TEACHING BY DEBATE

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Introduction

As an assistant professor of constitutional law at the United States Military Academy at West Point (hereafter “West Point”), I have tried various methods of instruction to teach cadets about the law. I have tried lectures (both with and without the Socratic Method), videos, news articles, and small group discussions to name a few. Desiring to increase cadet involvement, class preparation and oral speaking skills, I introduced a debate model to teach my cadets individual rights (such as freedom of speech).

Since my introduction of the debate model, I have seen increased cadet preparation for class and an improvement in my cadets’ ability to persuasively and succinctly articulate a legal position on constitutional issues that run the gamut from the commerce clause and presidential seizure power to due process in wartime. Still, as the semester drags on, I notice cadet enthusiasm dwindling. As a response, I have replaced debates with other teaching methods with meager results. Upon conducting a survey of my three sections, I found that the majority of the class wanted to continue debating, though there existed in most sections a minority of students that wanted nothing more to do with debates.

Beyond summarizing some of the literature on teaching by debate, my purpose in this paper is to provide several debating methods that can be used over the course of a semester, giving the reader options to choose from in formulating a plan to introduce debate and keep the class interested over the long haul. Before doing this, however, I will briefly discuss some of criticism of using debate in the classroom followed by a rebuttal. After understanding both the criticisms and advantages of debate, the reader can then choose among the various methods, many of which allow the professor to account for the potential drawbacks of this teaching method without totally scrapping the idea and losing the unique educational opportunities it affords.

Criticism

Debate is not without its critics. In her article The Debate Debate,2 Professor Tumposky sets forth numerous critiques to the use of debate in the classroom. First, she emphasizes that

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debates tend toward dualism. Dualism is “the division of something conceptually into two opposed or contrasted aspects, or the state of being so divided.” In the classroom, this means that debate—instead of causing students to consider a multiplicity of perspectives—might persuade students to view an issue as having only two positions (yes or no). Thus, Professor Tumposky explains that “[d]ebate can oversimplify and misrepresent the nature of knowledge.”

Second, debates tend to focus students toward the question of winning or losing. Instead of seeking the best solution to the proposed problem or issue, students focus selectively on aspects that strengthen their own argument, often refuse to make concessions, and permit arguments to be reduced to sound bites (e.g., think of televised presidential debates). Third, inherent in the debate format is the need for two sides to validate a point of view; however, most reasonable people will agree that some issues do not have an “other side of the story.” For instance, Professor Tumposky cites an issue such as Holocaust denial as a prime example of an unreasonable position not suitable for debate. Fourth, debate fosters a confrontational classroom environment that is not suitable for many students. Professor Tumposky cites several studies that suggest the adversarial nature of debate tends to be less suited to the way females and members of certain minority groups communicate. As such, Professor Tumposky raises good questions about whether debate is a prudent pedagogy to foster genuine peer interaction and learning in universities today.

So Why Do It

After considering the criticism, it seems reasonable to question the utility of debate in the classroom. Yet, for all of the criticism, proponents continue to laud the advantages of debate in the classroom for disciplines that range across a spectrum of educational disciplines, including sociology, history, psychology, biotechnology, math, health, dentistry, nursing, marketing and social work. In fact, debate in a written format has even been utilized effectively in online

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3 Id. at 53-54.
5 Tumposky, supra note 2 at 53.
6 Id. at 54.
7 Id.
8 Id.
9 Id.
10 Id.
12 Tumposky, supra note 2 at 54.
13 Id.
Initially, it is key to understand that debate is not a methodological strait-jacket. In her influential article on the utility of debate, Professor Kennedy defines debate broadly: “Debate refers to the process of considering multiple viewpoints and arriving at a judgment, and its application ranges from an individual using debate to make a decision in his or her own mind to an individual or group using debate to convince others to agree with them.”

