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Students' perspectives on debate exercises in content area classes.

*Communication Education* 52 (2003) 157-163.

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### Abstract

The recent movement to promote debate across the curriculum presumes that debate-like activities in content-area classes can enhance disciplinary learning as well as core skills. Yet students in such classes may resist debate activities if they believe (1) debate promotes hostility, (2) debate disadvantages demographic groups preferring noncompetitive communication styles, or (3) debate is too unfamiliar. The present study elicited end-of-term written evaluations of debate-like activities in a seventy-student class on rhetorical traditions. Students in the class worked in small groups to prepare debates on issues arising from lectures and reading. Teams presented debates during weekly discussion section meetings; those not debating acted as judges and wrote explanations of their decisions. Thematic analysis of the student responses indicated that, while a few students expressed discomfort with the competitiveness of the activities, most were laudatory. Results point to the value of debate across the curriculum for promoting small group communication and for fostering divergent perspectives on course topics.

Keywords: debate across the curriculum, collaborative learning, small group communication, critical thinking

## Students' perspectives on debate exercises

Teaching experience as well as empirical research affirms that debating helps students develop content mastery, as well as argumentation and communication skills (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Louden, 1999; Bellon, 2000; Williams, McGee, & Worth 2001). I therefore build debate exercises into most of my courses. But I am not the most important person in the classroom. Students learn. Far from empty vessels waiting to be filled with instruction, they bring to class theories, attitudes, skills and habits that shape the success or failure of the activities they will pursue there (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Freire, 1970/2002). I've become curious, therefore, to learn what students think about the debate exercises they undertake with me. Do they find debating helps them learn? If so, what, in their experience, does it contribute?

In focusing these broad questions, my experience and the literature suggest three specific concerns that warrant particular attention. These concerns pertain to three specific reasons students may have for considering debate exercises unhelpful in content area classes:

First, since arguing requires open disagreement, students may associate it with negative interpersonal or emotional qualities like hostility and fighting (Benoit, 1983; Tannen, 1998; Trapp, 1986; Walker, 1991). In this case, some students would be understandably quite reluctant to engage actively in debate exercises.

Second, some students may find the competitive nature of this specific form of arguing—debate—to be intimidating or silencing. In particular, gender differences in argumentation styles (Meyers, Brashers, Winston, & Grob, 1997) may mean that some women are disadvantaged in debates. In this case, students could rightfully object that debate exercises are unfair.

Finally, students may simply find debate exercises to be unfamiliar. In this case, they may resist the innovation, preferring instead activities such as class discussion and group projects in which they already know how to learn.

I raise these questions out of my own teaching practice; I also raise them from an interest in debate across the curriculum. As long as debate was confined to co-curricular activities and courses expressly devoted to argumentation, students who chose to become involved could be presumed to endorse the value of the activity (Williams, et al, 2001). But now that debate is spreading beyond these traditional homes, students will encounter it more involuntarily, and their attitudes toward it will matter more. As Bellon has noted, "advocates of debate across the curriculum must produce strong evidence demonstrating pedagogical benefits if such initiatives are to succeed" (Bellon, 2000, p. 161). At least some of this evidence should come from student voices, representing students' perspectives on debate across the curriculum.

#### Instructional Context of this Study

In the spirit of classroom assessment propounded by Angelo and Cross (1993) I decided to simply ask students what they thought of debate-like activities in one content-area class. The class in which I collected these data was one that I was leading and that incorporated some features of debate across the curriculum. This 70-student, sophomore level course was intended primarily to introduce communication majors to the rhetorical tradition stretching from the sophists to the postmoderns. I focused each weekly unit on one enduring question in rhetorical theory—for example, "Is science rhetorical?" and "Are emotions bad reasons?" Lectures and whole-class exercises on Monday and Wednesday introduced the week's issue and reviewed the readings.

Students also participated in smaller discussion sections of about 20 students meeting on Fridays. Within the discussion sections, students were organized into four- or five-person work groups. Each week of instruction culminated in a Friday debate between two of the work groups in each discussion section. Assessment standards developed with the class encouraged the debaters to organize their presentations clearly and to draw support from the course readings as well as from their own experience. The students not directly participating in the day's debate were given the opportunity to question the advocates. They then decided the issue by majority vote, and over the weekend these judge/audience members wrote two-page position papers defending their decisions.

This class provides one model for "debate across the curriculum," since it focused primarily on content mastery and used debate exercises only as a means to pursue that end. The sort of material covered was not significantly different than that which might be found in any humanities course with a theoretical bent—philosophy, or historiography, or literary theory. The course had no prerequisites; in particular, no previous exposure to debate was required. And there was no extensive instruction in debate. The teaching assistant and I simply enacted the first debate ourselves, and then worked with the students to develop assessment criteria.

