

DEBATE AS A WHOLE LANGUAGE TOOL FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS

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In the quest for new visions and applications that spread the message that debate is a great method for teaching communication and thinking skills, debate is being taught to an increasingly younger audience. The introduction of the National Junior Forensic League has spurred substantial discussion about debate and speech at this age. We present one example of debate as an excellent teaching tool for young students in a summer migrant education program. Specifically, we examine a debate curriculum used in the classroom with junior high aged students of the summer migrant school in Breckenridge, Minnesota. It was a six week long class which included approximately two hours of education time per day. The nine to fifteen students ranged from entering sixth grade to entering eighth grade using the Limited Current Issue Debate (LCID) Instructor's Guide¹.

The class debated whether or not to adopt English and Spanish as official languages. Debate was chosen because the main goal was to get the students to talk and be expressive. Other goals were to improve organizational, reading and research skills. By combining these goals, debate was used as a whole language teaching tool. The students began by not being very vocal. By the time the course was over, they were very verbal and could clearly express their opinions. The students improved their reading skills as well.

One of the important factors for improving reading was the desire to research. Breckenridge is a small school, but they used the library, the internet, and general national newspapers. We used the Breckenridge Middle School

Library with which the students were already familiar because they had visited other summers. Once a week we visited the Mildred Johnson Library on the campus of North Dakota State College of Science. Here the students had access to more in depth research materials. In addition to the goals set by the Minnesota State Department of Education, the students learned how a larger media center might be organized and how to search, access and borrow materials in a larger system. Because many of the materials they found useful didn't circulate, they also developed documenting and note-taking skills. Reluctant readers, who many of these migrant students were, need what seems to them a less academic, less tedious stimulus to read. Researching on the computer appealed to these students. When they found articles on their topic on the internet, they had to read them and weigh them for validity.

They were also increasing their knowledge of the use of the computer and the internet without really thinking about the fact that they were improving all of these skills. Most of the students had rarely if ever read a newspaper. National newspapers were brought in and combed daily. The students learned about the different kinds of information found there and how to evaluate its recency, objectivity and its value as support for their arguments. Later in the course, the first question the students would ask is "Did the paper come

yet"? Their curiosity directly translated into better researching skills. Many of the students had never used indexes in a library. Through debate they used the library, found sources on the internet, and sorted through the articles to find their evidence. Organizational skills were also nurtured. The students began with very little idea how to organize an argument, a paper, or a speech. They were successful at writing cases and organizing their thoughts and arguments by the end of the course.

The debaters obtained other language arts skills such as memory. They would remember evidence they had seen before when discussing or debating the resolution. Some students were even offering evidence to their opponents during the debate. "Oh, I have a good card for that argument, here!"

Also, students learned more about themselves. Since all of the students were Hispanic and from families that speak a combination of mostly Spanish and some English, the resolution had direct impact on their lives. Many students said in the beginning that it would be hard to see the other side of the argument, but later actually changed some of their opinions about what was really involved with an "official" language. Some students realized that they do not speak "pure" Spanish or English but speak a unique dialect and hybrid (as do most people). This helped to make them aware of their own unique identity.

This class confirms that debate is possible at lower grades with students of varying ability ranges. These students were not academically exceptional and had lacked significant language arts

skills such as writing, reading, and organizational abilities. This deficiency can be somewhat attributed to their constant migration. They miss instructional time during those moves in the year. The debate program worked well with these students and they demonstrated a substantial level of improvement in just six weeks. As an addendum, there has been feedback from the students themselves as to the value of this practice. Four of them reported this past summer having achieved A's in the ninth grade second semester English class. The thrust of that class was research and report.

Perhaps the competitive nature of debate (even in small doses) creates a desire to make an effort to read more. The students' desire to read the newspaper and other material creates not only the skills but also the needed motivation to use those skills. Additionally, through the research process they explored an important topic and gained a more sophisticated level of understanding. By being able to think, write, talk, criticize, and explain various ideas on both sides of a topic which is pertinent to their lives, the students found some joy in the learning process.

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¹ Iverson, J. (1995). Limited Current Issue Debate Instructor's Guide. Fargo, ND: Division of Independent Study.