In-Class Debates: Fertile Ground for Active Learning and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Skills

Ruth Kennedy
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

Students learn in diverse ways; therefore, instructors must utilize a wide variety of instructional strategies. Students benefit when instructors use instructional strategies that promote active engagement. In-class debates cultivate the active engagement of students, yet participation in debates is often limited to students involved in debate teams. The benefits of using in-class debates as an instructional strategy also include mastery of the content and the development of critical thinking skills, empathy, and oral communication skills. Debate as an instructional strategy, however, has its opponents. Some believe debates reinforce a bias toward dualism, foster a confrontational environment that does not suit certain students, or merely reinforce a student's existing beliefs. A variety of debate formats are described which address these criticisms including meeting-house, four-corner, fishbowl, think-pair-share, and role-play debates. Finally, issues related to the assessment of in-class debates are addressed such as whether the students are assessed individually or as a team, what aspects of the debate are assessed, and whether the instructor and/or students will do the assessment.

Debates date back over 4,000 years to the Egyptians (2080 B.C.), and debates as a teaching strategy date back over 2,400 years to Protagorus in Athens (481-411 B.C.), the "father of debate" (Combs & Bourne, 1994; Freeley & Steinberg, 2005; Huryn, 1986; Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Yet in most high schools and universities, the only students who participate in debates are those on competitive debate teams (Bellon, 2000). 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 (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). Just as writing assignments have been incorporated across the curriculum, debates have been successfully used in a variety of disciplines including sociology, history, psychology, biotechnology, math, health, dentistry, nursing, marketing, and social work. Further, debates in a written format have even been used effectively in online courses (Jugdev, Markowski, & Mengel, 2004).

Benefits of In-Class Debates

Students learn more effectively by actively analyzing, discussing, and applying content in meaningful ways rather than by passively absorbing information (Bonwell & Eison, 1991); therefore, students benefit when instructors utilize instructional strategies that promote active engagement. Bonwell and Eison define active learning as "anything that involves students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (p. 2). Meyers and Jones (1993) define active learning as anything that "provides opportunities for students to talk and listen, read, write,

and reflect as they approach course content" (p. xi). They contend that students learn best when applying what they are learning and that teachers need to use a variety of instructional strategies, since students learn in different ways. Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) report that student engagement is linked positively with critical thinking and grade point average, particularly for students with lower Scholastic Aptitude Test scores.

In-class debates cultivate the active engagement of students, placing the responsibility of comprehension on the shoulders of the students (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). The students' approach dramatically changes from a passive approach to an active one (Snider & Schnurer, 2002) and "students place a higher value on learning by participating than on learning by being lectured at and receiving information passively" (Berdine, 1987, p. 8). As one student said of debates held in an International Management course at the University of Glasgow, "In most classes you sit around very quietly at a table and get lectured at. This was an opportunity to interrelate with the subject itself and let the lecturer stand back for a while; and let us actually teach each other" (Walker & Warhurst, 2000, p. 41). Bauer and Wachowiak (1977), who taught separate sections of the same course at the same university, Introductory Personality, decided to work together to hold seven debates. Each of these seven debates was held twice, once in each of Bauer and Wachowiak's sections of Introductory Personality. Each debate consisted of two teams, a team from Bauer's class consisting of Bauer and a student from his class, and a team from Wachowiak's class consisting of Wachowiak and a student from his class. The instructors felt that "the opportunity to watch their professors dodging the verbal slings and arrows of each other was a novelty which aroused student interest and sharpened critical

thinking" (p. 192). Dundes (2001) reported that students in her Criminal Justice course at Western Maryland College, who did not typically speak in class, were more likely to share their opinions during a debate.

Lewin and Wakefield (1983) taught a psychology course at California State College in which they debated each other in class to expose students to both sides of the issues. The professors concluded, "Although both of us had taught similar material in the past, the debates forced us to re-read and re-think both our own and the opposing position more intensely than is necessary to repeat lecture material" (p. 116). Just as these professors needed to prepare more intensely for participation in a debate rather than a lecture, so also students need to master the content more thoroughly when preparing for a debate (Parcher, 1998). About 78% of the 544 students Combs and Bourne (1994) surveyed in a senior-level marketing course stated they believed they learned more through debates than lectures.