#### Data Collection

To find out what the students thought about the debate exercises, I asked them on the final Friday of the term. This query was conducted as part of a broader review and assessment of the course's impact on their learning. An instructor began the data collection by leading each section through a de-briefing in which students were invited to consider the strengths and weaknesses of three ways of learning: "ordinary" discussion sections, debates, and small-group

projects. In particular, the instructor asked whether the competitive nature of the debates might intimidate or silence students who might prefer more cooperative modes of communication. After ten to fifteen minutes of whole group discussion, students were invited to take ten minutes and write, anonymously, a brief essay articulating their views on the questions of whether, and (if so) how, the debate format helped them learn. They were also invited to suggest specific changes to the debate exercises. These written responses constitute the data upon which this report is predicated.

Fifty-two students, representing 73% of the class, submitted usable responses. I performed a thematic content analysis of the essays, compiling phrases that related to the guiding questions for this study.

### Results

Debate and negative interpersonal or emotional qualities. Only four students (8% of those responding) voiced a concern about hostility, fighting, anger or other negative interpersonal or emotional consequences of debate exercises. One explained, for example, that "once you have a set position any attack on that position tends to be upsetting." Another commented on the "tension" of debating. Each of the four nonetheless went on to express a positive overall evaluation of their experiences.

Debate and competition. Despite the explicit prompt that directed students to consider the competitive nature of debate activities, only 7 students (13%) mentioned competition or intimidation. Four of these thought that competition was actually a good thing, "because it forced people to prepare extensively." Another student denied being intimidated by debates. Only two mentioned competition negatively, explaining that debating encouraged teams to "say anything to

win" or "to take extreme viewpoints." Even these students, however, did not express a feeling of being personally disadvantaged or silenced by the debate format.

Debate and unfamiliarity. Only three students noted that the debates had initially been unfamiliar; each went on to explain that "in retrospect it was a key element" in their learning. More students, by contrast, took up the explicit prompt and commented on the relationship of debate to other learning activities—class discussion and small group work.

The relative advantages of debate in contrast with "ordinary" class discussion received comment from 17 students (33%). The bulk of the responses took debates to be equal to, complementary with, or better than discussion for the following reasons. (1) Debates require all students to contribute. (2) Debates bring forward a variety of different points of view. (3) Debates require "rational format" (perhaps as opposed to mere expression of opinions). (4) Debates force participants to know what they're talking about (as opposed to "BS"). One student confessed,

Although I admittedly hated preparing for the debates and would have rather just had a discussion section every week (to avoid doing the work), I certainly learned a lot more as a result of the debates. When I have discussion sections in other classes, I simply reword statements made by other members of the class so it looks like I actually know what I'm talking about, when in fact I am completely unprepared. . . . The debate and the small group preparation that preceded it was an extremely effective way to facilitate me actually doing the work.

The relationship between debate and another form of classroom communication—group work—was mentioned by more students (25; 48%). Again, all considered debate to be equal to, complementary with, or better than small group discussion; only one student suggested that group work replace some debates. A number of students spontaneously elaborated on the way that small group discussion and whole-class debate had reinforced each other. Students explained

that group work facilitated the debates for many reasons. Their responsibility to other group members encouraged them to prepare and to practice prior to the debate. The small group meetings were a comfortable place to brainstorm, ask questions and "bring different thoughts together." Group work enabled students "to expand our limited capacities," allowing them to do better work together than any could have done alone.

Other students commented on the reverse effect, noting that the debates helped promote good group discussion because "fear of shame and desire for a good grade" in the debate required the group to "remain focused" and cooperate and because the debate allowed responsibilities to be given to "everyone," as opposed to projects where "one person [is] helping others along." One student articulated the correlation between the debates and the small group work thus:

I think that while the debates were certainly valuable to learning about the course material, what made them so was the small group discussions that my group had every week. During the debate, we tended to focus simply on one side as a debater. We would often ignore or negate very valid points the other side/group made. However, during the small group discussion, there was no need to do this. We threw out ideas on both sides of the argument in order to help us prepare for the debate and/or paper. We learned from each other because we were listening to each other. I do not think that listening necessarily occurred when we were involved in the debate. . . . Since the small group discussions happened because of the debates, we should keep the debates. But the real learning happened in the discussions.

Debate and learning. All but one of the 52 students responding expressed positive assessments of their debate experiences. Despite some drawbacks, the debates were described as "fun," "enjoyable," "the most/very/helpful," "very/useful," "worthwhile," "critical," "essential," "the best option," "excellent," "good," and "a good idea." Moreover, students were able to observe the value of the debate activities for the learning of disciplinary knowledge, that is, from the perspective of debate-across-the-curriculum.

As to communication skills, nine students (17%) commented that debates provided a valuable opportunity and incentive to develop their public speaking abilities. For example, one student said,

Fridays were the best part of this class. . . . Not only does the debate format force you to know your material it also helps you better your public speaking skills.

Clarity and eloquence help win an argument so while presenting the facts forced you to discover the most effective delivery method.

Ten students (19%) thought the course had helped them become better at supporting their own arguments and analyzing those of others. One of these reported gains on an even more fundamental skill. In his words, "the debates were the main reason I learned that it is possible to argue both sides of a question. This taught me that I shouldn't be narrow-minded and should hear things out until I make a final decision."

