

Debate as a Tool for Enhancing Critical Thinking and Civic Skills

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Abstract

This manuscript emphasizes the role of debate in promoting individual competencies necessary for democratic engagement. By simulating actual democratic processes, our debate course provided students with practical experience in deliberation and perspective-taking. This approach encourages students to navigate complex societal issues, fostering an appreciation of the nuances of argumentation while cultivating empathy towards differing viewpoints. These findings suggest that structured debates can serve as a tool for promoting democratic skills among college students, preparing them to become informed, active participants in their political communities.

Introduction

For many people, discussing politics and social issues with strangers holds little appeal. Our political identities no longer represent just our predilection for one political party over another, our policy preferences, or our feelings about how the government should work. Instead they represent where we go to church, where we went to school, our basic social values, and even our prejudices. With all of these other identities linked to our partisanship, “every election feels like it’s also about the status of our religious group and our racial group, and our culture and where we live, and who we grew up with” (Mason 2023).

The Gen Z students many of us teach in the college classroom are no less partisan than their parents. Most of our youngest American voters possess both positive attachments to political parties and negative attitudes towards those of opposing parties. These positive and negative political attitudes pose a problem in university classrooms. When we teach, we frequently ask students to acknowledge that other individuals perceive and respond differently to

issues. This requires discussions of politics or identity. Such conversations may feel fraught for students, discouraging participation or causing discomfort.

Yet taking out or minimizing politics in our lives is not a viable option. Whatever definition of participatory democracy we accept, all entail the idea that citizens should be involved in making decisions that affect their lives (Levin 1998). As rights expand and participation enlarges to include new groups, private acts like voting may become less important to good governance than the public and social acts that occur when people engage with one another in the public sphere (Giddens 1994). The diversity of those participating in political society makes the practices associated with “dialogic democracy,” or problem-solving occurring through negotiation, understanding, deliberation, and mutual accommodation, particularly important (Giddens 1994; Levin 1998). Dialogic democracy requires skills of its citizens--the ability to articulate an argument and justify a point of view, to hear and understand the views of others, and to recognize reasonable and unreasonable choices (Levin 1998: 70). Citizens must be prepared to tolerate diversity and to listen to their fellow citizens. They must have some level of social trust and respect for others around them.

The university classroom could serve as an important space for learning and practicing these skills. As faculty members, many of us would argue that our charge includes teaching people to engage with diverse ideas and opinions thoughtfully, including their own. We can teach students to listen, to negotiate, to deliberate, and to respect opposing viewpoints. We contend that formal debate represents one way to cultivate these democratic practices in our classrooms.

According to Joshua DeSantis, “Formal debate has deep roots as a mechanism for truth-seeking, knowledge construction, and public discourse” (103). It requires students to

construct and advance arguments, but also to listen to and respond to the arguments of others. It teaches them to engage respectfully in discourse on contentious topics, and acclimates them to the democratic reality of the presence of different and often opposing viewpoints. In short, debate teaches them the skills associated with citizenship in a diverse democracy while also allowing them the opportunity and space to practice those skills.

Using Structured Debate to Model Citizenship

Our study contributes to the growing body of literature on the advantages of structured debate to civic education. Positive outcomes of structured classroom debate include improved content retention and critical thinking across academic disciplines and enhanced “interpersonal and communication skills like collaboration, flexibility, and emotional regulation” (DeSantis 104).

Often debate is integrated into college classrooms as a way to get students to engage more deeply or critically with course content. While debate facilitates content acquisition, our course substantially deviated from this pedagogical motivation in that our primary goal was to promote metacognitive processes more so than to teach any particular content area. In this regard, structured debate enables students to develop and practice higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis over lower-order thinking skills such as comprehension and application (Kennedy 184). Preparing for debate requires familiarity with media literacy and logical argumentation: students must refine a position through research and careful scrutiny of sources, and be able to organize and prioritize evidence while anticipating challenges, as well as identify and avoid inconsistencies and logical fallacies.

