Educational Innovations

Using Guided Debates to Teach Current Issues
Debra R. Hanna, PhD, RN

ABSTRACT
A guided-debate strategy was developed for a graduate-level core course in current issues based on the Jesuit method of discernment (group decision making). The strategy encourages students to use up-to-date Internet sources to determine the range of opinions on current controversies in the discipline. In addition to providing a structured process to engage in persuasive discussion of difficult issues, the strategy facilitates critical thinking about the quality of the debate itself. Thus, students learn to avoid the pitfalls associated with consensus, such as failing to express reservations or negative opinions that might be important, while learning how to express concerns that might not be easily received by others in a group. [J Nurs Educ. 2014;53(6):352-355.]

Guided debate is an ideal strategy to teach a graduate-level core course on current issues. Not only will students learn to locate and evaluate breaking news about current issues in nursing, they can also develop skills for lifelong learning, collaboration, and civic engagement. This article describes a guided-debate teaching strategy for a face-to-face, graduate-level course on current issues, which can also help students learn to synthesize evidence and articulate a cogent point of view in a persuasive, convincing manner (Conger, 1998).

Teaching With Planned Debates
Planned classroom debates provide an opportunity for formal, persuasive argumentation about a particular controversial question according to a preestablished set of rules. In a guided classroom debate, the affirmative and opposing points of view are argued in an orderly, respectful manner. Formal debates are often won by one side and lost by the other side, depending on the persuasiveness of the winning team’s argument. Therefore, preparation for a debate requires diligence, strategy, and knowing well the strengths and limitations of both sides of the question being considered. Yet, the real purpose of a guided classroom debate is not to produce winners and losers; rather, the true purpose (and the art) of classroom debate is to examine a question from all angles in a scholarly manner so that a good decision can be made. Learning how to engage in the art of formal debate helps students understand how to discuss complex issues to collaborate credibly and valuably within interprofessional forums.

One strategy that linked formal debate with decision making when important group decisions were needed was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century (Byron, 2008). The method is called the Ignatian, or Jesuit, method of discernment. According to Byron (2008), “Ignatian discernment includes judgment of fact and assessment of feeling” (p. 65). Although judgment of fact may be self-explanatory, assessment of feeling is not immediately clear, and this is described later in this article.

Process for Guided Debates
Each student is asked to debate at least two different issues during the semester, taking the affirmative position in one debate and the opposing position in the second debate. Question topics are listed in a neutral manner in the course syllabus. During the second class, students are asked to sign up for the topics they would like to debate. At least four students are needed for each debate so that there will be equal numbers of affirmative...
and opposing side students, with at least two students on each team. By creating teams, students can work together ahead of time to prepare for their debates. If the team of four debaters remains the same for two debates, the students will be able to switch affirmative and opposing roles easily. Approximately 2 weeks before the scheduled debate, the instructor will e-mail the class the debate “resolve” (issue in the form of a declarative sentence). Internet links, articles, or books that might help the students explore the issue will be recommended in the e-mail. The teacher asks to be included in the debater team’s preparatory e-mail discussions to help them understand difficult aspects of the issues or to guide their thinking. When preparing for the debate, both teams should discuss both sides of the issue together in advance. The students should present different points of view that have been raised in the discipline, not their personal points of view. Students prepare to engage in formal debate by viewing a film (described later) and by reading an article that provides four ways to persuade and four ways to not persuade others (Conger, 1998).

At the beginning of the debate, the teacher poses the debate resolve to the entire class, but only the debaters engage in the formal debate. Nondebating students have an assigned role as active listeners (described later). Each debater is expected to make at least four statements during the debate, which should proceed in an orderly manner from one team to the other. This means if affirmative debater 1 opens the debate, opposing debater 1 would respond first. Affirmative debater 2 would respond next, followed by opposing debater 2. The debate proceeds in this manner until each side presents all points for the issue being debated.

Each debater should respond to the previous debater’s claims, as each point in the debate must be acknowledged. However, each debater is also entitled to make a new point so that the art of persuasion can be practiced and honed. The time limit to respond to the previous debater’s statement is 2 minutes. The debater may use 60 seconds to think about the response, but he or she would then have only 60 seconds of speaking time to make a statement. Late speech (taking more than 60 seconds to begin responding) and failing to respond to the point just made will disqualify the debater, who will be removed from the debate for that round. The maximum time set for the entire debate is 40 minutes. If students become engaged in a good debate with many points on each side, the debate could potentially extend to more than four rounds. However, the time limit of the formal debate is provided so that the rest of the class can enter into open discussion of the issue. The semester is arranged with two debates per student; however, students might debate more frequently during the semester if the class size is smaller (20 students or fewer).

**Rules of the Debate**

All debaters are expected to be courteous to each other. Disrespectful behaviors, such as sarcasm, rudeness, interruptions, low-voice comments, negative facial expressions, or negative gestures disqualify the debater from that round. This behavior is associated with a 5-point penalty to the debater’s individual grade. No debater may use a raised, loud, accusatory, or angry tone of voice at any time. Use of such voice will automatically disqualify the debater from continuing in the debate, and if the behavior is egregious, the student will receive a failing grade for that debate.

The debate should begin with statements related to known relevant facts so that the debaters and class members are able to make judgments based on facts. As the debate proceeds, the logic and adequacy of the facts should be challenged within the debate itself.

