

Teaching with Debate

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Debates can be an effective and engaging way for students to analyze different concepts and to develop critical thinking and public speaking skills. They are also a useful technique for achieving greater participation in class and for discussing controversial issues in a structured environment. The Kaneb Center recently hosted a workshop on using debates in the classroom; below are some of the highlights from the workshop:

Choosing a Debate Question

To have a fruitful debate, choose an open question with two (or more) sides that can be reasonably supported with academic evidence. A great place to start is with major debates and schools of thought in your discipline or a moral or ethical question involving the subject matter you are teaching. The question should be simple enough for a non-expert to debate, yet complex enough that students will be able to develop multiple arguments to support their side of the issue. Another helpful way to choose a topic is the fact-value-policy framework. Here are some examples:

- **Fact:** *“Genetically modified foods are safe to eat.”* This is a disputed statement that allows students to debate the definition of “safe to eat” and the science behind whether the foods are harmful to humans or not.
- **Value:** *“Preemptive war can be morally justified.”* In this statement, students could draw on different societal values and principles to discuss the morality of war.
- **Policy:** *“Public universities should allow funding for student groups that promote a specific religion.”* Policy debates include questions about whether the policy in question is desirable or effective and whether the policy-enacting agency should be the one to make the policy.

Of course, these three types of debate questions often overlap. Use this flexibility to choose a question that is most relevant to your particular course and to your students.

Setting up the Debate

It is important to keep your learning goals in mind as you decide what type of debate to conduct, what question(s) you will use, what roles the students will have, how they will be assigned to teams and how the debate will be graded. Once you have everything planned, be sure to clearly communicate the information to the students to allow them to fully prepare for the debate. You may also want to provide your students with assigned reading, directions for researching the topic on their own and the debate rules and etiquette guidelines.

Debate Formats

Classroom debating is an extremely flexible teaching method, so there are many different formats you can follow, depending on your own learning goals and objectives for the class. We’ve outlined several (for individual students, small groups, the full class or online) in our [workshop handout](#) and many more format suggestions are available online.

Most debates begin with a short period of individual or group preparation, which is a great time for the teacher to listen in on the preparations the group is making and offer suggestions or answer questions before the debate starts. It is also helpful to end the debate with a debriefing stage when the arguments made by both teams can be assessed and students can discuss their ideas independent of the side they were assigned to or chose to argue.

The debate also often includes a time for teams to make opening and closing statements, where they have uninterrupted time to develop their arguments. Other potential debate components include a rebuttal, where Team B can respond to the arguments made by Team A, or a cross-examination, when teams can question each other in a more free-flowing style. In debate styles with smaller teams, this could also be a time for students in the audience to question their peers on the evidence they have used to support their arguments.

Give Debate a Try!

Debate can be a fun and useful active learning technique and is a great way for students to develop many important skills. For more information about using debate in the classroom, see the resources below.

Additional Resources

[*Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum* by Alfred Snider and Maxwell Schnurer](#)

[*The Debatabase Book: A Must-Have Guide for Successful Debate* by Robert Trapp](#)

[“Debating the Evidence: An International Review of Current Situation and Perceptions” by Rodie Akerman and Ian Neale](#)

[International Debate Education Association](#)

[Createdebate.com](#)

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