

Using Debate to Develop Empowered Learning In the Classroom: A Prescription

Introduction:

Textbooks, journal articles, and seminars, in service training can all help provide resources for teachers to use in their classrooms. Many texts are now accompanied by course outlines, lesson plans, chapter quizzes and formal examinations. Games and exercises have been developed to aid the teacher in involving students, creating interests in particular subjects, motivating students to learn, and helping the students find direct application for knowledge they acquire. Field trips and case studies help facilitate learning on different levels. Finally, use of the internet has opened the door (or window) to a world of information about teaching methods in a plethora of subject areas.

With all these resources available, it is still primarily the teacher who structures, plans, teaches, and controls the learning environment for students in the classroom. The choices these teachers make help determine the amount of inclusion the students feel and the confidence they express in participating. The curriculum choices the teacher makes help to determine whether the student learns “how to think” or simply acquires a body of knowledge.

The bottom line is that the way the teachers structure their studies and experiences probably has the single greatest impact on what actually happens in the classroom. Whether or not students feel empowered to learn is greatly impacted by the atmospheres the teachers create, the experiences they provide, and the behaviors they model.

As debate coaches, we would argue that competition in forensics and debate contributes strongly to a student’s acquisition of critical thinking skills. Through that acquisition, students develop confidence and feelings of empowerment.

Current literature and personal

by

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experience both seem to indicate that many argumentation skills can be incorporated into the classroom situation with similar results. Actually, the chain to empowered critical thinking seems to go through several steps:

1. the student feeling welcome and included
2. the student feeling empowered
3. the student feeling motivated to learn
4. the student developing critical thinking skills and
5. the student having the opportunity to engage in equitable exchange with peers and teachers.

One facet of argumentation which seems to have a good deal of application in both classroom and life situations is the “discovery of ground”. This discovery progresses through steps very similar to the five steps mentioned above.

With this in mind we will present a five-step prescription to be used in the classroom which mirrors the five steps used in the “discovery of ground”. Secondly, we will describe three scenarios which illustrate the prescription at work. Finally, we will include a brief bibliography of current readings in empowered learning, the development of critical thinking skills, and adapting argumentation training to classroom situations.

THE PRESCRIPTION

In response to the need to develop a training program for students we developed a prescription which seems to have utility in several contexts (the competitive debate round, the classroom, interpersonal exchanges, etc.) The prescription was derived from a variety of academic readings in argumentation theory and human communication.

Although the prescription is grounded in theory, it needs to be investigated in a formal, scholarly manner in order to claim any reputable significance. The writers of this paper are committed to that end.

Intuitively and anecdotally, however, the prescription makes sense. Based on limited trials; it seems to have a positive, reciprocal effect on students. While the prescription has practical applications which are initially suited for academic and competitive success, it should have relevance to most any situation where communicating parties are struggling or have traditionally struggled for equal ground in exchanges.

The Prescription:

Step one: Identify or formulate objectives

Step two: Define terms and concepts

Step three: Prioritize positions

Step four: Share frames of reference

Step five: Realize equity of exchange

Step one:

Identify or formulate objectives

There are two argumentation concepts at work in the objective phase; resolution and paradigm. The initial step in any debate round is to state the resolution. At this level those involved in the debate should be clear on the specific topic of the round. In addition to the statement of the resolution debat-

ers are encouraged to discuss judging paradigms before the round so that they might focus their presentations even further using the ideas the participants and judges have brought to the round with them.

The link between these argumentation concepts and a good communication scenario is strong. Much like debaters have a predetermined resolution to discuss, communicators should have a predetermined objective for their exchange. The idea of paradigms can then be linked to the idea of goals.

For those with an academic debate background, step one is very simplistic in nature and seemingly goes without saying. However, in real world scenarios people often enter an exchange without a clear objective. The objective step in this prescription begins a person's endeavor for empowerment by first establishing a clear focus for discussion and allowing all participating parties to present their goals.

Step two:

Define terms and concepts

In competitive debate, after the statement of the resolution comes the definition of terms. Debaters are required to explain and clarify terms so that the debate may be focused and avoid the "two ships passing in the night" exchange. In this aspect, all parties involved have the opportunity to understand objectives and the context in which the issues will be argued.

