenced student opinion. Prior to being assigned a debate position, 132 students in Environmental Science were polled for their opinions on six controversial issues. Each student was assigned to a position, with regard to their opinion, for a debate on one of the issues. Students researched both positions and constructed arguments and counter arguments for both sides, but only argued one side of the debate in class. One week following the debates, students were again polled for their opinions. Prior to debating, only 41% of students happened to agree with their assigned position, yet following the debates, 77% of students agreed with their assigned positions. This suggests that researching and/or arguing an assigned position in a class debate influences student opinion toward that position.”