Debates afford many benefits besides promoting active engagement and mastery of the content. Because debates require listeners and participants to evaluate competing choices (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005), they follow Vygotsky's (1978) call for the type of social interaction that develops higher-order psychological functions as well as critical thinking skills by moving up Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy (Elliot, 1993; Gazzard, 2004; Gorman, Law, & Lindegren, 1981; Jugdev et. al, 2004). The lower order thinking skills of knowledge, comprehension, and application focus on rote learning or *what* students should think, whereas the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation focus on *how* to think: "The short-term objective of acquiring knowledge should be tempered with the long-term goal of training the mind to think analytically and critically" (Vo & Morris, 2006, p. 16). Instructional strategies such as debate and case studies are better suited to the development of students' higher order thinking skills than traditional instructional strategies such as lecture (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Critical thinking skills used in a debate include defining the problem, assessing the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognizing inconsistencies, and prioritizing the relevance and salience of various points within the overall argument. Speaking of the power of debate, one student at Southwestern University said, "I will forever approach history textbooks with scrutiny rather than blind faith that the texts are true" (Musselman, 2004, p. 346). Freeley & Steinberg (2005) contend that for over 2,000 years, academic debate has been recognized as one of the best methods of learning and developing critical thinking skills.

There is more information now than ever before, and the pace of change will likely continue to be rapid in future generations; therefore, educators must focus less on teaching facts and more on teaching students how to use information. In the past, vocations were often passed on from generation to generation, but now most individuals have several different careers in their lifetime (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Although debate certainly requires the mastery of content, it also demands the mastery of critical thinking skills which can be applied to changing situations and new information.

In addition to critical thinking skills, debates also demand the development of oral communication skills, which are vital for success in most careers (Combs & Bourne, 1994). "Debate involves not only determining what to say but how to say it" (Roy & Macchiette, 2005, p. 265). Williams, McGee, and Worth (2001) surveyed 286 participants of competitive debate teams at 70 different universities. These students rated improved communication skills as the most substantial benefit of debate participation. Similarly, the marketing students surveyed by Combs and Bourne (1994) reported a statistically significant improvement in their and their peers' oral communication skills as a result of in-class debate participation.

Surveys of business leaders reveal the perception that college graduates do not possess adequate oral communication skills (Combs & Bourne, 1994; Cronin & Glenn, 1991): "Except for students majoring in communication, most undergraduates take at most one course emphasizing oral communication skills; therefore most non-speech majors have little or no opportunity to refine and reinforce their oral communication skills" (Cronin & Glenn, 1991, p. 356). Alumni also have identified practice in oral presentations as the most prominent gap in their educational experience (Dundes, 2001). Steinfatt (1986) argues that imbedding oral communication exercises in various courses across the curriculum increases the students' oral communication skills as well as their learning of the discipline-specific subject matter. Participants also must hone their listening skills in order to give effective rebuttals (Allison, 2002; Combs & Bourne, 1994): "Debate changed my life because it taught me to listen" (Snider & Schnurer, 2002, p. 9).

Debating opens opportunities for the development of empathy. As one student said, "When you went to the debate you listened to both sides of the argument, which I thought was the main strength of the debates, that you do see both sides, rather than just seeing it from one point of view. Lecturers tend to have their own opinion, so in this way we heard both sides of the argument" (Walker & Warhurst, 2000, p. 40). Another student said that debates "taught me that I shouldn't be

so narrow-minded and should hear things out until I make a final decision" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 161). Schroeder and Ebert (1983) assert that debate is one way to minimize instructor bias; furthermore, 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 (Berdine, 1987).

