

THE USE OF DEBATES AS A LEARNING TOOL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

THE USE OF DEBATES AS A vehicle for learning is well-established. For instance the Oxford Union has been holding debates since 1823, and continues to provoke thought and comment on a wide range of topical subjects. Debates are often used in Law Schools where "Moot Courts" enable students to practice legal advocacy. However, the use of debates as part of a modular science curricula is not common place despite the fact that this method of learning can act as a useful technique to encourage independent learning in relation to the debate topic. Debates also enable students to develop key skills in terms of rapid response, one to one communication, answering difficult questions and discussing issues in a professional manner.

The issue for a given debate can often be centred around a topical or current issue and should be one in which both sides of the "argument" have a realistic basis. Students should be briefed with respect to the format of the debate, the rules of engagement and the criteria by which they will be assessed. If debates are to be used as part of the assessment regime then it may be impractical to have teams of more than six students "per side" as it becomes difficult to ensure that each student contributes. However, debates can be used successfully with larger groups as a more generic learning tool, or in a formative role, prior to an assessed debate. Further, if a number of debates are held in successive sessions then larger groups can form part of the audience, whilst two smaller teams debate the specific topic. The room setting can add to the realism and atmosphere of the debate and where possible teams should be seated opposite each other, with the audience surrounding this central

"arena". This is usually easy to achieve in all but the most rigid teaching space.

A CASE EXAMPLE

Debates are used within a Part III module entitled "Agriculture, Environment and Sustainability". There are usually 25-30 students from a range of degree courses. The learning outcomes are: to discuss, evaluate and quantify aspects related to genetic modification; and to communicate in a professional manner in a debating forum.

Thus the subject of the debate is "Genetically modified crops can/cannot contribute to agricultural production in an environmentally sustainable manner."

Students are provided with an overview of the subject prior to the task being set and a substantive reference list. The tutor sets the scene, allocates teams and reading lists two weeks prior to the debating event. Each team works together to prepare their case, and one week is allocated as a private study period during which each group is expected to prepare for the debate. Each team is expected to allocate particular roles.

- * Proposers who gives a verbal presentation (prepared by the team) for 15 minutes in support of their case.
- * Questioners who ask questions of the opposing team after the opponents' case has been presented, and answer the questions asked by the opposing team and the audience.
- * Summarisers who present the summary of the case (prepared by the team) for 10 minutes and try to incorporate the answers to the most

important questions posed during the debate.

The audience generally consists of everyone involved in the other debates, plus two independent members of staff. Before the debate, the audience casts their vote for the case that they agree with, and will cast their vote again after the debate. Members of the audience are also allowed to ask questions. The Chairperson needs to give a short introduction to the debate, ensure fair debating and keep the debate on track and within time.

There are two components of assessment: a mark derived from the content and organisation of the debate itself (a mark is awarded to the group as a whole and then apportioned within the group on the basis of group assessment of effort); and a written report on the subject of the debate (max 2000 words).

In conclusion, it has taken several years for debates to evolve into a robust learning tool and we continually adjust the format (and the subject matter of the debates). Many students also experience debates in Part I and this is important as it exposes them to this learning method early in their University careers. As tutors we feel it not only encourages independent learning in relation to the subject matter, but also exposes students to important transferable skills such as team work, synthesising data, the importance of using quantitative evidence and general debating skills. It is important to have a firm but fair chairperson and to choose (and update) the subject of the debates with some care.

Dr Julian Park
LTSN Bioscience
j.r.park@reading.ac.uk