Creating a Class Debate Assignment

Why Debate? Class debates are a wonderful way to empower students to recognize the complexities of problems – especially nuanced, layered social issues – by considering multiple perspectives. Debate teams also require students to work collaboratively and cooperatively to identify and support arguments, just as a legal team would do when prosecuting or defending the accused. Well-developed arguments account not only for the perspective assigned, but also consider carefully the counter-arguments others will offer. Importantly, class debates provide students with the opportunity to develop, refine, and practice public speaking and critical thinking skills.

Debate Topics: Think of an issue in your field for which multiple perspectives exist. Think about controversial, relevant, recent news-breaking, and interesting topics to encourage dynamic classroom discussion. Students are more likely to engage when debating a subject to which they can relate directly, so consider the implications of this issue for students' lives. What are the ramifications of this issue for their world?

For example, competing theoretical or social perspectives may offer differing understandings of an issue. For example, differing theories of gender development (biological, interpersonal, and cultural theories) each provide different explanations for how people develop a gendered identity, with the differing views having important implications for identity, relationships, politics, legal issues, education, sports, and much more.

Exploring the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of these perspectives provide and more nuanced understanding of a complex issue. Similarly, different perspectives on issues related to environmental issues/climate change, incarceration and recidivism, health care, poverty/homelessness, mental health, etc.

Reach Out: Identify guest speakers who might offer "real world" perspectives on this issue. CMU alumni can provide accounts of how they see these perspectives play out in fields relevant to your course. Invite them to speak to your class in-person, remotely, or through a recorded video.

Additional Resources:

Love, S. M. (2004, September). Online debate: A case study combining traditional strategy and online technology. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, 1*(9). http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Sep_04/article06.htm

Northern Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. (2012). Classroom debates. In *Instructional guide for university faculty and teaching assistants.* Retrieved from https://www.niu.edu/citl/resources/guides/instructional-guide

University of Illinois-Springfield ION Professional eLearning Programs. Online instructional activities: Debate. https://www.uis.edu/ion/resources/oiai/debate

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Class Debate Assignment

Objectives:
1. To develop knowledge of the main points of each team's theoretical perspective.
2. To identify, compare, and contrast (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) each team's theoretical perspective.
3. To consider the value of the evidence supporting each theory/perspective.
4. To initiate discussion of how these theoretical perspectives describe, explain, and/or predict competent (effective, appropriate, ethical) interpersonal communication.
5. To identify and apply criteria for evaluating theoretical perspectives.
6. To work collaboratively and cooperatively with others.
7. To develop, refine, and practice public speaking and critical thinking skills.

Team Formation:
>Students will (select or be assigned to) one of three advocacy teams. Each advocacy team will be composed of 3 advocates (speakers), plus support members who generate arguments, offer explanations, and provide examples.

Topic Selection: As a team, review the theories/perspectives of interpersonal communication and select a first choice, second choice, and third choice. For example:
1. Symbolic Interaction Theory
2. Uncertainty Reduction Theory
3. Social Penetration Theory
4. Social Exchange Theory
5. Relational Dialectics Theory

Once selected, contact your instructor (in class or via email) with your preferences. Your team will be notified shortly as to which theory/perspective is yours.

Debate Preparation:
>Each advocacy team will:
>1. develop a case to support their theoretical perspective with evidence,
>2. offer counterarguments to refute other teams' perspectives, and
>3. consider the implications of adopting a particular perspective.
>
>Proposition Under Debate:
>"Resolved: _____ theory or perspective best describes, explains, and predicts what is competent interpersonal communication."

Format of Debate Day: (75 minute class)

Introduction (instructor)	5 minutes
Round 1: Constructive Speech	5 minutes maximum per team
Round 2: Rebuttal Speech	7 minutes maximum per team
Round 3: Summary Speech	4 minutes maximum per team
Debrief: Class Discussion	15-20 minutes

Round 1: Constructive Speech

1. Introduction: identify the assumptions/main points of your team's theoretical perspective for an unfamiliar audience.
2. Provide evidence to support your team's theoretical perspective.
3. Discuss the implications of adopting or implementing your team's perspective: what would it mean for the people involved.

Round 2: Rebuttal Speech

1. Offer counterarguments for other teams' theoretical perspectives.
2. Refute the counterarguments presented against your team's theory.
3. Compare your team's theory to other teams' perspectives to show how yours provides a better explanation of competent interpersonal communication.

Round 3: Summary Speech

1. Summarize the case against your theory's competitors.
2. Summarize the case for your team's theory.
3. End with a powerful closing statement.

Debriefing: Class Discussion Questions

1. Describe the process your team went through to create the arguments for your theory. How did it feel?
2. Where any of you on a team presenting a perspective with which you did not initially agree (or with which you still don't agree?) What was that experience like? How did it feel arguing for something you understood, but with which you didn't agree? Was it difficult, enlightening? Did it bring to light a new way of thinking? Relate with other beliefs?
3. Which points brought up during the debate that were most influential? Why? An argument that was well-made, attacking other's weakness, persuasive arguments, evidence, personal experience?
4. Individually, did you give more weight to certain evidence than others? Who should set the standard for what is considered competent interpersonal communication? Criteria differ among groups, individuals, scholars, educators, scientists, parents/guardians, sociologists, psychologists, politicians, businesspeople.
5. Did anyone's attitude or perspective change about what constitutes competent interpersonal communication throughout/after the debate? How? If not, what's the importance of understanding different theories of interpersonal communication? What is the goal? Why is it important to be able to explain/predict interpersonal communication/relationships – to make better arguments for your view, deal with the others, enhance communication, understand behavior, communication styles, beliefs, educated/informed choices, critical thinking?
6. Why is it so hard to define/describe/predict competent interpersonal communication? Different criteria, experiences, cultures, beliefs, rules/laws, education?
7. Should there be an over-arching theory that describes, explains, and predicts competent interpersonal communication? What's the importance of studying interpersonal communication theory? Ponder question: how do we know what constitutes competent interpersonal communication?
8. What are the implications of taking one perspective over another– for individuals, relationships, rules/laws, raising children, education, cultures: reactions, understanding, problems?