Discussions are used more frequently than debates in most classes. Goodwin (2003) asked her students to contrast debate and discussion. The students noted that in debates a variety of viewpoints are presented whereas in a discussion this does not always happen. Additionally, debates require the use of logic and reason rather than merely a free expression of opinions and force participants to be prepared so they know what they are talking about. One student confessed, "Although I admittedly hated preparing for the debates and would rather have just had discussion every week (to avoid doing the work), I certainly learned a lot more as a result of the debates" (p. 160). Osborne (2005) used debates in one section of world history and discussion in the other section. She reported that the non-debate class referred to the debate class as the "fun class" and that a higher percentage of students participated in the debates than the less-structured discussions.

In addition, while written essays are used more frequently than debates, Gregory and Holloway (2005) contend that debates extend students' critical thinking and argumentation skills more than essays and that they demand additional performance skills that essays do not. Assessing students in a variety of ways – with both writing and oral assignments – gives more students an opportunity to excel. One student said, "As someone who is dyslexic I have appreciated the opportunity to present something other than in written form" (p.635). Berdine (1987) gives his marketing students a choice between writing a term paper on a controversial topic or participating in an oral debate.

The Debate about Debates

Debate as an active instructional strategy has its opponents. Nancy Tumposky (2004) asserts that debates reinforce a bias toward dualism. Most debates present only two views, yet there might be multiple viable solutions or only one defensible point of view. Typically one student or a team of two or three students defends either the affirmative or negative side of a resolution through constructive speeches and rebuttals (Chial & Riall, 1994; Hopkins, 2003c). Musselman (2004) mitigates the bias toward dualism by assigning two to three students to be conciliators in each debate in her history courses. Two-thirds of the way through the

debate the conciliators offer alternative or conciliatory positions to the two original, extreme positions. Crone (1997) has students represent three different views in each of the debates in his introductory sociology class at Hanover College. In a *Four Corner Debate*, students contemplate their opinions of a statement and then move to one of the four corners of the room, which are labeled "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The students who have selected the same corner then work together to present arguments for their position. After each group defends its position, the students may switch corners if their opinions have changed. Then each group works to write a paragraph summarizing the four strongest arguments for their position (Hopkins, 2003a). Quotes from two International Management students illustrate that participation in a debate does not always result in a dualistic mentality: "In the end it's not always yes and no, it's always to find a middle way" and "You learned to see the grey, it's not necessarily black and white… you were aware of both sides of the issue" (Walker & Warhurst, 2000, p. 40). Similarly, Scannapieco (1997) reported that 76% of the dentistry students surveyed "agreed that participation in the debate helped them to realize that most issues are not clear cut" (p. 960).

Role-play debates (Hopkins, 2003b) provide an additional way to promote more than two viewpoints on an issue. In this format, students are assigned – individually or in small groups - to represent a stakeholder in a particular issue. For example, in a debate concerning whether bar owners should be responsible for patrons who drive drunk, some of the stakeholders might be a bar owner, a liquor store owner, the president of a local Alcoholics Anonymous group, a police officer, and the mother of a child killed by a drunk driver.

Sydney Duncombe (1988) uses another type of role-play debate in his American government classes at the University of Idaho. During the role-play debate, the professor wears different hats, such as a beret to represent the French multi-party system or a red, white, and blue straw hat to represent the American two-party system. In each debate, he uses up to five of his collection of 30 different hats to represent each view. The various hats represent political philosophers, nations, past or present political leaders, or stakeholders in a particular issue such as a hunter or a police officer when debating gun control. The hats help his students know which side he is representing at any given moment in the debate. Rebuttal follows rebuttal while he switches the hats back and forth. His students ask questions and point out fallacies during the debate, and he responds as the character he is currently playing would respond.

Nancy Tumposky (2004) asserts that debates foster a confrontational classroom environment and therefore

do not suit students from some cultures and women, who are often "uncomfortable with oppositional forms of communication" (p. 54). However, Lisa Elliot (1993), who conducted debates in her Psychology of Women class, felt that she addressed this concern by grading merely on participation rather than on performance. MacArthur, Ferretti, and Okolo's (2002) study of the participation of 11 and 12 year olds in debates demonstrated that students with and without learning disabilities participated equally in the debates, as did boys and girls. Others view the confrontational nature of debates as a potential benefit rather than a criticism of in-class debates. For example, Fisher et al. (2001) purport that participation in a debate empowers students to better handle conflicts outside of class. In "The Art of Debating" (1998, teacher information for module 7, ¶ 1) the authors assert that "most people do not know how to argue logically while staying calm" and that in-class debates can enable students to learn to argue constructively.

