

# The Use of Debates as a Learning or Assessment Tool

## 1. Title of case study:

The Use of Debates as a Learning or Assessment Tool

## 2. Contact details

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## 3. Context

Programme: Approaches to sustainable development      Level: Part 3

Number of students: 20-40

## 4. What is the rationale behind the practice?

The use of debates as a vehicle for learning is well-established. For instance the Oxford Union has been holding debates since 1823, and has continues to provoke thought and comment on a wide range of topical subjects. Debates are often used in Law Schools where “Moot Courts” enable students to practice legal advocacy. However, the use of debates as part of a modular science curricula is not common place despite the fact that this method of learning or assessment can act as a useful technique to encourage independent learning in relation to the debate topic. Debates also enable students to develop key skills in terms of rapid response, one to one communication, answering difficult questions and discussing issues in a professional manner. In this particular module the objective of the debates are:

- to discuss, evaluate and quantify issues related to two\* sustainable development topics
- to communicate in a professional manner in a debating forum

*\* Depending on group size the number of topics debated can vary*

## 5. What does the staff member do?

The staff member needs to decide on the questions to be debated. Questions can be derived from students themselves (by polling the class, as individuals, on what they feel are the two most pressing issues relating to sustainable development and then selecting the most popular issues for debate).

The tutor needs to provide the students with an overview of the subject prior to the task being set and a substantive reference list, although student's are advised that additional literature should be sought out, read and used during the debate and in their individual written reports. The tutor sets the scene, allocates teams and reading lists two weeks prior to the debating event. Ideal team size is 5, meaning that each debate engages 10 students, 5 presenting a case for the motion and 5 against the motion. Thus if 4 topics are debated this can engage a class of 40 students. The Blackboard VLE provides an excellent resource for posting material, forming and managing the debating groups.

Each team works together to prepare their case, and one week of the module timetable can be allocated (optional) as a private study period during which each group is expected to prepare for the debate.

It is suggested that the tutor provides clear guidelines on the structure of the debate so that students are clear of timings and roles. Below is one example format but this could easily be varied.

*Each team is expected to allocate particular roles:*

- ◆ *Proposers who gives a verbal presentation (prepared **by the team**) for 15 minutes in support of their case.*
- ◆ *Questioners who ask questions of the opposing team after the opponents case has been presented, and answer the questions asked by the opposing team and the audience.*
- ◆ *Summarisers who present the summary of the case (prepared by the team) for 10 minutes and try to incorporate the answers to the most important questions posed during the debate.*

*The audience generally consists of everyone involved in the other debates, plus two independent members of staff. Before the debate, the audience casts their votes for the case that they agree with, and will cast their vote again after the debate. Members of the audience are also allowed to ask questions.*

*The room should be set out with opposing teams facing each other. The Chairperson needs to give a short introduction to the debate, ensure fair debating and keep the debate on track and within time.*

### Assessment

It is important for the tutor to explain the assessment of the debate in detail. In this case the debate forms the basis for two coursework marks:

1. A mark derived from the content and organisation of the debate itself. It is important to provide the criteria upon which the students are going to be assessed during the oral part of the debate. I would advocate that at least 2 members of staff assess each debate.  
(When used summatively a mark is awarded to the group as a whole and then apportioned within the group on the basis of peer assessment of effort)
2. An individual written report on the subject of the debate (max 1500 words). Again clear criteria need to be provided when the debate assignment is set.

## 6. Does the practice work?

Student evaluation of the debate as a learning or assessment tool is generally very positive and they feel it provides a dynamic and interesting learning strategy. Students on the whole enjoy the preparation for, and the debate itself. They see it as a useful method for encouraging their learning and the challenging nature of the debate itself. Negative comments are generally associated with the group marking issue, or from

naturally “quiet” students who often do not perform well in a debating scenario. Both of these issues have been considered so as to increase the equitability of this style of learning tool.

The debates format has evolved into a robust learning tool and the format of the debate is continually adjusted (and the subject matter of the debates). Many students also experience debates in Part I and this is important as it exposes them to this learning method early in their University careers. Debating not only encourages independent learning in relation to the subject matter, but also exposes students to important transferable skills such as team work, synthesising data, the importance of using quantitative evidence and general debating skills.

## **7. Advice for staff**

It is important to have a firm but fair chairperson and to choose (and update) the subject of the debates with some care. If using for the first time it may be most appropriate to use in a formative context with Part 1 students as the debating process does require careful management by the tutor. Experience suggests that the tutor hones the management of the debate over the first few times it is used as a learning or assessment tool.

The issue for a given debate can often be centred around a topical or current issue and should be one in which both sides of the “argument” have a realistic basis. Students should be briefed with respect to the format of the debate, the rules of engagement and the criteria by which they will be assessed. If debates are to be used as part of an assessment regime then it may be impractical to have teams of more than five students “per side” as it becomes difficult to ensure that each student contributes. However, debates can be used successfully with larger groups as a more generic learning tool, or in a formative role. Further, if a number of debates are held in successive sessions then larger groups can form part of the audience, whilst two smaller teams debate the specific topic.

The room setting can add to the realism and atmosphere of the debate and where possible teams should be seated opposite each other, with the audience surrounding this central “arena”. This is usually easy to achieve in all but the most rigid teaching space.