Often times in non-debate related exchanges this is not the case. Two people may be sure that they are both meeting to discuss the "domestic media", but one may show up prepared to discuss news journalism, while the other person is prepared to discuss television journalism. Without requiring a definitional step, individuals may suffer from misdirection before any exchange takes place and in effect be comparing apples to oranges.

Step two gives the idea of clarifying terms in argumentation practical application in other forms of communication. Defining necessary aspects of any information exchange adds direction and diminishes connotative or de-

notative discrepancies.

Step three:

Prioritize positions

Theoretically, there must be an equal division of ground in any competitive debate round. In lay terms there must be pros and cons to each side of the resolution so that debaters can have equal room to maneuver (*a concept that is critical to this paper*). Having in mind that there will be issues that have to be compromised or conceded, debaters begin to prioritize arguments in order of importance. Debaters have to ask themselves, "given the information in this round what ground am I willing to give, and what ground am I prepared to defend?"

This is also a very important concept in real world exchanges. It is the inherent nature of humans to propose and prioritize options based on their needs. A child asking for a raise in allowance may request \$5 hoping for \$2.50 for comic books, and an additional \$2.50 for snacks and candy. Realizing that she will likely not receive all \$5 the child feels as though if she allows her parents to rule out snacks and candy, she may still receive an additional \$2.50. Since the comic books were the top priority even though the child did not get all that she requested she still maintained enough ground to get what she felt she needed.

Step three outlines a very effective communication strategy grounded primarily in argumentation. Through using prioritization, students can learn how to identify and defend the ground they really need in order to meet their goals.

Step four:

Share frames of reference

Jargon is very important in competitive debate. It provides clarity and direction to those participating. Whether it is in stock issues, or value criteria, debaters deal with terms an untrained person could not understand or evaluate without some explanation. Debaters also use evidence to support claims they have made which are grounded in this jargon. For the com-

petitive debate round this works very well as participants are expected to know the jargon and be able to analyze the evidence. In essence they have a reference for the round before it starts.

In real world exchanges people also use jargon. Often contexted in evidence based on their experiences, one person's frame of reference may be drastically different from another's. This can make the transfer of information very difficult. Often times teachers try to interest their students in the subject at hand by referencing personal anecdotes. If the teacher's frame of reference differs too greatly from the student's, the anecdote may hold no significance to the student. However, if a teacher references the information in a context that is relevant to the student's own background and experience or allows the student to provide the reference, she/he will likely understand the concept on a deeper level and make it his/her own.

Step three teaches that it is necessary to go into any communicative exchange with a critical mass of information about all the parties involved. If all parties in the exchange can understand the reference and context of the other, the exchange has a greater chance of meeting its objective.

Step five:

Equity of exchange:

Competitive debate usually requires an adherence to time limits within the round. This provides structure and helps to ensure that debates are not one-sided exchanges.

This strictly adhered to concept in competition is extremely significant in other forms of communication as well. Society often focuses on the "lecture" concept of conveying information. Parents lecture their children on the rules of the house. Teachers lecture their students on classroom information. Employers lecture their employees on goals of the workplace. Unfortunately, typical to all these examples is the fact that the recipient of the lecture rarely has ground for information exchange. Without the ability to analyze, speak about,

clash with, and contest information, children, students, and employees fall victim to one-sided information transfers.

Step five culminates in the ultimate empowerment of all parties. With each participant understanding and believing in the value of the other participants, ethical, empowered exchanges are likely to occur.

THE SCENARIOS:

Scenario One: A New Instructor

Background: Often times, empowering the teacher is just as important as empowering the student. As an instructor enters into a teaching situation for the first time, conflict may arise between the instructor and administrators on the approach to be taken to reach curriculum goals. Due to different frames of reference, a concise, logical approach is needed to establish cohesion.

SCENARIO:

Step One, Identify or Formulate

Objectives: The objective step in this situation would suggest that the new teacher initiate a preliminary meeting with the supervisor. (Department head, principal, graduate student advisor, etc.) In this meeting, the two parties would have the opportunity to discuss curriculum goals. Both parties could then further outline the goals and establish both primary and secondary objectives. This action is crucial in laying the foundation necessary to the success of the second step.

