

DEBATE: Important for Everyone

Alfred C. Snider
Edwin W. Lawrence Professor of Forensics
Director, Lawrence Debate Union
Director, World Debate Institute
University of Vermont

January 2011

I was a very poor student and also a discipline problem until at the age of eleven. I was invited to be in a debate. It changed my life, and especially my approach to academics. I discovered a reason to enjoy school, and I found my voice in the modern classroom. I debated all through college and immediately became a debating coach at the college level. I have been one ever since. About twelve years ago I became involved in promoting debating in other countries. I have now done debate training in 35 countries, including places like Venezuela, Iraq, Latvia and a lot more. For the last eight years I have focused my training of students for competition in the World Universities Debating Championship format and I regularly attend the world championships. I have published a broad variety of articles and books concerning debating, with a special mention of my book, now in its second edition, Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum about using debate techniques in the classroom to improve learning in a broad array of subjects (Snider, 2006).

I have become somewhat of a debate evangelist, taking my message to whoever and wherever I can. I am just a small part of the story, but debating as a method of learning and individual development is now spreading explosively all over the world, from Saskatchewan to Sudan, from Iraq to India, and everywhere in between.

The point I want to make here is that debate is an extremely important activity that as many people as possible should participate in.

Why the 21st Century is Different

Our older techniques of education and social organization may have been satisfactory in the past, but the present is quite different. Many important changes in the intellectual landscape of our planet took place in the 20th Century, and they are all making their mark in the 21st Century. These developments are already known to you, but bear repeating to make my eventual point.

Instead of an in-depth explanation, allow me to just outline these changes:

1. There is more information now than ever. The increase in information will continue to increase geometrically, which means that we need to know

- how to find and analyze information as much if not more than we need to memorize the information itself.
2. The pace of social change continues to increase. Our lives are so much different than our grandparents; our parents and our children will live in a very different world. We need to learn more than useful patterns; we need to know how to adapt and how social change redefines us as citizens.
 3. The globe is one connected whole more than ever. What happens in Italy influences China, what happens in Brazil influences India. Economies and technological patterns are increasingly connected. As with any large and complex system, understanding how it operates can be challenging.
 4. Our mass media rains down on us with “expert” discourse. Given the first three events, we more and more rely on selected talking heads to do our thinking for us. Of course, such “experts” have their own points of view and their own masters, requiring us to judge them more closely than ever.
 5. We are surrounded by weak arguments promoted with considerable resources. We vote for “Yes we can,” instead of “Here is how we can,” and we are told so often that certain products or services will make us sexy or give us status when that is obviously not true. We become susceptible to the weak arguments around us through sheer repetition.

Why Current Educational Methods Fall Short

I am sure that we are all familiar with the chorus of criticisms that modern education faces. Rather than repeat all of them, I would like to briefly summarize those indictments that seem most relevant to this discussion.

1. The old “banking” model is insufficient. We often view students as a bank account into which the instructor deposits knowledge. The data is a “thing” or an “artifact,” and once the student has it, they are then educated. Given the magnitude of current knowledge that seems impossible as well as ineffective. I tend to agree with Paolo Freire in this work [The Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#) (Freire, 2007). Students need to learn how to manipulate and process data more than just check to see how full their knowledge bank account is.
2. Students are too often in a passive role. They are told to remain quiet and learn through listening. I am all for listening, but there is little motivation for it unless the student has a chance to be active, to participate and express themselves. We need a “noisy classroom” in the words of the UK’s Debbie Newman, who advocates active roles for students through debating and similar communicative roles (Newman, 2010).
3. Skill development is neglected. Skills have been relegated to the domain of vocational education, whereas multiple skills are essential for high level intellectual involvement in modern society, such as organizing research, public speaking, responding to criticism, thinking on one’s feet, asking and answering questions, note taking, learning to persuade listeners and other abilities. The current method of “learn it once and move on” neglects these complex skills that need to be developed over time and through

considerable repetition. Debating does this by, during each iteration, calling on all of these skills by those participating.

4. Students are taught to “accept” and not to “question.” The truth comes from the teacher as unassailable fact and the student becomes a habitual receiver of that information. The student is not taught to question and find the fault in what is offered. This poorly prepares students for the real life situation of competing advocates offering their own perspectives and asking the citizen to wisely choose between them. Modern education does not train young people to find faults, ask difficult questions and to test ideas that are being offered to them. Thus, in life they may find it hard to do what they are rarely trained to do in school. Debating, on the other hand, makes as one of its absolute principles that they need to question and find fault with the ideas of the other side.

