

THE PUBLIC DEBATE WRITING ASSIGNMENT: DEVELOPING AN ACADEMICALLY ENGAGED DEBATE AUDIENCE

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Courses: Public Speaking, Persuasion, Conflict
Analysis, Argumentation and Advocacy, Organizational
Communication, Cultural/Intercultural Communication

Objectives: Students will: (1) attend and critically analyze
a public debate; and (2) be able to connect the arguments
and strategies in the public debate with concepts from their
courses.

Rationale

There are dozens of public debates on college campuses each academic year, and faculty all receive e-mail encouraging us to send students to such events as extra credit. Members of communication departments want to be supportive of their colleagues, and often dutifully send students off to events with a simple check mark for attendance. However, if such events are educational in nature and can add to students' overall experience in their communication courses, then it is critical to ensure their participation in public debate events contains some degree of academic rigor. Giving students credit simply for attending does not forward the aims of public debate to create an engaged citizenry.

Previous studies of the use of extra credit indicate that instructors tend to choose extra credit opportunities that they believe provide the greatest potential educational

value to students (Hill, Palladino, & Eison, 1993; Norcross & Dooley, 1993). The public, on-campus debate certainly provides students with an example of intense public deliberation on important public issues. Condit and Lucaites (1993) argue that “public argumentation functions as a contest of competing voices concerned to determine the best course of action in contingent situations” (p. xii). It is easy to see how this style of engagement could enhance an audience’s understanding of a number of communication concepts. Simple attendance, however, does not provide students with sufficient engagement with the material to constitute an educational experience.

The activities listed below encourage students to view public debate through the lens of their communication theory or practice courses. By doing so, students should begin to see everyday applications of concepts they are discussing in a variety of communication courses.

Activity and Debriefing

In order to ensure that students gain the highest educational benefit from this assignment, the reflection pieces that students complete should be specific to the course that is assigning the extra credit. Below are some examples of student reflection pieces for a variety of courses:

- For the Public Speaking Course: Ask students to reflect on how debaters use (or fail to use) delivery, performance, or style to create ethos and adapt to their audience. This assignment could also be made more specific to a particular course concept (i.e., persuasive speaking, gestures, etc.). Additionally, attention could be paid to the manner in which debaters organize, adapt, frame, and/or present their arguments in an attempt to adapt to their audience.

- For the Persuasion Course: Ask students to reflect on the nature of persuasion—which teams did they think were most persuasive and why? Were they most persuaded by logos, ethos or pathos? How important is a good balance of all three to a persuasive argument?
- For the Argumentation Course: Ask students to identify some different argumentative strategies and techniques used by debaters, and compare and contrast their “effectiveness.” Did any of the debaters use “unethical” strategies and/or techniques?
- For the Communication and Conflict Course: Have students identify the value, if any, of an “adversarial” forum/format like debate to decision-making, topic education, public discussion and dialogue. Students might be asked to focus on whether a public debate is an adversarial, or a cooperative, event. How is a facilitated debate different from what usually “passes” as debate in our contemporary culture?
- For the Cultural/Intercultural Communication Course: Ask students to isolate ways that the debaters constructed (or attempted to construct) identity (their own and that of the audience) in order to build their arguments. What are the social, political, and/or cultural implications of constructing identity in a manner as the debaters did? Do the different positions advanced by the debaters invite audience members to assume different identities? How important are these identities (or roles) to the success or failure of the political positions advanced? Are certain identities privileged? Whose identities are marginalized?
- For the Organizational Communication

Course: Have students reflect on topics of the “event.” What role does the event play in creating organizational identity—how does the university, department, or the debate program define itself through the event? How do these organizations define themselves in relation to other organizations or communities? What organizational rituals can you observe at the event? What function or role do they play for the organization, and are these positive or negative?

Appraisal

The goal of this activity is to encourage students to go beyond just attending a public debate and instead to increase their reflection on course concepts by asking students to be active audience members. The only drawback to the addition of these activities is that they do create an additional level of work for the faculty member. However, the educational benefit gained by asking students to complete meaningful assignments far outweighs the additional work of grading a few more short papers.

There are numerous variations to these activities customizable to communication courses taught by individual departments. Additionally, assignments can apply more specifically to lessons taught during the time period in which the public debate takes place. These variations create a much richer experience for the student and provide a greater opportunity for faculty debriefing after public debate events.

Discussion

Alexander (1995) argues that in order for the study and practice of communication to realize its full potential, students must be willing to engage “themselves imaginatively into the standpoint of others in order to comprehend the dimensions of the situation as a *whole*,

in terms of *possibilities* as well as actualities” (p. 144). Asking students to evaluate aspects of public debate when completing extra credit assignments for a class encourages them to engage in debates not just as passive audience members, but as active citizen participants. The addition of a more rigorous standard to traditional extra credit opportunities increases the rigor associated with communication courses, and provides student with another avenue through which to gain insights into important communication concepts.

References and Suggested Readings

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