

Using Debate Method in the Classroom

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This is not a standard activity plan, but rather an overview of the benefits and different ways of using debate pedagogy in the classroom. In the words of one of the world's most renowned authorities on debate pedagogy, prof. Alfred Snider of University of Vermont, „debate is a way of teaching ideas that empowers students and requires the application of critical learning skills... it is an engaging, stimulating, and illuminating practice that can help educate students and encourage them to take responsibility for their education.“¹ While the customary use of the word 'debate' calls to mind images of confrontational, highly emotional and not always constructive discussion, often based on demagoguery or empty rhetoric, debate in the classroom setting is guided by certain rules and procedures that ensure that the activity has positive effects on its practitioners.

A debate is a communication practice, either oral or written, that serves the purpose of transmitting ideas and arguments on a multitude of (socially relevant) topics.² It is composed of two or more sides of an issue and positions are identified and allotted in advance of the debate so as to give the teams the chance to prepare their arguments.

In the JustNow educational toolbox, we have several activity plans, short films and timeline card sets whose subjects can also be discussed through various forms of classroom debate activities. This document provides you with several formats and options for implementing debate in the classroom.

Benefits of Debate Pedagogy

Debate is known to have the following side effects :³

- Develop critical thinking and analysis abilities
- Sharpen research skills;
- Debaters gain general and specific knowledge of many current affairs and social issues topics;
- Improve argumentation skills;
- Debaters learn to present an argument persuasively;
- They gain the vision and understanding that there are two sides to most arguments;
- They learn respect for others, to let them have their say.
- Debaters gain the confidence to speak in front of a room full of people;
- They practice how to structure and order their thoughts, to identify, introduce, develop and summarize key points;
- They develop a sense of timing, to prioritize their material and speak within a given time frame;
- They gain the flexibility to react quickly to new ideas, critical questions, and to remain unflustered in crises.

¹ Alfred Snider and Maxwell Schnurer, *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum*, Revised edition, International Debate Education Association (New York: 2006), p.2

² Ibid, p.6

³ Courtesy of the English Speaking Union, www.esu.org

Research on the effects of debate also shows that debate and critical pedagogy are important civic education tools: they engage people with the current social issues around them, arouse their interest and keep them interested in researching and seeking information, in being informed. Furthermore, the academic evidence for the benefits of debating is compelling: these include examining both sides of issues in a thorough and fair manner⁴, promoting gender equality and advancing feminist perspectives⁵, improving student communication skills⁶, increasing active student involvement in the learning process⁷, advancing critical thinking skills to new levels which likely could not be achieved via other methods⁸ and empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning, rather than being instructor dependent.⁹

Goals & Learning Outcomes

Debate as a classroom method can be used towards achieving multiple learning outcomes¹⁰, such as:

- Building students' skills of communicating effectively, persuasively, respectfully;
- Fostering students' team work skills, peer management and collaboration;
- Developing students' critical thinking, analytical, research and summarizing skills;
- Assist the students' internalization of key theoretical concepts;
- Improving students' presenting, public speaking skills, and building their confidence.

Different Options for Applying Debate in the Classroom

Before proceeding to provide instruction about different debate-based activities that can be implemented in the classroom, it is important to cover a bit of basic ground on argumentation, as students need to be introduced to the key components of an argument prior to being invited to debate.

British philosopher Stephen Toulmin created a simple overview of the three parts that are necessary to form a complete argument: a claim, warrant and evidence (or grounds). These are the constituent parts of an argument and necessary for rhetorical clarity.

⁴ Ingalls, Z. (1985), May 8. Resolved, that competition in college debate is as fierce as in a basketball playoff game. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. 13-14; Mooney, C. J. (1991), March 13. Foes share a classroom to help students examine both sides of the abortion debate. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A15, A18.

⁵ Brusckie, J. and A. Johnson. (1994). An analysis of differences in success rates of male and female debaters. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 30:162-173, Elliot, L. B. (1993). 'Using debates to teach the psychology of women.' *Teaching of Psychology* 20:35-38, and Haffey, D. B. (1993), April. A problem-solving analysis of women in debate. Paper presented at the 1993 joint meetings of the SSSA & the CSCA. Lexington, KY.