Debating as Important Bundle of Educational Experiences

For each of these five ills, I believe that debate is a possible solution. Debate provides the potential for independent vigorous free thought and dialogue. Debate cannot easily be policed or controlled, and its process requires active thinking. Classrooms are increasingly important spaces to teach students intellectual survival skills.

I believe that using debate as an educational and/or classroom technique is valuable in addressing these issues and how citizens deal with them. Debate teaches content as well as process and requires information acquisition and management. Different aspects of an issue must be investigated and understood by the debater. Debaters learn how to gather information and marshal that knowledge for their purposes. The process of debating is dynamic, fluid, and changing. Every day brings new ideas and new arguments. Every opponent uses some arguments that are expected and some that are not. Connections need to be made between the arguments in every debate as debaters search for ways to use what others have said against them. Debaters also learn to compete against others in the realm of ideas while cooperating with team and class members in their efforts. Debaters learn to cooperate in order to compete. Debaters must critically analyze and deconstruct ideas presented by their opponents in preparation for doing the same thing for the rest of their lives in all of their information transactions.

Debating inherently involves a number of essential processes. It is easy to see how these processes add extra dimensions to the learning situation.

1. State your case. Any essay will do this, of course.
2. Clash with a critique the arguments of the other. This is rarely done in modern media, and even more rarely in schools.
3. Defend your own arguments from the critique of opponents. Media time allocation does not allow this, nor are there many teachers who are willing to defend their arguments against critical analysis.

4. Develop a perspective on all issues that enables a decision about the question at hand. The discussion needs to be packaged for a decision by an audience, which rarely happens today in politics or in education.

Debate calls to task simplistic public dialogue and foments a kind of global critical thinking. By encouraging participants to look carefully at the root causes and implications of controversies, and by teaching students that experts often have their own interests in mind when they produce facts and norms, debate can create a powerful resistance to many problems that seem to overwhelm us today. Most important, debate teaches a method of critical questioning and learning that can help anyone who seeks out new interpretations. Debates encourage students not only to debate about content but also about the frameworks of problems and how to solve them. Debate heightens mental alertness by teaching students to quickly process and articulate ideas. Thinking on their feet, debaters are required to hear an idea and then provide a response. This pressure-laden scenario enhances the educational outcomes and spontaneity of debates.

Empirical Results

Most of us working in this field believe that debating has a very positive academic impact on the students who participate. However, the opinions of committed enthusiasts is not going to influence school systems and ministries of education. Only rigorous empirical research can do this. Some of the earlier studies of the academic impact of debating were flawed in very important ways. However, now we seem to have a series of peer reviewed studies that suggest that the relationship is quite strong between debating and academic success.

Competitive Debating

Academic performance by African Americans in the USA is an example of an education system failing an important population. Fewer than half of African American high school students finish school. Debate can make a real difference. Mezuk (2009) examines data from Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Debate League from 1997 to 2006. Overall, more than three quarters of debaters graduate, compared to barely half of non-debaters. The effects for African American males are even bigger: African American males who participate in debate are 70 percent more likely to graduate and three times less likely to drop out than their peers.

A variety of other studies have confirmed these findings. According to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues compendium of research (NAUDL 2010). Studies of students in Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, Seattle and New York (2004) concluded, "Academic debate improves performance at statistically significant levels on reading test scores, diminishes high-risk behaviors, and improves academic success and student attitudes towards higher education."

In another study, in Minnesota in 2005, the findings included:

- Debaters scored 36% higher on the reading post-test than on the pre-test. This improvement is 61% greater than improvements among the comparison group.
- 80% of debaters reported no attendance problems compared to 49.02% with no reported attendance problems among the comparison group.
- Debaters averaged 15% higher self-esteem than the comparison group, and this boost in self-esteem was positively correlated with the duration of debate participation: the longer he/she debated, the wider the differential.
- By the end of their first year of debate, 100% of the debaters reported an increased interest in their classes.
- Compared to the comparison group, 87% of debaters were better able to analyze information.
- On a 4.0 scale, the gross average of debaters' 2006 GPAs was 2.97, compared to 2.5875 among the comparison group. Returning debaters averaged a 0.13 increase in their GPAs, while returning comparison group members lost an average of 0.10 points.
- 100% of Minneapolis urban debate league debaters were unlikely to engage in negative risk behavior (drug use, early pregnancy, and alcohol). Debaters scored the highest possible score on this indicator.

