

Debate as a Laboratory for Political Science and Student-Centered Learning

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Recently, formal discussions surrounding pedagogy in the liberal arts and sciences have turned to the conceptualization and practical pursuit of “student-centered” learning. (Wulff, 2005) It is no longer enough for many educators (and students) to focus exclusively on the unidirectional transmission of knowledge from the “expert” to the “novice”, with periodic regurgitation of knowledge taken as meaningful assessment of successful transmission. In turn, the most essential question posed to proponents of this new paradigm essentially comes down to one of guidance and control; teachers still need to have a presence, and students still require (and often demand!) guidance and parameters. Striking a consistent balance between what is “student-centered” and what is merely interpreted as “passive” on the part of the instructor is a challenge for even the most seasoned teaching professionals, particularly when dealing with complex or controversial social issues.

Rising in parallel with the concern of pedagogy is the observed lack of civic engagement among students, and apathy among undergraduates regarding the “big issues” of governance and policy that are the very substance of nearly all the social science disciplines. (Putnam, 1999, Eberly, 2002) Students themselves are concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and the supposed pay-off it will generate upon receipt of a bachelor’s degree. (Giroux, 2002) While students do appreciate expressing and learning about a variety of views on political issues, they often lack the knowledge base

to participate in an informed discussion; loose discussion prompts can veer into an realm of personal narratives bereft of insightful connection to the material, while prompts that are too specific can move to close to memorized recall of material with little opportunity for critical synthesis or analysis. (Murphy, 2004)

We propose that with the application of a competitive debate model to class materials, particularly in the discipline of political science, teachers can empower students to cultivate important skills related to research, critical argument and analysis, and persuasive public presentation. As they inhabit the roles of policy-makers or similar advocates, students find a personal investment in material that often seems out of their reach to understand and irrelevant to their personal lives.

While some scholars have disagreed with the adversarial, overly formalized, or otherwise negative attributes of competitive debate, (Sloane, 1997) the classroom offers an opportunity to modify the format, thus taking advantage of competition as a motivating factor for students while favoring process over competitive outcomes. This emphasis permits debate in the classroom to reflect the qualities of as “laboratory” for ideas to be combined, tested, and defended without incurring many of the issues brought on by a purely adversarial model. (Friedley, 1989)

- I. The Problem – In the United States, younger people are disengaged from the political process. This is a result of several different factors.
 - a. Students do not participate in politics because they either/both don't understand how the political process affects their lives, don't understand

the relevant and determinative political issues, or feel alienated from the political process. Much of their involvement is consumer/identity-oriented, which provokes questions of plurality and diversity. (Putnam, 2000, 2003 Barber, 1984, Giroux, 2002)

- b. Many students rely on passive learning techniques; they rely on professors and teaching assistants to provide them with relevant material, rather than seeking information relevant to their classes on their own. (Brookfield and Presskill) Connected to this static process is the proliferation of “neoliberal discourse” frequently injected into higher education issues, which identifies knowledge and information as “products”, (thus reifying the model of students as “consumers” rather than creative agents of knowledge and reason.) (Giroux, 2002 Eberly, 2002)
- c. Students (and instructors) often have negative views about ‘debate’ because they characterize debates as the kind of shouting match on ‘Crossfire’ where two adversaries yell at each other rather than truly listening and engaging each others substantive arguments.

II. A Possible Solution: Debate as a Teaching Tool in Political Science:

“Conversation may not be the soul of democracy, but *practicing together as deliberating bodies* could provide one means of reenergizing the possibility of participatory democracy.” (Eberly 2002 p 291)

- a. The Theory Behind Debate as a Teaching Tool

- i. Debate helps students identify and understand multiple perspectives on an issue, rather than relying on their pre-formed opinions. Occupying the “role” of one who is in favor of a proposal or against it also helps students understand the process of decision-making that often makes social and political issues seem distant and incomprehensible. (Dickson, 2004)
- ii. Debate teaches students how to work effectively with groups, in both the construction of arguments and in attempts to persuade and engage a group with opposing arguments. (Goodwin, 2003)
- iii. Debate forces students to support their opinions, and thus requires them to research their position and find supporting evidence. They also look at potential evidence against their position to understand how they can answer it. (Most students who do competitive debate demonstrate significantly better research skills than those who do not.) (Ballon, 2003)
- iv. The interactive nature of debate helps develop students’ critical thinking skills by forcing them to apply information and theories rather than just repeat them. Knowledge is internalized and applied rather than didactically presented and absorbed. Debate also provides structure and clear guidelines that are often difficult to achieve in less formal discussion-oriented formats.