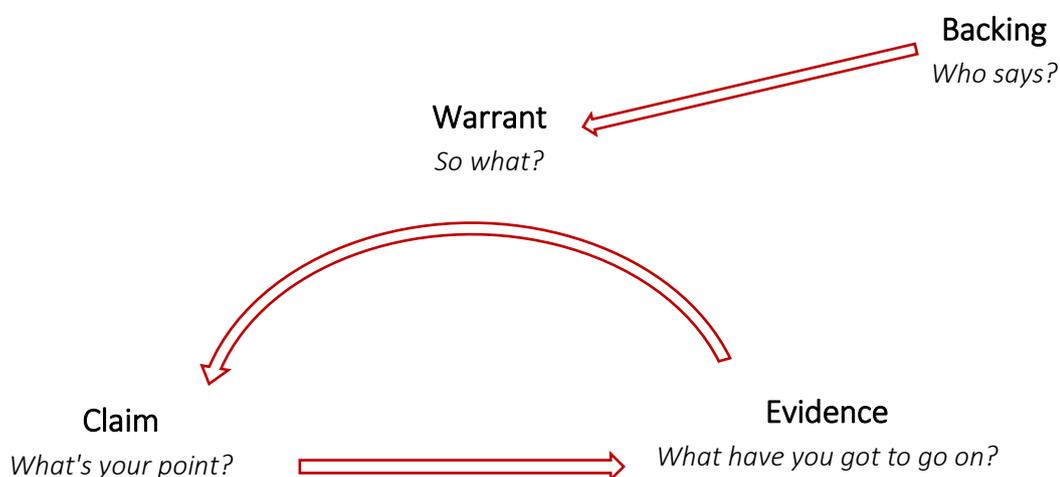
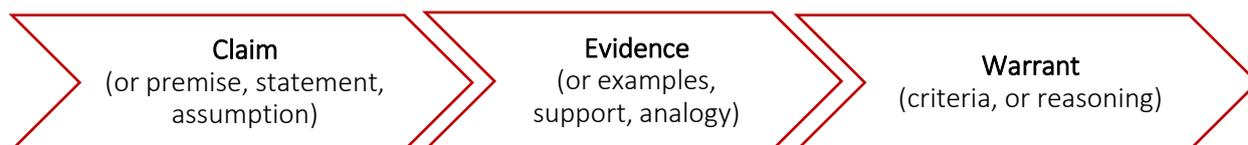
⁶ Garrett, M., L. Hood, and L. Schoener. (1996). 'Debate: A teaching strategy to improve verbal communication and critical-thinking skills'. *Nurse Educator* 21:37-40.

⁷ Crone, J. A. (1997). 'Using panel debates to increase student involvement in the introductory sociology class.' *Teaching Sociology* 25:214-218.

⁸ Colbert, K. and T. Biggers. (1987). 'Why should we support debate?' in *Advanced debate: readings in theory, practice, & teaching* 3rd ed., ed. D. Thomas and J. Hart, Chap. 1. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

⁹ Frederick, P. J. (1987). 'Student involvement: Active learning in large classes'. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 32:45-56.

¹⁰ Juan Luis Jiménez, Jordi Perdiguero and Ancor Suárez, "Debating as a classroom tool for adapting learning outcomes to the European higher education area", Research Institute of Applied Economics, University of Barcelona, Working Paper 2011/09



We use argumentation to present our views and to convince others of our opinions and beliefs. There are many justification criteria for arguments, for e.g.

- Moral or Value-based arguments (that argue something is good or bad, or should (not) be done on basis of an intrinsic value, ethical code of behavior, morality);
- Instrumental or Policy-based arguments (that argue something is good or bad, or should (not) be done due to the perceived costs and benefits of the action, (un)intended consequences of a policy, feasibility, etc.)

Most sound arguments have an element of considering the values and implications behind a given question, dilemma, policy or event.

Aristotle believed that persuasion rests on three basic categories: ethos, pathos and logos.

Ethos or ethical appeal means convincing the audience through speaker invoking respect on basis of his authority, expertise on the subject matter.

Pathos or emotional appeal means persuading by appealing to audience's emotions. Whether by language choice or by using metaphors and analogies that invoke emotional response, emotional appeal can effectively enhance argumentation.

Finally, **logos or appeal to logic** means persuading by the use of reasoning.