**Class Participation**

Before the formal debate begins, the instructor will hand out a Debate Review Sheet to all students (Figures 1-2). During the debate, nondebating students can record debate points made by each side on the front of the Debate Review Sheet (Figure 1). After the debate, students have 5 minutes to complete the reverse side of the Debate Response Sheet (Figure 2). They should write their opinions about the points raised in the debate (judgment of facts). Students should also write an assessment of their feelings related to the points debated. The assessment of feelings is not one’s emotional response to the issue; rather, the student is asked to consider whether the points made by each team seemed credible, logical, and defensible (which may lead to a sense of peace) or whether the points seemed far-fetched, superficial, or inadequate (which may lead to a sense of inner disquiet). Students may feel a sense of completeness, thinking that all possible points were made, or a sense of having witnessed an inadequate exchange of ideas, especially if major points were not made. These types of feelings are to be assessed after the debate has ended. On the basis of their judgment of fact and their assessment of feelings, students should come to an opinion about the debate and vote for the most persuasive team.

The Debate Response Sheets are handed in after class so the teacher can review them to understand how well each student was engaged during the debate. The final vote is tallied and the winning team announcement is made at the beginning of the next class when the sheets are returned to the students. After the Debate Response Sheets are handed in, the class is free to discuss any points raised in the debate, their feelings about the points raised in the debate, and any points that they thought could have been made but had not been made.

**Debate Response Paper**

In addition to preparing for the debates, students are required to use one debate as the basis for a scholarly paper called the *Debate Response Paper*. The paper should begin with the issue that was posed, a summary of the affirmative and opposing points made during the debate, and the student’s critique of points made by each side. The student should write a discussion that supports one side or the other and can include any additional points or personal insights that might not have been mentioned during class. The student should also mention the strengths and limitations of the debate itself. In the discussion section of the paper, the student should mention the judgment of facts and the assessment of his or her feelings. Finally, the paper is to be summarized with a one-paragraph conclusion.
Preparing Students for Debates

In addition to the written guidelines provided with the syllabus at the beginning of the course, students are encouraged to view the DVD of *The Great Debaters* (Black, Forte, Winfrey, & Roth, 2007; which was available in the college’s media center). This film portrays the struggle that students on a college debate team had with each other as they prepared for debates. It also demonstrates the different struggles they encountered in the world at large when, as a team of Black students from the small Wiley College in Texas during the Great Depression, they debated an all-White student debate team at Harvard University. In the film, the winning debate comment was derived from a student’s personal experience and was stated in a way that would challenge but not offend his listeners. Therefore, the strength of his argument was one that could persuade his listeners to see his point as being most credible. This scene in the film demonstrates a high-quality, complex debate skill that is essential for civic engagement. The film shows that an individual can say things that are difficult to say in a way that can be heard and that can persuade others.

Debates can hone students’ persuasive speaking skills, but persuasion depends on flexible, creative, critical thinking (Dundes, 2001; Gervey, Drout, & Wang, 2009). Moore (2011) pointed out that the nature of critical thinking differs from one discipline to another. He shows that philosophers believe that critical thinking depends on “being incisive (even surgical); for example, ‘cutting through ideas’ or ‘being a sharp knife’” (p. 265). Incisive critical thinking eliminates and excludes extraneous information so that the paring-down process leaves the most essential elements intact. In contrast, historians believe that critical thinking is a constructive process of “trying to hear from one’s sources and then trying to assemble something from that” (Moore, 2011, p. 266). For students of literature, critical thinking involves a lateral movement to connect ideas from one text to another, which is what Moore called an “empathetic engagement with one’s subject matter—an understanding” (p. 267). Nurse educators might ask: What type of critical thinking is needed for nursing? According to Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, and Day (2010), critical thinking is one of many ways that nursing students need to learn how to think. Rather than limiting nursing students to a method of critical thinking, Benner et al. explained that “nurses need multiple ways of thinking, such as clinical reasoning and clinical imagination as well as critical, creative, scientific, and formal critical reasoning” (p. 85). In this sense, they encourage nurse educators to go beyond the limits of critical thinking to help students develop multiple ways to think so they will be more flexible and creative in their professional roles.

On the other hand, peer pressure to achieve a good grade can diminish the true spirit of a classroom debate as a full consideration of the issue. The guided debate process can protect highly cohesive groups from engaging in a negative form of consensus called groupthink (Janis, 1996). Janis (1996) defined groupthink as “the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action” (p. 167). Janis also pointed out that highly cohesive groups that engage in groupthink are those where members “adopt a soft line of criticism, even in their own thinking.” (p. 167) mostly because “they keep silent about their misgiv-
ings and even minimize to themselves the importance of their doubts” (p. 173). The guided debate process protects highly cohesive groups (such as students vying for a grade) from engaging in groupthink, specifically because an expectation exists that each group member will examine his or her feelings about the issues, content, and quality of the debate itself. The examination of feelings is outlined with specific questions on the Debate Response Sheet so the graduate students can bring two aspects together (intellect and feelings) when evaluating the debate content and process. As Benner et al. (2010) reported, multiple ways of thinking are needed for our discipline.

**Conclusion**

Guided debates can be used for graduate and undergraduate students. Although undergraduate students may need more supportive guidance than graduate students to engage in debates, both groups have an opportunity to learn multiple important skills. Besides helping students to learn how to find and evaluate up-to-the-minute news within the discipline of nursing, guided debates provide an opportunity for students to learn skills for critical thinking, persuasive speaking, and collaborative decision making. The guided debate strategy is designed to protect group members from a negative form of consensus called groupthink. Ultimately, this strategy can help students learn to value and seek the diverse opinions that are essential for successful interprofessional problem solving, which will be needed throughout their professional lives.

**References**