Research has shown that students learn more effectively when they play an active role in the learning process as opposed to passively absorbing information. Active learning has several definitions but generally means providing students “opportunities to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach the course content.” No one method of instruction is perfect, as students learn in different ways and benefit from a variety of instructional methods being used in any given class, but study has demonstrated a positive link between student engagement and critical thinking and grade point average, particularly in cases involving students with low Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. This research supports the use of debate in the classroom since it requires active engagement by students, investing them with the responsibility to investigate, articulate and defend a particular issue.

Research has also shown that debate encourages class participation among those students that typically do not talk in class. For professors struggling with ill-prepared students, debate also offers an opportunity to put the onus back on the student but with the benefit of sharing in the reward of presentation (or at least the fear of looking ill-prepared in front of one’s peers). Study has proven debate to be an effective means of requiring students to master content more

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17 Kennedy, *supra* note 14 at 183.
20 *Id.*
thoroughly by preparing for the debate.\textsuperscript{24} Despite complaints about the workload involved in preparing for debates,\textsuperscript{25} student surveys have yielded overall favorable results toward debate.\textsuperscript{26}

Most importantly, debate offers an opportunity for students to move beyond the acquisition of basic knowledge in a subject matter and progress into the types of higher order critical thinking skills that good debate requires.\textsuperscript{27} Debaters must analyze, synthesize and evaluate the knowledge they have acquired in order to propose, oppose and make competing choices.\textsuperscript{28} Debaters apply course material through the use of well-reasoned arguments that are capable of being understood by not only their professor but also their peers.\textsuperscript{29} This process develops and improves oral communication skills, and at the same time, hones students’ listening skills as a necessity to make effective rebuttals.\textsuperscript{30}

Though some may question the competitive nature of debate in the classroom, it can actually create unique opportunities for students to develop empathy.\textsuperscript{31} Through exposure to contrasting viewpoints or by the defense of a position to which a student is opposed, students learn to listen to both sides of an argument and to see things from the other point of view.\textsuperscript{32} Debate also provides an opportunity to reduce instructor bias toward subject matter and encourages the introduction of logic and reason into a class that might otherwise be overcome by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Goodwin, J. (2003). Students’ perspectives on debate exercises in content area classes. \textit{Communication Education,} 52(2), 157-163.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Id.; Combs, H., & Bourne, S. (1994). The renaissance of educational debate: Results of a five-year study of the use of debate in business education. \textit{Journal on Excellence in College Teaching,} 5(1), 57-67 (reporting 78\% of the 544 students in a senior level marketing class reported learning more by debate than lecture); Osborne, A. (2005). Debate and student development in the history classroom. \textit{New Directions for Teaching and Learning,} 103, 39-50 (stating that her students referred to her class involving debate as opposed to her non-debate class as the “fun class”).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Vygotsky, L. (1978). \textit{Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.} Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Cronin, M., & Glenn, P. (1991). Oral communication across the curriculum in higher education: The state of the art. \textit{Communication Education,} 40(4), 356-367 (noting through surveys the perception of business leaders about inadequacy of communication skills among undergraduates).
\item \textsuperscript{31} Goodwin, supra note 25 at 160 (quoting a student “[Debate] taught me that I shouldn’t be so narrow-minded and should hear things out until I make a final decision.”); Walker, M., & Warhurst, C. (2000). Debates, assessment, and student learning. \textit{Teaching in Higher Education,} 5(1), 33-49.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Allison, supra note 30; Combs et al., supra note 26; Snider et al., supra note 22 at 9 (quoting a student “Debate changed my life because it taught me to listen.”).
\end{itemize}
personal opinions.33 Though not an all-inclusive list, these are among some of the many reasons why debate has been recognized as one of best methods of learning for two thousand years.34

**Methods of Debate**

Debating in the classroom can take many forms. Though not an all-inclusive list, the following debate methods offer a range of opportunities to increase student understanding and involvement with course material. This section will discuss the following types of debate: four corner, role-play, fishbowl, think-pair-share, and meeting house.