Formal debate also affords students the opportunity to develop interpersonal (or so-called “soft”) skills valued in today’s workplace. For one thing, the demand on participants and audience members to eschew distraction and listen actively during formal debate far surpasses the relatively passive behaviors of students during a lecture course or even, in many cases, a discussion-based seminar course. Debate is a time-tested pedagogical tool for developing oral communication skills even in second language learners (el Majidi et al.). The inherently interactive aspect of debate—the obligation to work in teams to collaborate on the requisite tasks—also makes this pedagogical tool stand out. David Wilsford observes that college graduates’ interactive skills are “distinctly underdeveloped” (224). He blames standard college course work, which occurs in an “interactive vacuum” whereby students can attend class and earn a grade without ever speaking to another student. In contrast, in the workplace “Most of what students will accomplish as employees will be collaboratively based, in team projects and in interactions with peers and all layers of an organizational hierarchy” (Wilsford 224; see also Bellon 162).

Finally, research suggests that formal debate offers students greater exposure to alternative viewpoints, which may prompt empathy for divergent positions. Kennedy writes, “when students defend a position they oppose, they must at least temporarily transcend their own bias. By learning about both sides of a controversial topic, students are more open-minded and better able to see another person’s viewpoint” (185).

Course Description

HUM 261 “Fight Club: Debate and Civil Discourse” is an interdisciplinary course designed to be taught during Virginia Wesleyan University’s three-week intensive January term. Twenty-four students, ranging from first years to seniors across all majors, registered for three-hour sessions five days a week. The course required students to work intensively on weekly-shifting teams of four to argue the pros and cons of topics we selected together and assigned. In class, students engaged in preliminary activities such as research and writing, leading to the weekly performance of structured debates on various contemporary political and social issues, prompting them to articulate their viewpoints, consider opposing arguments, and develop reasoned positions. The topics debated ranged from the pros and cons of implementing gender-neutral bathrooms to the role that social media plays in the loneliness epidemic. The course emphasized listening without distraction, limited technology by requiring handwritten notes, and included both peer evaluations and self-assessments of debate performance. We assessed the effects of the curriculum using qualitative and quantitative data collected through surveys, student journals, and classroom observations.

Course Description / Learning Objectives:

HUM 261, Fight Club: Debate and Civil Discourse, offers an interdisciplinary approach to critical thinking that introduces students to some aspects of forensics (speech and debate). Students stage debates on contemporary social issues during the term, developing their own lines of inquiry and conducting research in preparation for weekly engagements.

The learning objectives for the course are as follows:

- Understand the value of civil discourse and civic engagement
- Demonstrate various forms of critical literacy (e.g. media literacy) via research
- Develop informed opinions
- Participate effectively in meaningful and thoughtful discussions with peers
- Practice listening without distraction
- Evaluate peers' performance and conduct careful self-assessment, reflecting on one's own values, strengths, and skills

The conception for the course was inspired by a children's podcast titled *Smash Boom Best*. This podcast models structured debate by having professional content creators use facts and stories to debate subjects such as "Bluey vs. Elmo," "Mars vs. Saturn," or "Weekends vs. Vacations." Each episode features a single debate topic with a static sequence of four rounds. Each side provides a Declaration of Greatness, or opening statement, followed immediately by the other side's rebuttal. This is followed by the Micro Round, featuring a creative challenge, such as a letter to the editor, that each side has prepared in advance; a round called the Sneak Attack, a surprise creative challenge requiring debaters to invent something on the spot, such as a rap song, that supports or extends their argument; and the Final Six, six words to summarize or wrap up the argument. After every round, the designated judge, typically a precocious child guest, and audience listening at home are invited to award a point to the winner. At the end, points are tallied and the winner of the debate is revealed. *Smash Boom Best* is hosted by Molly Bloom and produced by American Public Media. The website for the show offers resources for educators, including lesson plans, a guide to logical fallacies, and even a scorecard.

We adapted the structure of *Smash Boom Best* debates to include the following components: a prepared opening statement, an improvised rebuttal, a creative challenge which varied each week, and the closing statement in the form of Six Last Words.

While we, the instructors, selected broad themes to investigate each week via readings, videos and other course materials, students were given a role in developing more specific lines of inquiry to research and debate. For example, in January 2024 the three designated weekly themes were the loneliness epidemic, book bans, and gender-neutral spaces. Thus, under the rubric of “book bans,” one pairing of teams debated the question, “What matters more, parental rights and entitlement or children’s rights and needs?” Another pair of teams debated “Should schools be able to restrict materials that make students uncomfortable?” and the third pair of teams debated “Should parents be allowed to restrict children’s access to library materials?”

