HOW TO SET UP AND RUN AN EFFECTIVE DEBATE

Using debates in a tutorial can help students become familiar with core concepts and improve both their critical analysis and communication skills. Debates also enhance teamwork, promote higher-order thinking, and are especially beneficial when a subject is controversial or complex. Communication skills develop when students express themselves, particularly when they state their ideas in a clear manner and listen to the views of others. Students are also encouraged to develop skills in synthesising information which are valuable in future written tasks.

If done well, debates contribute to the development of: communication skills, teamwork skills, and analytical skills. If combined with other approaches, information literacy and problem solving skills may also be developed and enhanced.

PART A: SETTING UP THE DEBATE

1. **Decide on the purpose of the debate**

   Start with one or more clearly stated intended learning outcomes that will be achieved through debate. Ensure these are aligned with course learning outcomes and take into account the generic skills, threshold learning outcomes and graduate attributes associated with the course.
   - Consider how you will encourage student engagement. Is the debate part of the course’s assessment strategy? Are there participation marks allocated to participants? If there is no weight attached, you will need to elaborate how the debate supports the course learning outcomes or prepares students for success on course assessments.
   - Choose an appropriate over-arching question around which to frame the debate. Ensure that the debate requires responses that prompt critical thinking and synthesis of concepts.
   - Decide whether or not students will have a choice in the side they will argue during the debate, or whether they will be placed in a team by you. Each variation has benefits and limitations:
     - If students choose which side they will argue in advance, they are more likely to conduct strong research.
     - If students have to become familiar with both sides of the debate, they may read more widely.
     - A further option is deliberately placing students in a team where they will be arguing against their preferences, assisting them to develop high level critical thinking skills. Depending on the learning outcomes you are trying to achieve, one of these options will be more suitable for your class.

2. **Research the background information**

   Although the purpose of having the debate is for students to become familiar with the topic, you will still need to know the area thoroughly.
   - What are the boundaries between the relevant and irrelevant information?
   - Anticipate areas of debate that may be raised, and be aware that students may become sidetracked by irrelevant issues.
   - Consider how you will help students return to the central focus of the debate without denigrating their efforts.
3. **Help the learners prepare for the debate**

The intended learning outcomes for the discussion should be clearly explained to the students so that they are aware of its purpose. They will be more likely to stay focused on the key skills and knowledge, and application of those.

Consider your students' prior learning and determine what they need to know before taking part. The more students know about the topic, the more robust the debate. If students do not know enough about the topic, the tutorial may end up becoming an *ad hominem* dispute.

- Provide the students with general background information before the debate, including some stimulus material (a journal, video or newspaper article, for example). They can have their notes with them so that they can refer to them throughout the debate, as required.
- Ensure students are aware of the process for choosing their ‘side’ before the day of the debate (see point 1 above).
- Ensure students understand the timing of the different parts of the debate. This is particularly important if the time allowed for the activity is restricted (half an hour - one hour). If you have a longer time frame (two hours or online) the debate can be extended to allow for more input.
- Provide students with role statements which will allow them to frame the arguments effectively. For students who will be part of the judiciary, clearly explain that their role is to evaluate all points raised during the debate, and come to a clear conclusion as to which side presented the most effective argument.

4. **Prepare the debate plan**

Your lesson plan should contain:

- Learning outcomes
- Setting the scene
- Timing of the debate
- Closing the debate (Summary)

Plan for ways to encourage students to participate if they are reluctant, and for reining the debate if it should go off-track.

Give thought to the length of time needed to carry out the debate, and indicate on your lesson plan the time the speakers will need to stop.

5. **Prepare the environment**

Ensure students are prepared for the debate, not only in terms of the topic they will argue for or against, but also in terms of your expectations about their involvement.

- If you are using Collaborate or another technology-based platform, students will need to know how to use it. Consider a short ‘mock’ debate to iron out any difficulties and get students comfortable using the technology.
- If this is an in-class debate, make sure that the room is laid out to ensure students can see and speak to each other. You may need to rearrange tables to suit the format of the debate. A sample room layout is shown on the Discussion and Debates Resource Sheet.
- To enhance the quality of the debate, encourage students to:
  - Articulate their points concisely
  - Listen attentively
  - Remain objective (attack the argument, not the person)
  - Ensure their contributions are relevant
  - Be reflective and constantly monitor the points made by opposing and supporting sides.
PART B: RUNNING THE DEBATE

- The diagram on the resource sheet shows the process for a four team debate. This debate format allows more students to be involved than traditional three or four person debate.
- Each team needs to have the same amount of time to present their argument and rebuttal.
- The resource sheet shows a variety of timing strategies for debates. The two hour debate allows for longer set up and closing times, and provides for more student interaction during the debate (for example, the Judiciary could 'crossexamine' the affirmative and negative teams before delivering their judgement).
- Depending on the format, an online debate can be done in real time (using Collaborate) or asynchronously. Asynchronous debates are by definition not in real time, but can provide opportunities for students to refine their understanding of the topic over a longer period than one class, and may also be used as a formal assessment task.

6. Closing the debate

- To make the debate a valuable experience for students, it is essential to spend some time providing feedback on the issues raised and the way students carried out their roles.
- This feedback should be aligned to:
  - Course outcomes
  - Generic skills
  - Task requirements (if appropriate)
- You may wish to develop a feedback sheet for you and your students to complete, including opportunities for students to reflect on their developing communication, analysis and teamwork skills as a result of completing the activity.

For more ideas or support about leading effective discussions, contact the Centre for Teaching and Learning.