- v. Debate requires students become comfortable with delivering their positions in front of a critical listening audience, which is an increasingly important skill in both business and politics, as well as a necessary skill for civic engagement. (Levinson, 2003) Students also learn to critically evaluate arguments as audience members. (Harwood, 1998, p 164-165)
- vi. Debate, by encouraging students to understand issues in a more complex and dynamic way, encourages tolerance of opposing views, which makes civic engagement more civil and attractive. Debate also forces students to deliver their opinions in a highly structured format which can help eliminate natural tendencies toward both anxiety and aggressiveness. (Bellon, 2000)

b. Objections to Debate as a Teaching Tool

- i. Debate is overly adversarial, and thus will be seen by students as an inherently hostile activity. (We will refer to this as the “Crossfire” argument.) (Goodwin, 2003)
- ii. Debate oversimplifies complex controversies because it requires students to take sides and search for information that only benefits their position. (Sloane, 1997, 281-283 and Rennau Tumposky, 2004) (We accept this as a potential consequence that could come from unmonitored research, hence the assignment that students research both sides. The use of “counterplans” as a negative strategy also

helps students understand that there are often many potential solutions to issues conceded as problems.)

- iii. Students may be intimidated by a debate process in which their beliefs are directly challenged, and will thus be less motivated to actively participate.
- iv. Debate is a western, liberal, and traditionally male-dominated format that excludes different ways of speaking.
- v. Students are unfamiliar with the debate format, and which will limit success in debates and learning the class material due to distractions of formal rules and criteria.

c. Experiential Evidence

- i. When the emphasis on the *outcome* of competition is diminished, likelihood of adversity is greatly reduced. Evaluation is assessed primarily by participation, production and quality of evidence produced and arguments generated from it, with the point differential between the “winner” and “loser” negligible (factored in as bonus or extra credit points). Even when debates are decided in favor of one team over another, the face-to-face format discourages overt hostility.
- ii. Competition (especially when paired with a peer) motivates a willingness to work. (Superior performance will still be rewarded, but not in a way that will create a penalty for others.) Additionally

the process of evidence collection is closely monitored and given swift critical feedback.

- iii. Elimination rounds provide for important peer modeling practices, while permitting students who are not competing the opportunity to serve as critics. The possibility for incorporating a more deliberative function into an adversarial practice is created: superlative students are given the opportunity to speak in a “final round”, and their peers are given the opportunity to consider, evaluate, and respond to arguments from the perspective of having participated in the research process, and then write ballots justifying their preference for one team over the other. The research process also seems to make students more impartial—they are less likely to vote for the team they are most friendly with and more likely to vote on the substance of the debate. (Modeling an important practice of listening to positions rather than assessing character or likeability of advocates.)
- iv. We require students to divide into “labs”, small groups of two to three partnerships that will all research the same case, (proving the resolution true/prudent through deductive means) as well as the negative evidence opposing their case. This forces students to understand both sides of a potential argument.

v. While formal co-curricular competition is often burdened by evaluative “unwritten rules” that can exclude diverse experiences and backgrounds, (West, 1997) the classroom is an opportunity to reshape guidelines and expectations. Most students (from a wide variety of backgrounds and experience) have reported that they do not feel excluded from classroom debates; rather, debate has given them an opportunity and space to develop a “critical voice” that, while challenging, is an enjoyable learning experience.

d. Important Contextual Factors for using Debate

e. Different formats of debate

i. Classic team format

1. Issues oriented debate
2. Presidential Trial

ii. Simulations

1. Crisis
2. Conference (World Summit on Information Society)

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