Aristotle's favorite, logic, is based on effective deductive and inductive reasoning, and on avoidance of fallacies.

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TWO CIRCLES

Materials needed: space for all students to participate (it is best to clear the classroom of desks and chairs, or go outside where furniture will not pose an obstacle to forming large circles)

Preparations: the teacher/facilitator needs to select a debate topic, and ensure that students have some preliminary/basic knowledge about it, sufficient to form arguments and discuss about it.

Instructions:

- a) Students are instructed to form two circles, one on the outside and another on the inside. Students are to form pairs (external circle facing the internal circle).
- b) Teacher reads out the motion/debate topic, or a statement. The students in the external circle are to agree with the statement; the students on the internal circle are to disagree.
- c) The students discuss: in each pair, each student offers 2 arguments (in favor or agreeing with the statement, the other disagreeing with it). This discussion lasts for 10 minutes.
- d) The students are then instructed to move – external circle clockwise direction, the internal circle counter-clockwise. After a few seconds, the teacher stops the movement of the circles, and new student pairs are formed.
- e) The teacher now reverses the roles: external circle students are now disagreeing with the statement, and internal circle students are now agreeing. Student pairs hold a new mini-debate, each offering 2 arguments in favor of their position. This discussion lasts for 10 minutes.
- f) In the end, the teacher holds a group reflection on the topic, and the arguments offered during the mini debates.



AGREE/DISAGREE BALL TOSS

Materials needed: space for all students to participate (it is best to clear the classroom of desks and chairs, or go outside where furniture will not pose an obstacle to forming large circles), soft ball or another item of soft texture (e.g. plush toy)

Preparations: the teacher/facilitator selects a debate topic, and ensures that students have some preliminary/basic knowledge about it, sufficient to form arguments and discuss about it.

Instructions:

- a) The teacher instructs the students about the rules of this particular activity: (1) no argument should be repeated (i.e. one should always strive to provide original argumentation); (2) student is to express the argument from the affirmative/negative side depending on the request of the previous speaker, rather than on the basis of personal conviction; (3) each student in the small group should speak a minimum of 2 times; (4) only the student holding the ball may speak (there are no interruptions).
- b) Teacher divides the classroom into several small groups (ideally, maximum 6 participants per group). The teacher writes the debate topic/motion/statement on the board so that it is visible to everyone. The teacher models the assignment using two other students: reading the statement from the board, the teacher says 'I agree with this, because... (and provides an argument in support of the statement on the board).' After the teacher is finished with an argument in favor of the statement, s/he tosses the ball to a student and says, 'You agree with me.' → the student is then required to provide another argument, in support of the statement on the board. After stating his or her argument, this student tosses the ball to another student, and says 'You disagree.', and this student now needs to provide an argument against the statement on the board. (etc.)
- c) The point of this activity is that it requires absolute attention and focus from the students, as they never know (1) when the ball will come flying their way or (2) whether they will be asked to support or attack the statement that is being debated. In each small group, each student should speak at least twice.



OPINION LINE

Materials needed: space for all students to participate (it is best to clear the classroom of desks and chairs, or go outside where furniture will not pose an obstacle to forming large circles), soft ball or another item of soft texture (e.g. plush toy)

Preparations: the teacher/facilitator selects a debate topic, and ensures that students have some preliminary/basic knowledge about it, sufficient to form arguments and discuss about it.

Instructions:

- a) The teacher writes the debate topic or statement on the board.
- b) S/he instructs the students to imagine a line extending throughout the classroom (or, if space allows it, create this line using colored tape on the floor), with one far corner end of the classroom having the sign 'absolutely agree' and the other opposite far corner having the sign 'absolutely disagree'. In the middle is the 'not sure' sign.
- c) The teacher asks the students to position themselves along the opinion line, on the basis of their attitude towards the statement on the board.
- d) Only the student holding the ball may speak (there are no interruptions).
- e) The teacher should ask some of the students from the far ends of the line to offer their argument as to why they stand where they chose to stand.
- f) After each argument, the entire group should 'vote' on it, by either coming a step closer to the student who presented the argument (if you agreed with what s/he said), or by moving a step away (if you disagreed). If you were not convinced in any way by what you heard, just jump in your place.
- g) The students should indicate their willingness to speak by holding their hand up (to receive the ball next), or if there are no volunteers to speak, the ball should be thrown at random to the next speaker.