The four corner debate35 starts with a question or statement, such as: “The federal health care law is a constitutional exercise of the commerce clause.” Students are then afforded time to personally consider the statement and their view based on the law. The four corners of the classroom are labeled “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” After personal consideration, the students move to the corner that most represents their position on the issue. The groups in each corner of the classroom then work together to come up with the best arguments for their position. After a specified time for group discussion, each group presents their strongest arguments to the other groups. This can be made in presentation form or through a more directed debate where the professor or assigned students can moderate and direct time for each group to present and rebut. After the debate, students are permitted to switch sides if their personal views changed. This form of debate directly counters the argument of dualism, showing there are more than two-sides to an issue, and often, variations of the sides.

Role-play debates36 also help to avoid dualistic debate models by assigning students to argue on behalf of different characters in a situation. For instance, in the issue of national health care, students could be assigned to various roles, such as doctor, patient, a wealthy person, a poor person, a lawyer, a judge, an insurance company, the president, and so on. Through the debate of the issue from various points of view, the students can broaden their understanding of the issue and its complexity.

Fishbowl debates37 can take several different forms, but usually involve grouping chairs in a circle pattern. Several chairs are then placed inside the circle for teams representing the different positions of the debate. Chairs can also be added for several students representing the audience. To bolster attention among those outside the fishbowl, an empty chair can be added, which is free game, allowing someone from the outside to enter the fishbowl to ask a question or make an argument.

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35 Kennedy, supra note 14 at 185.
36 Id.
37 Id.
Think-pair-share debates require students to think and make notes alone about the issue. After personal reflection is completed, pairs are formed. The pairs then work together, comparing their notes and creating lists to support both sides of the issue. Once complete, the pairs of two are combined with another pair. The newly formed groups of four discuss the issue, choose a position, and edit their list down to their best arguments. Finally, the groups of four present their position and reasons to the class.

Meeting-house debates and problem-solving debates are variations of the Lincoln-Douglas debate model. In a meeting house debate, each team makes an opening argument. The class is then given the opportunity to question each side. The professor serves as moderator, ensuring each side gets an equal amount of time to argue. In order to encourage more class participation and limit certain students from dominating the questioning, the professor could assign cards to each student. After each question, the questioner gives up one card. Once a student is out of cards, he or she cannot ask another question until all other students run out of cards. Alternatively, if three cards are assigned, a questioner that has two cards remaining may be limited from asking another question until everyone else in the class has only two cards.

Problem-solving debates typically involve eight students. Four students are assigned to each team. One student from each side presents a position based on historical and philosophical arguments. The next two students take the position on why changes are or are not justified. The third set of students propose a plan that would carry-out their position. The final two students summarize the position of their team and provide a closing argument.

**Conclusion:**

Debate offers a unique opportunity for professors to encourage students to work together, to apply course material, and to assume increased responsibility in the classroom. Study of debate has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting critical thinking and oral speaking skills. Beyond these skills, debate has received positive results in student surveys and has shown an increase in student preparation and participation. Critics of debate pose several legitimate concerns; however, the use of various methods of debate can account for these concerns while still allowing the positive aspects of debate to be enjoyed in the classroom. Finally, a professor’s ability to create a positive classroom environment during debate (e.g., emphasizing learning and not only the competitiveness of debate) can ensure the pitfalls of debate are minimized and the opportunity to learn the subject matter is enhanced.

**Annotated Bibliography**


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38 *Id.*
39 *Id.*
40 *Id.*
41 *Id.*
Professor Huryn offers an overview of teaching by debate, including a description of format and grading. She highlights the benefits she discovered by incorporating debate in her classroom, including increased class attendance, participation and enthusiasm. She also discusses the role of debate in encouraging vigorous discussion in the classroom.


Professor Melvin sought to reduce the subjectivity of class participation grades by utilizing an approach that combined instructor with peer grades. Students scored their peers on a scale of high (3 points), medium (2 points) and low (1 point). To avoid peer leniency, Professor Melvin used a forced distribution by requiring students to give out an equal number of high, medium, and low evaluations. Results revealed a high degree of consistency between class participation grades given by the professor and median peer ratings. Course evaluations showed that students considered the professor/peer method fair, and none of the one hundred and forty-four students across seven courses argued with the instructor about the assigned grade for class participation.


