

Debate Across the Curriculum: A Case Study

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Flourishing conversations between professionals in the public sphere are creating new opportunities for intercollegiate debate. This desire to expand debate outside of the Communication Studies community pushes the idea of debate beyond its traditional boundaries. Those of us who have witnessed these attempts to bring more disciplines into the world of debate have found that incorporating debate into the classroom, enhances the learning experience of the students while simultaneously aiding them to become better advocates for themselves and others. Over the course of the 2018-2019 academic school year, I helped professors from multiple disciplines with the challenge of incorporating debate into their classrooms through the James Madison University Communication Center. In this essay, my goal is to promote the intersection of debate and communication centers as a way to enhance the development of oral communication competency skills for students in the classroom.

Throughout the course of the semester, faculty members from multiple disciplines such as health, Spanish, nursing, and global studies, invited me into their classrooms to assist them and their students in tailoring a debate structure that works best for their individual disciplines. For many faculty, this was the first time they had considered rearranging their curriculum to something they had not done before. Our communication center provided support for faculty members in stages to aid them in this challenging, but rewarding process. Not all faculty members requested the communication center's assistance at each

stage, but many felt as if having the communication center as a supportive resource helped their students gain valuable insight into the debate experience.

For the first stage of this project, I facilitated a workshop that was designed to introduce the basics of debate and argumentation in the classroom. One of the classes I attended was a global nutrition class. All students in the health and science major are required to take this class once they are accepted into the major. In a quick debrief before the workshop, the professor expressed that she had taught this class many times, and each time she found difficulty in getting 40-45 students to step out of their comfort zones and explore wicked problems, or issues that exist within the nutrition field. This information was important because it allowed me to adjust the workshop to incorporate examples that were relatable specifically to nutrition and the topics they could consider exploring in their debates. This workshop also included an introduction to the Toulmin Model of Argumentation. This specific model was chosen because of its adaptability for the classroom; it can be applied to multiple contexts. In the case of this project, it is important that students were able to manage a model that can gauge the soundness of an argument while simultaneously catering to their specific field of experience (Andrews, 2005). The workshop also included basic delivery competencies for giving a structured debate and allowed students to practice forming and presenting an argument while also stepping outside of those aforementioned comfort zones.

After letting the groups spend some time brainstorming, faculty later invited me back into their classrooms to assist their students in the next stage of finding scholarly sources to back up their arguments and structure those arguments in a persuasive manner. This was the stage I noticed many students seemed to struggle with the most. They had favorable ideas and great topics, but many of them had no idea how to find scholarly sources or properly layer their arguments. Collaboratively, faculty and I decided that it would be most effective for students to schedule time with me outside of regular class hours in the communication center to provide them with one-on-one advice in an environment where they can feel comfortable to ask questions and explore new ideas on their debate topics. The session's main focus was centered around how to organize research in a way that would be the most persuasive to the audience. Chaudoin, Shapiro, & Tingley (2017) teach us that the sequence in which we place our researched arguments can be perceived as more or less persuasive. I found that working with these students one-on-one in a non-classroom environment helped them grasp a better understanding on the usefulness of using sequence to thoroughly analyze and develop arguments, which in turn led them to feel more confident in the topics they were discussing. The final stage of this project consisted of my return into the classroom. This time, I was able to watch and take notes on the debate presentations themselves. The debates were overall successful. However, each class had its own unique set of challenges. For some classes, students struggled with the flow of the debate and knowing the order and speaking time of each member. For others, students struggled with articulating sources and where they got them from. The biggest challenge I noticed from students across the board was delivering their arguments in a

way that is persuasive and compelling for their audience. It seemed as if many students were so focused on what they were saying, and making sure they had a strong enough argument, that actually delivering that well-developed argument seemed to fall between the cracks.

Since I was present for each stage of this project, after the debates were over I delivered constructive feedback in the individual classes. I informally reached out to a few faculty and asked if they felt more confident to teach and facilitate a debate on their own without the support of the communication center. Their responses ranged from "kind of" to "not at all." Many of them expressed that having the communication center as a support system contributed to their students' communication, analysis, delivery and organization competencies (Bellon, 2000, p. 165). This partnership with faculty is significant not only for student learning outcomes, but also for supporting the faculty. Debate is complex, but it contains many layers and pedagogical benefits for students across all disciplines. It promotes cooperative learning and intellectual disagreements, which provides students with the benefit of being able to collaborate efficiently, and communicate successfully once they leave the classroom setting.

References

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