Each team of four students was responsible for planning, researching, drafting, revising, and editing arguments to present before the class audience. The intensive January term three-hour days allowed for ample time for collaborative research and writing sessions during class period. Teams also had to determine individual roles and delegate tasks; this enabled those students reluctant to speak aloud to take on important behind-the-scenes roles of research and writing. For each debate, teams submitted an annotated bibliography and all pre-prepared remarks, including opening statements, closing statements, and the creative challenge. To make the scheduled debates more formal, we obtained a large digital timer with a count-down function. To make them more fun, we brought donuts on debate days, every Friday.

The creative challenge provided a deviation from the formal aspects of structured debate and subsequently brought levity to the tasks at hand. While many students were comfortable with

the scholarly practices of research, source evaluation, and composition (e.g. of opening statements), the creative challenges brought in those students who would not have otherwise identified themselves as “forensics team material.” These creative challenges included writing limericks, developing a smart phone app and social media campaign, and performing dramatic skits about school board meetings.

We approached the learning objective regarding active listening in two distinct ways. First, we offered lessons on the art of rebuttal (see the sample student notes from this day). During the debates, following one team’s opening statement, the opposing team had three minutes to develop their sixty-second rebuttal. The pressure of potentially winning a point for the strength of their rebuttal stimulated rapt attention. To further encourage undistracted listening, we required students to take all class notes by hand; a practice we justified by assigning readings about recent studies on the advantages of writing by hand over typing (e.g., Hu). During debate days, students in the audience acted as judges, recording team scores for each round in their journals using a detailed scorecard template we had provided (see sample scorecards).

Findings/Data

Preliminary data and student feedback indicate student improvement on a number of dimensions. We assessed outcomes in this course using instructor evaluations, both graded and anecdotal, of student performance on the same tasks in different units over time. We also used student feedback to a survey about the course administered after the end of course and student feedback on teaching evaluations. Future data collection will involve formalized pre-and post-course survey measures of student knowledge, perceptions of their skills, and comfort engaging in various activities like public speaking.

At the beginning of the course, a number of students expressed a general lack of interest in politics and discomfort with contentious discourse. 50% of the students who responded to our survey after course completion (N=7 or 29% of students enrolled in the course) said that they were only a little interested or not very interested in politics. A sizable number of our students did not regularly discuss politics, either online or in person.

Figure 1

How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others in person or by phone call?
6 responses

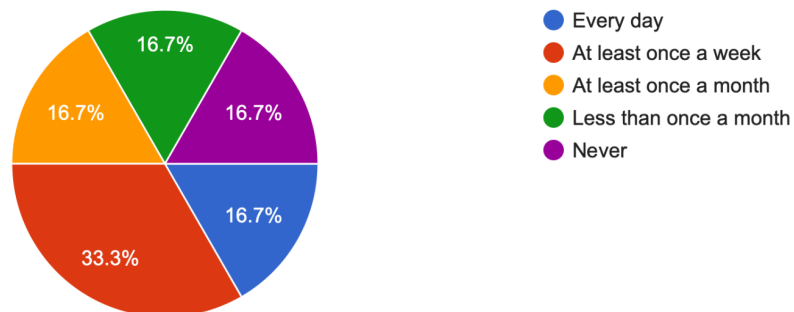
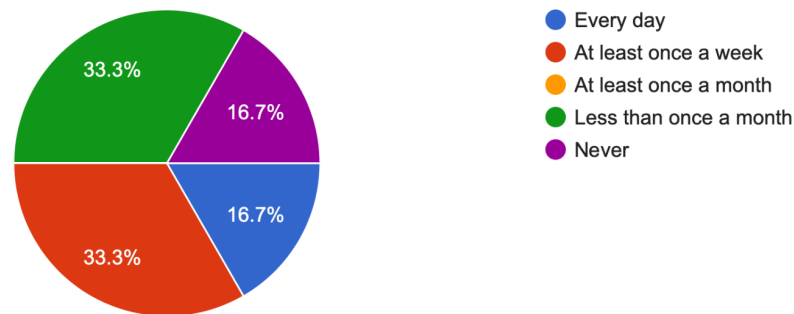


Figure 2

How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others online – such as by email, on a social networking site, or by text message?

