

DEBATE: KEY TO BETTER ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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I have been to Bangladesh. I have worked with the debaters there. I know that they are ambitious and want to make the most out of their education so that they can benefit their careers, their families, their communities, their country and the entire world. This is precisely why I am so pleased that debating has been embraced so firmly in Bangladesh, because I know that it will propel these students forward in a way that normal education may not be able to. From the best student to those who are struggling, debating can be of real educational benefit.

Most of us working in this field believe that debating has a very positive academic impact on the students who participate. However, the opinion 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

Debating can be used to enhance the teaching of various subjects (Snider & Schnurer, 2006). 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.

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

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