



# Unpopular Opinions – An Active Learning Experiment in Economics



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## Abstract

This project presents a **debate-based active learning activity** designed to enhance critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, and student engagement in Economics and Finance classes, but can easily be adopted in other subjects too. Students are asked to prepare balanced arguments for and against a provocative (usually unpopular), policy-relevant statement before participating in structured presentations, Harvard-style case discussions, or online forums. Pre- and post-debate polling encourages self-reflection by showing how discourse shapes confidence and perspective. The tutor then consolidates learning by linking student contributions to core theory, empirical evidence, and key literature using standard lecture-based instruction. This approach reframes the classroom as a space for collaboration, dissent, and co-creation of knowledge, helping students connect abstract concepts to real-world issues while developing the analytical and communication skills essential for economic and financial decision-making.

## Introduction

This activity introduces students to the complexities of a subject (such as economics and finance but can be adapted to any subject) through an adaptable, active-learning approach. Suitable for both introductory and advanced learners, it **enhances engagement** across online, in-person, and hybrid settings. By encouraging students to **contemplate new perspectives** and **collaborate on problem-solving**, the method **promotes higher-order thinking and openness to diverse approaches**. This perspective-taking helps learners understand stakeholder motivations, envision themselves in varied professional roles, and build confidence. Overall, the strategy strengthens cognitive development while fostering group work and **connection to the subject matter, to real-world contexts, and to one another**.

## How this Debate-Based Learning Activity Works

This teaching activity uses structured, student-led debates to help learners engage deeply with complex concepts and business situations as well as controversial/unpopular topics in economics and finance.

Each week, students engage with a provocative, policy-relevant statement or a business case. This statement or business case is given to them before the session. In groups, they prepare **three arguments for and three against a proposed action**, policy, or viewpoint, with each group advocating for one side. The activity is easily adaptable to different delivery formats, class levels and topics. Thanks to the flexibility of online collaborative tools, which allow ‘boundaryless groups’<sup>1</sup> it can also be used to facilitate online participation or with participants who have never met before, such as during induction sessions.

### Ways to Engage Students in Structured Argumentation

- **Group presentations:** Two groups present in class (10 minutes each), followed by guided Q&A with peers and the tutor.
- **Harvard-style case discussion:** For broad participation, arguments from the whole class are collected on the whiteboard to warm up the room, flip the classroom, and build knowledge collaboratively. Ideal for large cohorts or non-compulsory attendance environments.
- **Online Discussion Boards:** Students post their arguments asynchronously, enabling participation across time zones or flexible learning settings.
- **Rotating Roundtable:** Small groups rotate through stations (or online breakout rooms), adding one argument at each stop. Stations are later consolidated by the tutor.
- **Argument Wall / Sticky Notes Method:** Students anonymously post “for” and “against” points on a physical or digital wall. The class then clusters and evaluates the themes together.

In the second half of the session, the instructor synthesises the discussion by connecting students’ arguments to relevant theory, empirical evidence, and key literature. This segment adopts a more **traditional instructional lecture-based delivery format**, using standard presentation explanations and core concept overviews. By integrating structured teaching with the insights generated during the interactive debate, this approach reinforces understanding, clarifies misconceptions, and **anchors student-led discussion within established academic frameworks**.

### Pre- and Post-Debate Polling:

- At the start of each session, students record how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement/business case in question and rate their confidence.
  - The same poll is repeated at the end of the session, after presentations and discussion.
- Comparing the two sets of responses reveals how debate and discourse influence certainty, perspective, and openness to alternative views.
- This helps students see:
- how their own thinking evolves when confronted with new evidence and well-reasoned arguments.
- It also encourages intellectual humility, showing that changing one’s mind is a natural part of academic inquiry.

By recognising these shifts, students become more reflective learners, appreciate complexity, and engage constructively with opposing viewpoints. This ultimately **helps them recognise how evidence-based dialogue can reshape understanding**.

## Educational Value of the Method

- **Active learning for deeper understanding:** Frees classroom time for interactive analysis and real-world application, helping students develop higher-order thinking.
- **Learning as a Social Process:** Builds on the principle that understanding grows through dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Instructors act as facilitators, helping learners connect ideas through interactive activities.
- Use the **productive role of dissent** to encourage constructive disagreement as a pathway to insight.<sup>3</sup> Discourse becomes a tool for insight and deeper understanding.
- **Motivation and engagement increase** when students can question, critique, and influence the direction of discussion.
- **Feedback for instructors** emerges naturally as dissent reveals misunderstandings, and opportunities to refine standard lecture-based learning teaching.

## Examples of Debate Questions

- The choice of examples and business cases is crucial: They must stimulate critical thinking, structured analysis, and evidence-based argumentation.
- Well-designed prompts help students move beyond simple narratives, engage with nuance, and practise civil disagreement.
- **Sample Questions:**
  - “The gains from tax competition are threatened by new proposals to centralize international tax policy, stop tax rate competition, and increase taxes on multinational business investments.”
  - “Should a central bank act as a lender of last resort?”
  - “Should the wealthy be taxed more?”
  - “Does shifting production to low-cost countries negatively affect employment in developed economies?”
  - “Should patents on vital medicines be waived?”
  - “Should Tesla shareholders have approved a potential \$1 trillion pay package for Elon Musk?”
  - Nationwide, among Britain’s largest building societies, has sparked debate with its decision to relocate around 1,000 UK back-office roles to India. Is this outsourcing strategy justified as a way to reduce costs and improve efficiency? In developing your arguments for and against, draw on Nationwide’s published financial statements and any other relevant data you consider useful.

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