Step Two, Define terms and concepts: Once the primary and secondary objectives are agreed upon, the instructor and supervisor can alleviate more uncertainty through establishing definitions. For example, if the new instructor was to teach Oral Communication 101, there may be some questions as to what constitutes a proficient student speaker. The definition phase allows the instructor and supervisor to decide if by a proficient student speaker they mean a student that can simply write a speech, deliver a speech, or perhaps a combination of both. Having determined that a combination of both is called for,

the instructor can develop activities better suited to meet the agreed upon definitions and the two parties are then ready to move on to step three.

Step Three, prioritize positions:

In stage three, the concept of ground comes to the forefront. For instance, the new instructor may be just out of college where group activities and concepts were heavily stressed. In developing activities to her/his strength, the new instructor may want to only use classroom activities that promote group development. Understanding the instructors need to feel comfortable in the classroom but at the same time aware that the students need to be competent in more than just group based activities, the supervisor may want to propose a compromise. For instance, he/she may identify certain classroom activities that are conducive to promoting individual critical thinking skills as well as incorporating them into a group activity. By prioritizing ground (group work for the new instructor and individual critical thinking skills for the superior), both parties were able to give enough ground to keep the exchange healthy, yet maintain enough ground to accomplish their goals.

Step Four, share frames of reference:

At this point, it becomes important for the two parties involved to exchange their frames of reference with each other. It is imperative to the new instructor that his/her supervisor understands the need to focus on group work. While in college, the instructor was in a program that heavily stressed group projects and work. The concepts of group dynamics and group work are what the instructor feels most comfortable with in teaching to others. In turn, the supervisor needs to convey past troubles with students passing Oral Communication unable to display individual critical thinking skills while giving presentations. Other instructors and the community had been voicing their displeasure concerning the current situation. By examining each others frame of reference upon entering the exchange, it becomes easier for the two parties to allow one another to stand firmly on

their own ground.

Step Five, equity of exchange:

In many cases, new instructors are often polarized. They may simply teach those areas where they have had previous experience and feel most comfortable, or they may be given guidelines and be encouraged to strictly use them. If the two parties in this scenario follow the prescription, this will not be the case. The new instructor will allow the administrator to take time to explain the current situation and the strengths and problems that may exist. Upon finishing, the superior will allow the instructor to offer his/her own suggestions that allow their particular area of interest to be fully explored. At the point where both teacher and administrator values and realizes the importance of the other's input, an equity of exchange has occurred.

SCENARIO TWO:

The Case of the High School Teacher

Background: Taking what is known about the prescription the focus now turns to the secondary classroom. In scenario two an upper middle class, privately educated high school teacher finds herself teaching in an inner city high school. The high school is composed primarily of students from financially challenged backgrounds, broken homes, and rough urban childhoods. The teacher realizes that if she formulates her lectures (the class is American History) based on her own teachings and experiences she may very well lose her students. By utilizing the prescription she is able to effectively reach her students while teaching valuable history lessons.

SCENARIO:

Step One, Identify or formulate objective:

The objective step for this situation leans toward elementary in execution but remains vitally important. Upon the first meeting of the class the teacher and the students must determine what the purpose and goal of the class is. In cases involving high school curricula subject matter is almost always pre-determined. It is nevertheless important for students to discover ways in which they

can use the material and establish what their goals will be. To the extent it is possible, it would be beneficial if the students could have input on assignments and exercises used to teach the material.

Step Two, define terms and concepts:

After the goals of the course are established, it is time to define the terms. This is the stage where the students help define what is being taught. If one of the objectives is to identify individuals who have had a “positive impact” on the “women’s movement” of the 20th century, students would be led through a discussion where they define “positive impact” and “women’s movement”. This would help focus the discussion as well as teach students to identify criteria for how to measure “positive impact”.

Step Three, prioritize positions:

In this phase the teacher would make decisions about what was most important to least important to cover, in descending order. The teacher might believe education and medicine should be first and second. She would lead the class in a discussion where the students would try to decide what is most important to study. For example, students interested in medicine might think it most important to look at female doctors and what impact they had on medicine. Students interested in education would argue for a unit on the importance of women teachers. Students who value home schooling and stay-at-home mothers might argue for a unit on the contribution mother/educators had on highly respected citizens. In this compromise, both parties have their goals accomplished and learn the valuable lesson that time helps dictate how much can be completed and forces prioritization.