Other opponents believe that participation in a debate merely reinforces a student's existing beliefs rather than promoting an objective analysis of an issue. However, Simonneaux (2001) reports that in all of his studies, the only time the students in his biotechnology classes in southwest France have changed their opinions has been when they participated in a role play or debate. In Budesheim and Lundquist's (2000) research study of 72 students in three psychology courses at Creighton University, the students who defended a position they already supported almost always maintained their original viewpoint, whereas the students who argued a position inconsistent with their initial opinion were more likely to change their opinion. The response of the audience proved to be unpredictable, as only 52% maintained their original positions. Green and Klug (1990) reported similar results in that the sociology students who defended their initial viewpoint did not change their view, whereas those who were initially neutral or initially opposed the view they defended often changed their view in support of the side they debated. Johnson and Johnson (1985) found that 11 and 12 year old students who studied controversial issues independently were less likely to change their opinions than those who engaged in debate with others. A student, speaking of an in-class debate experience in a social work course, said, "I finally decided to convince myself that maybe my previous conviction was based on one-sided information, that there might be some truth to the other beliefs. To my surprise, I was amazed how quickly my stand and attitude changed" (Keller, Whittaker, & Burke, 2001, p. 352).

To avoid biased assimilation, Budesheim and Lundquist (2000) suggest requiring students to research both sides of the issue and waiting until the last minute to tell the debaters which side they will defend; alternatively, the authors suggest requiring students to defend one position during the debate and the opposing position in a written assignment. Budesheim and Lunhdquist state, "It is important that the format of the exercise encourages students to consider the opposite. Only then are students likely to be more open to new perspectives and spend less time reinforcing old beliefs" (p. 110). Thomas Moeller's (1985) developmental psychology students at Mary Washington College prepare to defend both sides of the issue and then flip a coin one week prior to the debate to determine which side they will represent. Mark Temple (1997) assigns roles only moments before the debate so that the students in his health classes will thoroughly research both sides of the issue.

Involving Many Students

In most debates, only two to six students actively participate in the debate; does this mean that the rest of the students are passive rather than active learners? Several debate formats, such as the Four Corner Debate described previously, address this issue by requiring all students to participate in some fashion. Temple (1997) suggests that professors require all students to prepare for a debate and then randomly select participants shortly before the debate. Schroeder and Ebert (1983) also expect all students taking their Business and Society courses at the University of Lethbridge and University of New Brunswick to be prepared for all the debates, as the participants are not selected until the day of the debate.

Elizabeth Musselman (2004) actively engages all of her history majors by assigning each of them a role in each of the six debates she holds every semester. Each student participates as an antagonist in two of the debates; the antagonists have the primary responsibility for defending the affirmative or negative position. Other roles include questioners and conciliators. The questioners come to the debate prepared with a question for an antagonist, the conciliators propose a compromise or alternative solution two-thirds of the way through the debate, and the remaining students write a one-to two-paragraph argument for one side of the debate. These students e-mail their arguments to everyone in the class prior to the debate and occasionally read their arguments during the debate.

In a *fishbowl debate*, the teacher divides the class into two groups, and each group works together to formulate arguments for their assigned viewpoint. After each side has presented their arguments, the groups give rebuttals back and forth. In another type of fishbowl debate the students are divided into three groups - one group of experts for each side of an issue and the remaining students represent the audience. In

this format, a group of chairs are arranged in a circle in the center of the classroom to create the fishbowl, and the rest of the chairs surround this circle. Each side has a turn discussing the issue with their fellow group members while sitting in the fishbowl, and then the audience group has their turn in the inner circle. Each group could have several turns in the fishbowl. A variation on that type of fishbowl debate involves arranging ten chairs in the middle circle in which three chairs are for each side of the issue and the remaining four chairs are for members of the audience. The six antagonists remain in the fishbowl during the whole debate, but those sitting in three of the other four chairs only stay for short periods of time so that all students have a turn sitting in the fishbowl. When someone in the audience hears something they want to respond to, they come and sit in the tenth chair, and then one of the other three must return to the audience so there will again be an empty chair.

