SUMMARY

In teams, students prepare arguments, supported by evidence, for and against a controversial topic. The position students argue is decided by a coin toss. Audience members participate in polling, discussion, and evaluation.

GOALS

• Encourage students to think critically
• Foster students’ ability to see multiple perspectives
• Teach students to question their own thinking

“The debate helps students question why they think the way they do.”

- Sergio Burgos
In teams of three, students prepare arguments for and against a controversial topic.

The instructor provides students with “Rules of Engagement.”

Immediately before the start of the debate, the instructor tosses a coin to assign “for” and “against” positions.

The debate follows a structure:

a. Team One presents affirmative position (3 min.)
   Team Two presents negative position (3 min.)

b. Team One reintroduces affirmative position with secondary arguments (3 min.)
   Team Two reintroduces negative position with secondary arguments (3 min.)

c. Team One offers rebuttal (3 min.)
   Team Two offers rebuttal (3 min.)

During the debate, each team member has a task: one speaks, another takes notes, while a third selects appropriate counterarguments.

The audience:

- is polled before and after the debate to determine whether their views changed in response to the debate.
- participates in post-debate discussion.

**ASSESSMENT**

The debate is worth 15% of the final grade. The assessment has two components:

**Oral (team grade): 12%**

Assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Argument and evidence (10 points)
2. Presentation (10 points)
3. Debate (10 points)

**Written (individual grade): 3%**

A 1-page reflection essay where students address one of two prompts: (1) How did your understanding of the subject change during or after the debate? or (2) What is your position on [the topic of the debate]?

**READY TO TRY IT OUT?**

**HERE’S SOME ADVICE …**

- Choose a controversial topic that is meaningful to students.
- Prepare students for how to engage in debates.
- Provide several opportunities for students to debate, including a practice run, because their skills improve with practice.
- Use a timer during the debates. Projecting a countdown clock in PowerPoint that everyone can see works well.

**BENEFITS**

- Debates help raise students’ awareness of their underlying assumptions. They push students to question their own thinking.
- Students are motivated to engage in the activity because they enjoy it.
- Debates allow instructors to see differences among student abilities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

**CHALLENGES**

- Students tend to rely on notes and readings; it can be challenging for them to respond on the spot.
- Physical space is a consideration: not all classrooms lend themselves to debate set-ups.

The implementation of this strategy was inspired by Oros, A. (2007). Let’s debate: Active learning encourages student participation and critical thinking. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 3(3), 293-311, DOI: 10.1080/15512160701558273

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