Professor Smith tested the correlation between instructor and peer evaluation of student debates. Instead of proving that students rated their peers in a lenient fashion, his study showed that student evaluations were lower than the instructor’s ratings. The differences, however, were small, revealing a strong correlation between instructor and peer evaluations. Moreover, student evaluations revealed positive feelings about debate, including personal observations by students about how much they learned as well as their opinion on the benefits of evaluating their peers.


Professor Martin analyzed a rating system that equally weighted peer evaluations with instructor evaluations to assign grades to students engaging in classroom debate. Overall, peer evaluation was proven reliable, as peer and instructor evaluations regarding offensive and defensive debate performance were similar. However, Professor Martin found that peers were more likely to give higher evaluations than the instructor for research and presentation. This so-called “peer leniency” is a concern for peer evaluations and should be monitored by the instructor in order to ensure a reliable rating system. Most students reported feeling comfortable in the role as rater and perceived the system as fair.


Professor Garrett analyzes the utility of debate in teaching nurses. Although debate has been around for over two thousand years, Professor Garrett suggests that debate is an innovative way of teaching, which had been abandoned by many educators in the early 1900s. She explains
basic debating procedure, and she highlights a technique that can reduce the propensity for
dualism. The article is unfortunately limited in its overview of debating methods; however, it
provides further support for the use of debate in multiple disciplines, including nursing, as a
means to develop critical thinking and communication skills.

Budesheim, T., & Lundquist, A. (2000). Consider the opposite: Opening minds through in-class

Professor Budesheim and Professor Lundquist analyze the impact of debate on
assimilation bias and suggest approaches to avoid this potential pitfall of debate. At the
beginning of the term in their psychology courses, the authors polled their students on a scale of
one to seven, regarding their students’ position on various controversial issues that would be
discussed in the courses (7 = very confidently, 1 = not at all confident). The authors assigned
student to debate a position either consistent or inconsistent with their existing opinion.
Following the debates, students were again polled. The results revealed that 88% of students that
argued positions consistent with their pre-existing viewpoint either became more confident in
their viewpoint or made no change. In contrast, 73% of students that were required to argue a
position inconsistent with their pre-existing viewpoint either grew less confident or changed their
viewpoint. As a result, the authors suggest that in order to ensure debate challenges students’
pre-existing views and promotes an objective analysis of both sides of an issue, students should
be assigned to defend the position that is inconsistent with their pre-existing viewpoint.

Goodwin, James (2003). Students’ perspectives on debate in content area classes,
*Communication Education, 52*(2), 157-163.

Professor Goodwin utilized debate in a 70-student communications course. The debate
format included group-work prior to debate. At the end of the semester, Goodwin surveyed his
70 students, receiving 52 responses. The survey results demonstrated that the overwhelming
majority of students enjoyed the debate format as a method of learning. Though students
identified negative features of debate, no more than four students identified the same feature, and
the overall favorable responses demonstrated that the positives outweighed the negatives in the
opinion of the vast majority of students. This article provides further support for the utility of
debate in the classroom and also identifies several pitfalls of debate that can be addressed by the
instructor in order to make the debate experience more effective for students.


The authors of this article taught large introductory level sociology classes at the
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Due to the administrative burden of grading papers in
classes that could contain 100 or more students, the authors dispensed with term papers as a
method to teach critical thinking and writing skills. The authors explain the success they
encountered through the use of debate on class enthusiasm, participation, and increased test scores.


Professor Tumposky harshly criticizes the use of debate in the classroom for various reasons, including the danger of establishing too competitive of a classroom environment, promoting dualism, and trivializing the complexity of issues. She opines on the lack of utility of debate in promoting critical thinking, though her harsh criticism fails to address methods of debate and instructor practices that would alleviate her concerns.


The author of this article highlights the positive impact of debate on critical thinking and oral communication skills. The author also considers and then refutes criticism levied at debate as a method of teaching in the classroom. The article concludes with a discussion of various methods of conducting and assessing debate.