The great majority of students (79%), however, focused on how the debates had encouraged or indeed "forced" them to better learn course content. Three broad themes emerged in these discussions.

First, students thought that the need to debate motivated them to engage the course content deeply. "By having debates at the end of every week," one student commented, "we would be thinking about the material all week long." Others echoed this view; debates encouraged students to go "much deeper into the issues," to "really delve into the topic more," and "to take a deep, detailed, and extensive view of the readings." This meant not only that everyone would do the homework—"more importantly, for the most part, everyone enjoys doing the homework."

Second, students thought that the debates, or (as above) the debates in conjunction with the group work, exposed them to a wide range of viewpoints and thus helped them engage the course content broadly. Some students reported that this broad engagement happened as they listened to the different sides during a debate. By the end, one said, "I'd often changed my mind several times AND had been forced to think about things I hadn't considered." Others explained that they had to grapple with alternative views as part of preparing for debate, in order to be able to meet the opposing arguments. For example,

The info that we would need to know would have to be that of both sides. This enforces us to not be so close-minded about things. Having knowledge about both sides also made our point much stronger, because we knew how to counterstrike when asked questions. Still others reported that "it helped me think about things from a different perspective" in particular "if I was debating [on] a side that I didn't agree with."

Finally, students thought that the debates allowed them to engage the course content personally. As one student admitted, "The debates helped me by forcing me to take a stance on something and create argument(s) to support it. Had I not been forced to do this, I probably would have taken a more passive role in the class." Other students echoed this view, noting the

"personal involvement" that debates promoted, which allowed students "to become intimately involved with the material" and to "learn for him/herself." Further, since students were encouraged to draw support for their arguments not only from the readings but from their personal experiences, the debates also helped them "relate rhetoric to other areas of life," and made what "we learned in class feel more applicable to our own lives."

Perhaps applying what they had learned about the value of competing viewpoints, 25 students (48%) articulated some negative features of debate in addition to their positive views. These features were diverse, with none raised by more than four students. Some found that listening to the debates was passive and uninformative. Several commented that some of the questions being debated were poorly formulated—either unclear or unfairly favoring one side. Several wanted more feedback. Two found the debates too highly structured; another, too unstructured. While students did not find the competitiveness of the debate intimidating, they did occasionally think that the element of competition prodded them to ignore the alternate point of view, to become polarized, or to "artificially dichotomize an issue." And some voiced a sense of frustration. During the debates, the issues often got lost, irrelevant points were made, and no clear decisions were reached. As one student commented,

[S]ometimes the debates got confusing and the arguments got smeared with each other, you didn't know what was right or wrong or anything like that. Overall, I think debates are good, but I think some course of action should be taken when arguments get 'muddled.'

### Reflections

I came away from the study with a keener enthusiasm for deploying debate exercises in this and other courses. In particular, the students' comments largely relieved my three concerns about the usefulness of debates. The debate exercises seem largely to have taken an end run around the ordinary equation of arguing with fighting, to have avoided disadvantage to any large segment of the class (i.e., women), and to have overcome any resistance to unfamiliar learning activities. Among these three concerns, I am left with some residual uneasiness regarding negative reactions to competitiveness. While some students did make negative remarks about competition, there was no evidence that competition affected any one group of students unequally. In other student cultures, perhaps ones in which females are less ardent advocates for equity, the disadvantaging of some students might be more conspicuous. In any case, I am determined to monitor student reactions to competition in classes where they debate.

Overall, this study warrants efforts to foster debate exercises in courses beyond communication departments. The student voices articulated in this study highlighted two themes of particular relevance to the cross-disciplinary value of debate. The first theme pertains to the relationship between debating and group work. One reason I had originally organized the discussion sections into teams was the logistical restriction that limited class time imposed on individual debating. I also was committed to the value of peer learning. As it turned out, preparing for debates proved an excellent small group task, in that each individual conspicuously benefited from the equal contributions of her peers (Cohen, 1994). In addition to their direct effects on student learning, therefore, debate exercises seem to be an excellent way of incorporating group work into courses.

The second novel theme pertains to generating diverse points of view on a subject. Traditional teaching techniques like textbooks, lectures, and tests with right answers insulate students from the open questions and competing answers that so often drive our own interest in our subjects. Debates do not, and in fact invite scrutiny of the widest possible range of alternative views on a subject. Students' comments about the value of disagreement also offer an interesting perspective on the nature of the thinking skills we want to foster. The previous research reviewed by Allen et al. (1999) has largely focused on the way debate can help students better master the principles of correct reasoning. Although some students did echo this finding, many more emphasized the importance of debate in helping them to recognize and deal with a diversity of viewpoints. Students here seem to be articulating a perspective on critical thinking surprisingly like that proposed by Deanna Kuhn (1991). As Kuhn pointed out, we only begin to seek reasons at all when we understand that a proposition can be doubted—that is, when we realize that others think differently about it. Kuhn's work documented that even college-educated individuals can have trouble imagining, constructing arguments for, and refuting positions other than their own. If this is so, then debate exercises may be an excellent way of leading students to experience the central aspect of truly critical thinking.

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