

COMPETITION AS EDUCATION: BRINGING THE TOURNAMENT TO THE CLASSROOM

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Courses: Introduction to Debate, Advanced Debate
Instruction, Argumentation and Advocacy

Objectives: Students will: (1) read and critically engage a scholarly article on some aspect of debate theory; and (2) synthesize the concepts they encounter into a prepared argument for an in-class debate.

Rationale

Debate instruction often encounters a difficulty that is a unique to competitive academic activities: how to instruct individuals to succeed at making arguments in a competitive forum, when most of the instruction occurs in a setting that is unlike the practice of competition. In other words, debate preparation is characterized by dialogic exchange while debate itself is characterized by dialectic exchange. To the extent that competitive dialectic exchange produces valuable educational outcomes, the practice of competition should be brought into the classroom. In order to bridge the gap between competition and instruction, educators should construct competitive activities that serve the larger goal of debate pedagogy.

Forensic scholarship has long been tasked with defending the educational benefits of the competitive practice of debate. Organizations have at times questioned the educational benefits of competition, such as the 1950 call by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools to abolish “all interscholastic contests except athletics” (North Central Association . . . 1950, p.

145). There are a number of defenses of the competitive aspect of debate. Littlefield (2006) argues that “the debate over competition versus education is immaterial because both lead to a higher level, which should be the ultimate goal; that higher level is knowledge” (p. 6). Littlefield (2006) notes that competition is an epistemic practice that should be valued for the knowledge it produces.

Competition also enhances the process of preparation. Debate coaches understand the motivational push that a tournament provides with the rigorous testing of arguments and research that goes on in each contest round. Graham (1966) points out that in-class competition motivates students to more thoroughly prepare than they might otherwise do so. Debaters are no different than other students save that they are intensely aware of the adrenaline pumping atmosphere that a debate competition entails, and the acute preparation that is required to succeed in such circumstances. Harnessing the competitive energies in the instruction of debate practices and theory can more fully educate debaters about the substance of issues and arguments than basic classroom instruction.

The activity listed below (and its application to various courses) provides a way to bring competition to the classroom for instructing debaters and motivating them to prepare their arguments in advance of the tournament competition.

Activity and Debriefing

The purpose and exercise of this activity differs little between different courses, save in the details of the assigned topic. In each case, there is a common set of readings assigned before class, with a core set of concepts that will be used for the in-class debates. Ask students to prepare a short case on each side of the issue, usually around two minutes when delivered. Each debate consists

of this constructive, followed by the constructive on the opposing side and a rebuttal of the same length from each participant. Rather than simply having a smattering of random debates, this activity couples the excitement of the tournament structure with the instructional potential of a classroom space. Set up a bracket (similar to the elimination rounds of a tournament) and have multiple debates, with subsequently more advanced students debating in front of the class, while their peers evaluate and participate in the adjudication of the debates.

- For the Introduction to Debate Course: Topics that are best to choose for the introductory debate course include items that are central to the current debate resolution. If the resolution features the necessity of government spending, the topic chosen for the mini-tournament could be on the economics of that spending. Namely, what role should government spending play in the economy? Good readings to choose could include introductions to the Keynesian and neo-classical schools of economics.
- For the Advanced Debate Course: Topics that are best to choose for the advanced debate course include different aspects of debate theory, both contemporary and historic. These can include whether or not the negative should be allowed to read counterplans (historic), whether or not multiple conditional advocacies are justified (contemporary), the legitimacy of intrinsicness tests on the part of the affirmative, whether or not counterplans that can result in the plan are competitive, etc. Good readings to provide on these subjects are found in the annals of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *The Rostrum*, *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate*, and the archives of Wake Forest University's *Debater's Research Guide*.

- For the Argumentation and Advocacy Course: Topics that are best to choose for an upper division argumentation course are classic public controversies. These include environmental regulation compared to free market approaches, tax reform, social services, death penalty, etc. For an environment topic, the debate hinges on whether or not protecting the environment is more important than economic growth, giving the students a valuable locus of clash to direct their argumentation.

Appraisal

The goal of this activity is to focus debate students' attention and preparation in the same way that they prepare arguments for a tournament. By reading and getting ready for the in-class tournament, debaters are far more likely to engage materials seriously and systematically. Students are also among the best innovators of argument in this setting. Though a debate may seem to be thoroughly explored (such as the legitimacy of conditionality), this activity often brings forth new and interesting arguments that the students generate. One drawback to this activity is that it requires a significant time investment on the part of the debate instructor. It is time well spent though, given the retention of information that this activity facilitates.

The variations on the activity include offering a prize for the winner of the tournament, other than just the pride of feeling victorious. One interesting twist can be to hand over the judging of the tournament to the downed participants as they are eliminated from the tournament. This allows students who don't do as much debating to be exposed to the increasingly more complex and well-prepared arguments of their compatriots. The process of judging these debates also clarifies the issues for less experienced or prepared students, and forces them to re-

evaluate the positions which they argued from.

Discussion

Debate is characterized by competition as coaches and students prepare throughout the year for the tournaments they attend. The educational benefits of debate come from the preparation process and the practice of attending tournaments and debating in round after round against intellectual equals. “[C]ompetition provides the incentives to teach our students more thoroughly, to discover new sources of arguments and interpretations, and then to submit those ideas to peer judgment” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 107); it is in this spirit that this activity is constructed. By providing a tournament experience in the classroom, it is possible to channel competitive energy into the preparation and instruction of debate.

References and Suggested Readings

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- Williams, D. E., & McGee, B. R. (2000). Negotiating a change in the argumentation course: Teaching cooperative argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36, 105-109.

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