

Oxford-style inspired academic competitive debates with a twist on hot topics of international economics and finance



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LEARNING ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

- From **Socrates** (cooperative argumentative dialogue) to **Oxford Union Society** (competitive debates), and **beyond**.
- Twelve in-class debates (a coherent set) with a specific protocol** of conducting them.
- Designed to complement a graduate course in **International Economics and Finance**.
- Those debates scheduled to take place every week in the class (could be also executed in the virtual classroom) were an essential component of the student's course work.
- I tested and refined them in my course, during teaching this course each year in the period of 2010-2013.
- These discussions were organized to align with the required textbook for the course by Carbaugh R.J., *International Economics*. South-Western Cengage Learning.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

These debates:

- Provided students with a distinguishable enriching experience from similar courses offered.
- Covered the course contents in a comprehensive fashion.
- Achieved many learning outcomes of the course.
- Provided enjoyable experience for students.
- Supported student's engagement.
- Provided experiential learning opportunity.
- Fostered competitive team spirit.
- Created fun and thrill in the classroom.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Debated were additionally motivated by the following objectives:

- To polarize opinions to let the audience understand both extremes, to prove that the truth is somewhere in between, with no easy solution.
- To engage the audience in voting, so they have skin in the game, not just listening.
- To have a "conclusion" everyone wants to continue with the discussion further on, outside the class.
- To initiate the interest in the topics everyone can relate to.
- To create a long-lasting memorable experience.

LEARNING ACTIVITY DESIGN

The class was divided into **three teams**, with a fixed membership for the 15-week long semester in order to conduct the **debate tournament**, with each team participation in each of the 12 debates in one of the rotating roles (4 times as a judging panel, 4 times presenting proposition, and 4 times as opposition).

When acting as a **judge (audience)**, a team was not required to prepare for the debate. A team assigned to argue in the debate had to **prepare for both side-arguments**, as only on the date of the debate the decision was made by the moderator, which team of the two preparing for the debate was to be FOR and which was to argue AGAINST the motion.

Debating teams had to prepare a **research write-up paper** to be submitted before the debate to the instructor with detailed theoretical arguments and empirical research findings to be covered in the debate, both supporting proposition and opposition, supplementing the extemporaneous speaking during the debate with depth and diversity of the arguments.

Each debate was scheduled to last 40 minutes (only a part of the class-time) with the presentation of both affirmative and negative sides of the argument interchangeably.

The debates had a formal structure and a **role-play form**, with more flexible format than a typical Oxford-style debate, allowing for a less rigid protocol for timing and order, favoring instead more intense and dynamic exchange of arguments, cross-examination and rebuttal. The debates were still conducted as a **contest with explicit rules** for a smooth professional flow, with rather short opening statements and impactful closing arguments, additionally permitting comments, supporting arguments, questions from the audience, presentation of points for immediate refute against statements made in the course of the debate.

The **instructor acting as a moderator** had a crucial role to maintain the balance and the order of the debate following the etiquette, making sure that each panelist has an opportunity to speak, and steering the debate to thoroughly deliberate all relevant merits of the issues.

The debates were based on a **sharply framed motion** of an interesting and polarizing topic – a specific question or statement to moot easily for both sides with a variety of valid arguments both for and against. The objective was not necessary to look for a solution but to offer two choices only – proposition (for) or opposition (against), with the purpose to convince (win) the audience (judges) by insisting (supporting and defending) own position, and not yielding to the opponent (questioning and countering) arguments.

COMPARISON – OXFORD DEBATE FORMAT VS. PROPOSED MODIFIED PROTOCOL

Rule	Oxford debate format	Proposed modified protocol	Objective
number of debates	one	tournament	limit confrontational classroom environment, enhance continuous engagement, develop empathy
pre-debate vote	yes	no	limit unnecessary polarization of opinions but still challenge prior beliefs
duration	strict time limits	flexible but balanced fairly	fosters consideration of multiple viewpoints
motion	clear cut proposal – just to be carried or defeated (if successfully opposed)	complex and multifaceted with room for broad discussion	indicate and appreciate complexity of issues, a role-play format mitigated the conflict of dualism
preparation	some, not documented	a research write-up paper submitted before the debate with detailed theoretical arguments and empirical research findings, both supporting proposition and opposition, in order to prepare for both side-arguments	provide wide perspective for the process of weighing ideas and issues to conclude with a logical decision, about the issue and about the presentation of arguments, minimize separating dualism, enforce more serious study effort
participants	selected representatives in the pre-arranged order	all members of the debating teams, affirmative and negative sides of the argument, interchangeably	explore clash of opinions supported by reasons and evidence, increase utility of the debate and promote critical thinking, help convince others to agree
strict order	affirmative (proposition), negative (opposition), timed (constructive and rebuttals speeches), questions	more discussion of arguments while presented by both: supporting and opposing team statements	develop ideas with description, explanation, and demonstration
opening and closing statements	extensive and essential	introductory and finalizing, respectively, leaving more room for numerous arguments in the course of debate	demonstrate complexity of issues, provoke reflection, assist in arriving at judgement
rebuttal, rigid divisions between speeches' types	addressing affirmative or negative statements respectively, quite limited	numerous and expanding to counterarguments and cross-examination via intense exchanges of statements, finalized with the closing statements of both teams	extend arguments against criticisms, which again are refuted by the opponent to explore the issues extensively
role of the moderator	follow the time and the procedure, enforce the rules to ensure the debate's smooth and orderly conduct	expanded and crucial to maintain the balance and the order of the debate following the etiquette, making sure that each panelist has an opportunity to speak, and steering the debate to thoroughly deliberate all relevant merits of the issues	correct misjudgments, avoid simplifications, provide additional explanation and reference
assessment	limited criteria	expanded criteria to include merits and evidence	avoid trivializing
conclusion	final vote	allow to continue the discussion further on, outside the class	invoke problem solving consideration