Step Four, share frames of reference:

Step four is possibly the most crucial step in this particular scenario. As mentioned in the background information, the students and the teacher come from two very different sets of circumstances. This is where open dialogue between student and teacher becomes a necessity. It will be very easy for the teacher to explain to the students

her background and “where she is coming from”. It will be more difficult however to get that information from the students. For this reason the teacher must utilize initial class meetings to give the students time to “tell a little about themselves”. In this phase the students will explore questions such as “how has this impacted my life and community?” and “If we were to change A, B, and C, what consequences would it have?”

Step Five, equity of exchange:

Just by following the prescription in setting up the class the teacher has already achieved a large amount of equity in exchange, but it is imperative that it does not stop there. As the semester continues the teacher and students must continue to work together to ensure that the original objective is met and that an understanding of individual ground is present so that the teacher and the students may feel empowered. This can be accomplished if the teacher continues to include the class in its direction. If the students feel involved in the decision making process, they are more likely to feel responsible for their own learning and thus empowered. At the point where students and teacher realize the value of each other’s viewpoints equity of exchange has begun.

SCENARIO THREE:

The Case of the Father and Son

Background:

Scenario three is the end result of learner empowerment in the classroom. This scenario finds a young man from the American History class in Scenario two attempting to start a new relationship with his father after having been raised for the last 10 years by only his mother. Having faced difficult life circumstances the father is making an attempt to re-enter his sons life. The father and son have never really known each other and find it difficult to relate. After following the prescription the two make positive strides in establishing a new relationship.

SCENARIO:

Step One, identify or formulate objectives:

Upon discovering that his father wishes to be a part of his life, the son

initiates an exchange with his father. His intention is to use the method his high school teacher used in setting up his history class so that they might be successful in their reunion. In this exchange they make clear the objective; to find a way to enter each other’s lives without compromising who they are. This gives the father and the son a goal, and an objective based on that goal, as they progress through the prescription.

Step Two, define terms and concepts:

For the father, entering his sons life means being involved in it daily and advising and counseling him as to the ways of the world. This is not what the son envisions. The son wants a slow exposure to his father. He believes he needs the counsel of a male role model but does not want to be subjected to it all at once. The two then decide to define “entering each others lives” as spending time together getting to know one another on a gradual basis. This narrows the exchange to a point where both can feel comfortable, and provides direction for what they wish to accomplish.

Step Three, prioritize positions:

Now the father and son must establish ground so that the new familial exchange is not without structure. The father feels as though it is important that he learns more about what his son is doing regarding employment and money. He feels that getting close to his son on this level affords him the opportunity to help his son avoid some of the same mistakes he made as a youth. The son on the other hand is more concerned with his education and securing money for college. He has seen the difficulty his father has faced and has decided the answer is a college education. Knowing where the priorities, the two come to a solution. The father agrees to help his son focus on his education as long as the son agrees that part of that focus will be working to save money for his college expenses. By prioritizing ground the two are able to reach a common solution that meets both needs.

Step Four, share frames of reference:

In this stage, the father and son

understand each other's ground but do not have a clear context for where the other is coming from. During this part of the exchange the father must attempt to paint a picture for his son as to why he has been absent for all these years, and why he feels the way he does about promoting the work ethic in his son. He must explain that his absence was due to his inability to support his family, and though this does not make his actions right it may open his son's eyes to his perspective. In turn the son must attempt to make his father realize how difficult it was growing up with only one parent and why it is so important to him that he gain his college education and secure a living before he has a family. By understanding these frames of reference the two will be better equipped to achieve the prioritized goals of their new relationship.

Step Five, equity of exchange:

In the final step of this exchange the two must realize the value of each other. The student, having been empowered by his teacher to better his relationship with his father, must now ensure that his father achieves the same empowerment. The two have to continue with proactive dialogue, and the son has to be sure that his father is afforded the same opportunity to develop as he was. Through this equity of exchange the empowered student has not only become the teacher, but has empowered his father to deal responsibly with other relationships in his life.

These three scenarios illustrate the cycle that is initiated with focus on "empowered learning". It is the belief of this paper that incorporating the argumentation concept of "discovery of ground" into the regular classroom would be an effective way of achieving the goals of empowered learning. We have begun to use this prescription and have experienced competitive success, and generated interest in the classroom. More importantly we have begun to see translation into the ways our students approach problem solving in relationships they have outside of class.

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