In *think-pair-share debates*, students first think and make notes individually. Then they work in pairs to create lists of reasons to support both sides of an issue. Next, two pairs work together to come to a consensus on which side they wish to support and refine their list of reasons for that side. Finally, each group of four students shares its conclusion and supporting arguments with the whole class. This strategy requires all the students in the class to practice their writing, thinking, listening, and speaking skills.

In the *Lincoln-Douglas debate* format, one person confronts another person just as Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas did during the race for the Illinois senate seat in 1858 (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Time limits for each part of the debate are established and communicated to the participants. In this type of debate, each side, either one person or a team, gives an opening argument, rebuttals to the arguments of the other side, and a closing argument. Dundes (2001) increased student participation while using this debate format by breaking her class into six groups. Each group consisted of two debaters and about four audience members. The six small group debates were held simultaneously in different rooms. The same six topics were debated once a week for six weeks; each student participated as a debater in two of the six debates and as an audience member in the other four.

Two variations on the Lincoln-Douglas debate format are the meeting-house and problem-solving debate formats. In a *meeting-house debate*, each team gives its opening argument, and then the rest of the class questions the debaters or offers comments. The teacher, acting as the moderator, ensures that each side receives an equal amount of questions. To conclude the debate, each side gives its closing argument (Chial & Riall, 1994). Hopkins (2003c) describes various ways to ensure as many students as possible participate. In

the three-card strategy, each student receives three cards and submits one each time he/she speaks. Once a student's cards have been used, he/she cannot participate again until all students have used all of their cards. Alternatively, students could be instructed to raise a hand the first time they wish to speak, raise a hand with one finger pointing up when they wish to speak a second time, and raise a hand with two fingers pointing up if they wish to participate a third time. As in the three-card strategy, a student cannot share more than three times unless no one else has a turn remaining.

The *problem-solving debate* involves eight participants, four on each side, debating a question such as "Should capital punishment be abolished?" In this format, the first two speakers present the historical and philosophical background information, the second set of speakers explains why changes are or are not justified, the third pair of speakers suggests a plan, and the last two speakers summarize the position of each team (Huryn, 1986).

Other professors encourage active engagement of all students through written assignments required of those who will not be participating orally. Moeller (1985) requires each student in the audience to submit a 250-word paper defending either the negative or affirmative position, Temple (1997) asks students to submit a written summary of the arguments used by each side, and Landrum (1991) requires students to submit a paper that summarizes both sides of the issue and gives evidence to support his/her own position. The students in the audience could be required to take notes during the debate (Snider & Schnurer, 2002); for example, Roy and Macchiette (2005) ask their marketing students to identify three main areas of disagreement and at least one area of agreement between the affirmative and negative sides. Including content from the debates on an exam (Huryn, 1986) or requiring the non-debating students to write multiple choice questions after each debate for the professor to use when constructing an exam (Scannapieco, 1997) are two additional ways to encourage all students to stay actively engaged.

Assessing the Debates

Consideration must be given to the criteria for assessing the debaters' performance. Some instructors give students full credit for participation alone, and others grade on a pass/fail basis to decrease the anxiety associated with an unfamiliar activity (Garrett, Schoener, & Hood, 1996). More often, teachers utilize a rubric to assess the students' performance; the rubric may be divided into such categories as analysis, evidence, organization, delivery, and teamwork. Huryn (1986) collects the students' notes, which account for

50% of their grade, so that those who struggle in oral communication skills can still obtain a good grade through preparing excellent written notes. The instructor could consider the following questions when formulating a rubric (Glantz & Gorman, 1997; Jugdev et. al, 2004; Snider & Schnurer, 2002):