6 responses



At a basic level, students demonstrated increased knowledge of the issues they debated. Students had varying levels of familiarity with the topics they debated at the beginning of each unit. Student survey responses indicate that between 33% and 67% had significant knowledge of or strong opinions on the topics that they debated in any particular week. Class discussions on readings, in addition to their journal entries on class discussions, indicate students were exposed to new ideas and perspectives throughout the semester. They would often call out the novelty of arguments or ways of understanding issues in their weekly journals. After familiarizing themselves with different arguments, multiple students claimed that they were “more open minded and conscientious.” A number noted that they did not change their positions on issues about which they already had opinions, but that they understood the other side more and even found “points from the other side that I agreed with.” Debates in this class clearly fostered respect for diverse perspectives among students.

Through individual and collective research, they also gained more information on the contextual realities of our topics. For instance, when students prepared arguments for and against the use of gender neutral bathrooms on campus, many students found sources providing historical context behind gender neutral spaces, engineering and building concerns underlying construction and conversion of restrooms, and numbers related to crimes/assaults committed in restrooms. One student pointed out that this research shaped how they thought the administration should address this issue on our campus, even if the research did not change her position on the topic overall.

Both instructors noted that the students who participated in our course demonstrated significant improvements in active listening. The importance of this skill was shared with the students and explicitly made the focus of exercises at the beginning of the course. We led students in activities aimed at modeling active listening early on. Journal entries over the class term demonstrated improvements in students' ability to reiterate important points and distill other teams' arguments. When students were asked to reflect on what, if any, skills that they had developed in class that would be useful outside of it, the ability to listen came up frequently. It was also clear as students scored each other's performances that they were improving in their abilities to engage content critically, especially finding holes or theoretical problems in arguments.

Pre- and post-course assessments of students by the instructors indicated an increase in students' confidence in public speaking. We had a number of students with concerns about public speaking and other forms of social anxiety. Throughout the semester, these students worked with their teams and took on public speaking roles. Their increased comfort with these roles was

apparent as the semester progressed, even if it was sometimes still clear that they did not enjoy public speaking. As indicators of this, students did less reading off note cards as the semester progressed. A number used fewer nervous tics while speaking. Some of the students who explicitly raised concerns about their discomfort with public speaking also seemed less nervous as made evident by physical responses like less face reddening when they spoke in front of the class. As one student noted in our response to our survey, “I feel like I am much more confident in my ability to speak my mind and defend my opinion.”

Students improved in their critical thinking abilities. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in their ability to anticipate and counter opposing arguments (blocking). In order to successfully block arguments, students must understand the values and assumptions inherent in those arguments. A number of students noted that blocking got easier for them over the course of the semester. Grades and written feedback on their debate performances also indicate that their skills at blocking increased measurably over three weeks. One student even noted in our survey that “blocks are a thing I’ll be using whenever I’m in an argument.”

They also showed a marked increase in their ability to evaluate the reliability and bias of information sources. A significant amount of time was spent helping students to learn how to assess the credibility of sources, and to identify potential sources of bias. Students noted in their survey responses that they felt more confident identifying reliable sources after completing the course.

Finally, teaching evaluations indicated that the students found the class activities enjoyable and engaging. Students gave the instructors high marks for the course content and structure. All of the students also strongly agreed that the course was of value to them (N=22).

While one student noted that they wished the course had involved more discussion of the movie “Fight Club,” a number of students wrote about how much they enjoyed the class. A number even isolated content that they found upsetting (transgender rights) or complicated (critical race theory) enlightening to think through and to learn more about.

Conclusion

Increasingly, educators seek new and innovative pedagogical approaches to encourage critical thinking, effective oral and written communication, and appreciation for their own and opposing viewpoints. These skills are necessary components of active citizenship in a participatory democracy. We contend that formal classroom debates provide a promising pedagogical approach to achieving these objectives, nurturing in students the skills required for a healthy democracy.

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