CLASS DEBATE

Materials needed: space for all students to participate in (tables should be cleared, and two rows of chairs put in the center of the classroom, facing one another), soft ball or another item of soft texture (e.g. plush toy)

Preparations: the teacher/facilitator selects a debate topic, and ensures that students have some preliminary/basic knowledge about it, sufficient to form arguments and discuss about it; with the help of the students the chairs are organized in two rows facing each other

Instructions:

- a) The teacher writes the debate topic or statement on the board.
- b) S/he divides the students randomly into two groups, one agreeing with the statement on the board, and the other group disagreeing with it.
- c) The groups are given 10 minutes for quick discussion and brainstorm on different arguments, perspectives to explore, stakeholders analysis, etc.
- d) After 10 minutes have passed, the students take their seats in the two rows.
- e) Only the student holding the ball may speak (there are no interruptions).
- f) The students should indicate their willingness to speak by holding their hand up (to receive the ball next), or if there are no volunteers to speak, the ball should be thrown at random to the next speaker.
- g) The arguments should be offered consecutively by the opposing side (i.e. student from affirmative/government speaks, and then student from negative/opposition speaks, then again student from affirmative/government, etc.)
- h) The teacher should monitor that the arguments are not being repeated, and that there is engagement – that the students are responding to each other’s argumentation (by refuting it, or enhancing it with further examples or evidence where appropriate).

Homework Ideas

- All of the debate activities presented here are planned in such a way that the students have some prior knowledge of the topic, and are able to use their critical thinking and analytical skills to come up with arguments in favour or against a certain policy. However, better debates can be held if the students are given more time to prepare and research a given topic. → Consider organizing a class debate by making it known in advance which teams are on the affirmative/government side, and which teams on the negative/opposition side.
- Another way of getting the previously noted learning outcomes is to assign individual speech assignment to students as homework, where they are required to prepare a persuasive 5-min presentation in favour or against a debate motion. These speeches should include a problem analysis, 2-3 fully developed arguments (incl. evidence), a call to action and an effective/appealing closing statement.

Examples of JustNow Debate Motions

For more examples of debate motions, explore the Debatabase of the International Debate Education Association: <https://idebate.org/debatabase>

1. Non-violent protest is the best way to counter dictatorship;
2. Extreme right wing parties should be banned;
3. Every citizen should be provided with Internet access;
4. The state should prohibit all items of clothing which cover the face;
5. We should ban all religious involvement in schools;
6. To preserve peace, we should prepare for war;
7. Prosecutions and trials foster reconciliation after a war;
8. Global human rights institutions should be dissolved in favor of regional human rights institutions;
9. We should make development aid conditional on the human rights record of the recipient countries;
10. We should ban citizens from traveling as tourists to countries with poor human rights record;
11. International human rights regime has done more harm than good;
12. Western nations should not attend sporting events in countries with bad human rights records;
13. International community has a duty to protect human rights, if necessary by military means, even in violation of the principle of national sovereignty;
14. Multinational companies should be held liable for human rights abuses that occur anywhere in their supply chain;
15. European countries should compel migrants and refugees to attend lessons about the sexual norms prevalent in the receiving country;
16. Western Liberal Democracies should implement Matching system for refugees;
17. Only direct European Investment Fund Money to States that agree to take a share of refugees proportional to their share of EU GDP;
18. Campaigners for refugee protection should not use pictures displaying the graphic suffering of refugees as part of their advocacy;
19. Environmental refugees should be granted citizenship in countries that have contributed most heavily to global pollution;
20. States should take high numbers of refugees, even when faced with strong democratic opposition;
21. The international community should pay countries near to conflict zones to process, settle and restrict the further movement of refugees;
22. The EU should offer Greece full debt relief in exchange for its housing Syrian refugees;
23. The EU should allow freedom of movement within its borders to Syrian refugees;
24. UN's responsibility to protect is more important than its respect to national sovereignty;
25. ICC should have its own enforcement arm (e.g. police/army);
26. Individuals suspected of having committed atrocities in Syria should be investigated by the ICC;
27. ICC is not an effective deterrent; etc.



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