- Is the student persuasive?
- Is the student well organized?
- Does the student focus on the central ideas of the debate?
- Is every statement supported by cited researched evidence?
- Is the research recent?
- Is the research complete or are there large gaps of knowledge?
- Are an adequate number of sources used?
- Is the evidence presented biased in some way?
- Does the student make frequent eye contact with the audience?
- Does the student respond to all of the opponent's points?
- Does the student challenge flaws in the opposition's arguments?
- Does the student avoid making faulty generalizations, distorting information, and oversimplifying issues?

A second consideration for assessment is whether to assess the students individually or as a team. Moeller (1985) gives his developmental psychology students both an individual and a team grade. The individual grade is based on diction, eye contact, insight into the issue, and overall effectiveness, whereas the team grade is based on their organization, preparation, use of supporting evidence, and use of rebuttal.

Third, instructors must decide who will do the assessment-- the debaters themselves, the rest of the students, the instructor only, or the instructor and students. Smith (1990) has all of his sociology students at Boston College rate the debaters according to ten different criteria, and then he averages the mean score from all the students with his score obtained using the same form. A comparison of the students' and instructor's ratings illustrated that there was a significant correlation between the instructor's and students' evaluations. Beck (1999) describes an assessment in which debaters are evaluated by the rest of the students. He asserts that requiring all students to write down and evaluate each argument used by both sides encourages active participation. Walker and Warhurst (2000) assign a group of students to assess each debate team's performance individually, and then the group of student evaluators works together to arrive at a decision on the assessments. Gibson (2004)

requires each member of the audience, who will score the debate, to also submit a critique of an article on the topic to demonstrate that they have some understanding of the issue.

Regardless of who is doing the assessing or how it is done, the evaluation procedure should be explained to the students when the debates are assigned. If their use of resources will be assessed, are they required to provide a bibliography? How many sources must they use to receive full credit? Are electronic resources acceptable? Some instructors require the students to consult particular sources, often placing them on reserve in the library, because the instructor's familiarity with the sources makes it easier to judge how well the students have used the material (Moeller, 1985).

Conclusion

"Active learning fosters complex thinking processes and improves retention, assimilation, understanding, and proper application of course content" (Scannapieco, 1997, p. 955); therefore, students benefit when professors use instructional strategies that promote active engagement. In-class debates provide an opportunity for students to be actively engaged, particularly if the instructor uses a debate model that involves more than just two to four students. However, even if only four students are orally participating in the debate, the novelty of a less familiar instructional strategy can increase the students' level of interest and attention.

Debate as an active instructional strategy enhances learning particularly in the areas of mastering the content as well as developing critical thinking skills, oral communication skills, and empathy. Participation in a debate requires a more thorough mastery of the content than even giving a lecture does (Lewin & Wakefield, 1983). Yet debates go beyond mastery of the content as students also develop critical thinking skills, such as recognizing inconsistencies and identifying assumptions. The students can apply these skills in many different situations. Similarly, debates demand the development of oral communication skills, which are vital for success in most careers. Most undergraduates take only one course in oral communication; therefore, instructors in various disciplines must imbed oral communication exercises in their courses. Debates also provide opportunities for developing empathy as students give consideration to various viewpoints, particularly when instructors structure the debate in such a manner that more than two views can be presented and that students are not always defending their own viewpoint. "Debating is the ultimate multi-task school activity since it involves research, writing, speaking, listening, and teamwork"

(Allison, 2002, p. 13). Therefore, participation in debate should not be limited to those on forensics teams but should be an experience afforded students in a wide variety of university classrooms.

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DR. RUTH R. KENNEDY, Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in early childhood and elementary education. Formerly, she taught middle school for four years and was an elementary school principal for seven years. Her doctorate was earned at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2002 in Curriculum and Instruction, and her research interests include sense of community, cross-age tutoring, learning styles, and the use of in-class debates. She can be reached at rkennedy@bloomu.edu.