THE DEBATES TOPICS AND THE SEQUENCE FOLLOWED

1. **Non-tariff trade barriers and trade wars.**
2. **OPEC polices and international implications.**
3. **Outsourcing and offshoring for US and Japan.**
4. **NAFTA – benefits and costs.**
5. **US current account deficit.**
6. **Chinese policy of undervalued domestic currency – an internal issue?**
7. **US debt ceiling increase or not?**
8. **The EMU – disruption. Euro-crisis. International Linkages.**
9. **Anatomy of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 – Contagion. – The role of G-8 and G-20.**
10. **IMF role in the recent country bailouts.**
11. **Debt reduction and debt forgiveness.**
12. **Deleveraging and economic policies (present & past).**

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

There were multiple learning objectives of this coherent set of debates: applying economic concepts, team collaboration, understanding current economic situation with a historical perspective through research and sharing personal experience, critical thinking and effective communication.

For these learning objectives, the focus during the debates was not only on rhetoric but also on the use of the relevant terminology, understanding of the issues and their implications through embracing a debate. Debates also stimulated independent research.

Debates encouraged effective and enlivened communication, tolerance for divergent points of view and helped enfranchise minority opinions. In a broad context of learning and acquiring also soft skills through debates, students could improve decision making, sharpen arguments with well-reasoned statements and rigorous self-examination, and practice efficient and dynamic team-work.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- Each debate concluded with the **anonymous ballot** taken individually by the members of the audience casting the vote (the judging panel team) with the results pronounced officially by the moderator.
- The judgement was based on the overall ability of the team to convince the judges to their side of the argument (in favor – pro or against – con).
- No personal opinions, neither personal attracts were permitted.
- The judgment was influenced by the following **criteria of assessment**:
 - quality and strength of arguments
 - presentation of evidence
 - rhetoric
 - charisma
 - humor
 - timing
 - teamwork
 - analytical and supporting skills
 - entertainment
- The **academic rigor** was enforced by selecting specific and current debates issues, corresponding to the course topics to be recognized and covered by students, reflecting required vital contents by merit. Students were expected to make connections to the concepts, to the real data, and to the current events.

DEBATES IN THE LITERATURE

The degree of **self-reported knowledge** increased significantly after debates by reinforcing already taught materials. Between 31% and 58% of participants **changed their views** after participating or observing each debate. Some changed their opinion even when they defended the side consistent with their original view. Despite initial prior fears of participating in a debate, 85% of the participants stated after debates that they would consider using debate as an instructional strategy. In both instances, males were more likely to respond positively than were females. (Kennedy, 2009)

Debating helps students acquire better comprehension, application, and critical evaluation skills when presented a complex topic. (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008)

Study demonstrated a positive link between student engagement in the debate and critical thinking and grade point average. (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006)

Debates stimulated students creativity and inquisitive mind. Students found the debate format helpful in their learning and understanding of course material, improving comprehension of economic problems and issues, and reported that it enabled them to see the relevance of economics. (Vo & Morris, 2006)

Debate coaches see improvement in their students' research and writing skills, as well as their students' ability to work collaboratively with each other. (Zorwick & Wade, 2016)

Debates have also been shown to increase critical thinking and when debate topics are carefully chosen, course content may be positively affected as well. (Carroll, 2014)

CONCLUSIONS

Presented structured series of debates with a research write-up paper were very effective at achieving stipulated **learning outcomes**.

Debates enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of teamwork and communication skills.

A more relaxed and more flexible than Oxford-style debate protocol and a debate tournament format facilitated **additional course objectives**: continuous student engagement, evidencing dualism of issues discussed, avoiding oversimplification, limiting confrontational classroom environment, seeking solutions not only aiming at winning.

Challenges observed by Tumposky (2004), (such as the danger of establishing too competitive of a classroom environment, promoting dualism, trivializing and misinterpretation of the complexity of issues, and the lack of utility of debate in promoting critical thinking) were **mitigated by the proposed modified format**.

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