Classroom Debating

One of the earliest results from the application of debating as a technique to use in classrooms teaching non-debate subjects was gathered in Providence, Rhode Island by Frank Duffin (2005). He was the principal of the school, so he was able to make broad changes in the way courses were taught. He divided the school into three groups: A.) debate across the curriculum used heavily in classes, B.) debate across the curriculum used sparingly in classes and C.) debate across the curriculum used not at all in classes. He took baseline information from the entire school in 2002. In 2003, after the program had begun, the results were mixed. In basic reading comprehension, students in group A.) finished 20% ahead of Group B.) [24 vs. 20] and 33% ahead of group C.) [24 vs. 16.7]. In 2004 students in A.) gained an additional advantage, rising to a score of 28 while the other two group reading comprehension scores had actually fallen. In a study of student ability to analyze and interpret world problems, all three groups improved from a score of 9.5 in 2002 to a score of 12 in 2003, but then the differences really emerged and in 2004 students in group A.) improved to 20 while group B.) improved to only 14 and group C.) scores actually declined. At this point parents of those in group C.) demanded that their students be included in the debate across the curriculum method and the experiment was discontinued.

In a recent study of students in Hong Kong, Sam Greenland (2010) was able to show that debate training of high school students showed considerable promise. He found that many of the issues that had been raised about previous studies did

not seem relevant. He found that it was not true, as some had suggested, that male students learned debating better than females, but that both gained knowledge and skills equally. He also found that those students, who were more academically able, based on previous performance, did no better than their poorer performing comrades, indicating that debate is not just “for the smart” but can be done by almost all students. Finally, he discovered that abilities in speaking English (the debating activities all took place in English) did not influence the amount of debating expertise developed, and that those with less English speaking ability still performed very well in the debates that were scored. Thus, these findings may serve to answer some of the concerns that debating only helps some, or the gifted or the verbally able. The results in a large controlled study showed that debating helped everyone. As of this time I am awaiting Greenland’s findings about the future academic success of these students and whether debating improved their overall performance, and preliminary analysis of the data indicates that debating did, indeed, improve overall academic performance significantly.

Conclusions

Those we teach today will spend the rest of their lives in the future. It is essential that we understand how the present is different from the past and design our educational experiences accordingly. All over the world educational systems are being reorganized to emphasize active learning, critical thinking and creativity. I do not pretend to believe that debating is a magic bullet for all of the issues we face, but I do think it is a very strong candidate for something that can be done to better prepare students for the future.

A democracy cannot just be a form of government; it must also be a state of mind. In democracies we get the governments we deserve, and if your voters are passive, accepting and lack critical thinking capacities and abilities to speak out, we will have more of the same, more of what we have now. I believe that we can greatly improve all of our societies by raising up a generation of debaters to become a new generation of citizens.

References

Duffin, Frank, *Latitudes in Learning*, “Debate Across the Curriculum Results,” privately published paper, 2005.

Greenland, Sam, “More Debates in More Classrooms,” Keynote Speech at 3rd International Conference on Argumentation, Rhetoric, Debate and the Pedagogy of Empowerment, Maribor, Slovenia, October 2010.
<http://debatevideoblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/lecture-more-debates-in-more-classrooms.html>

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Mezuk, B.. Urban Debate and High School Educational Outcomes for African American Males: The Case of the Chicago Debate League. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 78(3), 2009, 290-304.

National Association for Urban Debate, Urban Debate Works Evidence Center, 2010. <http://www.urbandebate.org/literature.shtml>

Newman, Debbie, "The Noisy Classroom," Keynote Speech at 3rd International Conference on Argumentation, Rhetoric, Debate and the Pedagogy of Empowerment, Maribor, Slovenia, October 2010.
<http://debatevideoblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/lecture-noisy-classroom-debate-for.html>

Snider, Alfred and Schnurer, Maxwell, Many Sides: debate Across the Curriculum, New York: iDebate Press, 2006.