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The Use of Debates in Higher Education Classrooms

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Abstract: Debating is a well-known pedagogical technique used to encourage discussion, motivate students, and it leads to more meaningful understanding of content. Yet, the only learners who typically participate in debates are those on debate teams (Kennedy, 2007). The challenge for educators is to determine how to use well-known principles of debating to facilitate discussions leading to mutual understanding. Mutual understanding is typically achieved when participants are willing to acknowledge different viewpoints or even adjust their views. This paper will explore some basic principles of debating and examine the benefits of including meaningful, interactive discussions in higher education classrooms.

Background

A key concern of most educators is –Are their students truly engaged and mindfully present in the classroom? As opposed to witnessing, blank stares or the learners’ heads “buried in” electronic gadgets. Although there may be a number of reasons why learners are not engaged, one possible reason they are not fully present is because some higher education classrooms do not include democratic discussions. A process where the educator and the learners participate in discussions that provides each party with an equal amount of opportunities to present their perspectives (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Mont, 2012; Mont 2008). According to, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) discussion and democracy are inseparable because they nurture and promote human growth. These educators suggests that human growth within learning environments occurs when there is an appreciation of and sensitivity towards the learning of others. Therefore, classrooms that rely on democratic discussions require giving and taking, speaking and listening, and result in mutual understanding. Debating, a form of democratic discussion (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999) is a viable option for maximizing mutual understanding.

Debating is a well-known pedagogical technique, yet in most colleges and universities the only learners that participate in debates are those on debate teams (Kennedy, 2007). Despite the infrequent use of this learning technique debating has evolved from a lengthy tradition. The Egyptians relied on debating over 4,000 years ago during public forums and some suggest that Protagoras used it as a teaching strategy in Athens between 481 – 411 B.C. (Kennedy, 2007). Since its first use, debating refers to the process of considering multiple viewpoints and formulating judgments (Allison, 2002). Debating can be a personal experience where an individual uses the process to help formulate his or her viewpoint or it can be a group process. As a group process, the group tries to convince others to accept their views (Tumposky, 2004).

Benefits of Debating in Higher Education Classrooms

Some educators that rely on debating consider it to be the ultimate multi-task learning activity (Allison, 2002, Kennedy, 2007, Mont, 2008, Tumposky, 2004). Participants in the debating process are tasked with: (a) researching an issue, (b) assessing the credibility of sources,

(c) prioritizing their views, (d) considering creative and applicable ways to share their views, (e) listening to and analyzing opposing arguments, (f) formulating rebuttal to the opposition, and, (g) all of this activity is completed within teams. As a result, learners foster a deeper understanding of subject matter and they become more responsible for their comprehension. Moving away from the passive approach of listening to lectures to becoming more actively involved in the educational process.

In addition to the multi-task nature of debating, Tumposky (2004) holds that there are at least three connections between critical thinking and debating. First, debating moves away from lecture to peer interaction. This viewpoint is supported by a study conducted by Budesheim and Lundquist (1999). One of the study's purposes was to assess the learners' views of the debating process and to determine if the activity influenced their learning. They found that the participants enjoyed the interaction generated by the debating process and they learned a great deal about the researched topics. Suggesting that debates could increase peer interaction and simultaneously increase learner comprehension.

Second, debating involves a more advanced form of knowledge/understanding. In Tumposky's (2004) opinion learners that participate in debating will progress through the domains of Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) for learning goals. Basic to the Bloom's Taxonomy is the development of knowledge. As learners achieve learning objectives they move progressively to more advanced levels of thinking. As the learner fulfills the tasks of debating they move beyond the basic levels of acquiring knowledge to the higher domains of Bloom's Taxonomy, which require critical thinking and analysis. And finally, debating develops metacognitive skills (making the learner more aware of their own thinking), by mastering critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

Debating cannot be purported as the fail-safe method for ending all educational difficulties and increasing democracy within classrooms, but it does offer a means for engaging all participants within the learning environment—educators and learners alike!

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