

3

This chapter argues that the use of debates in a core world history course can foster both authentic learning in the discipline and progress toward intellectual and ethical maturity.

Debate and Student Development in the History Classroom

Anne Osborne

The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion.

—John Stuart Mill, 1859, p. 25

You're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great. . . . What you do is not honest. What you do is partisan hackery.

—Jon Stewart, *Crossfire*, October 15, 2004

Can student development, a sense of civic responsibility, and a sense of self be fostered through core history requirements? Does a focus on these goals distract from the fulfillment of disciplinary goals? Or is it possible that activities and assignments intended to foster student engagement and participation in “authentic” historical tasks will also provide opportunities for student development both as autonomous selves and as citizens? Are classroom debates a particularly useful technique in working toward the goals of a liberal arts education?

Note: Research for this project was supported by a summer fellowship from Rider University. I am grateful to Arlene Wilner and Katherine Hoff for generously sharing their expertise as well as to my fellow BRIDGE participants for their insights and encouragement.

Education in the liberal arts has at least three goals. The first is fulfillment of disciplinary goals. The second is the personal development of the student, intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. The third is the preparation of the student, as a social and political being, to deal with others with tolerance and respect, with enough humility to recognize one's own human fallibility, yet with enough self-confidence to arrive at a personal commitment to a set of fundamental values or principles. These are challenging goals. Yet the undergraduate years should help the student progress in all these areas and should help to inculcate an interest and pleasure in the life of the mind that will allow that progress to continue throughout the student's lifetime.

In this chapter, I shall describe the pursuit of these goals in a history core course. After experimenting with various configurations of discussions and debates for several years, my conclusion is not only that the study of history can serve these broader developmental goals, but also that the same techniques that further the goals of personal development and preparation for citizenship can help students attain the disciplinary goals. In fact, I argue that classroom debates are a particularly effective way of working toward these goals.

History is an argument without end: in fact, academic culture in general is a culture of argumentation, and democracies are societies in which debate is central (Graff, 2003; Woodruff, 2004). Yet this culture of argument is initially alien to most students. Thus debates help students learn to participate in the "academic conversation," and in turn in the public discourse of our democratic society as well. Development in these areas not only makes them better students in the classroom, they also become better-prepared citizens. And by learning to argue effectively, they build up "forms of intellectual capital that have a lot of power in the world" (Graff, p. 9).

The Target Course

The course described here is the first half of the two-semester world history sequence required of all liberal arts students at Rider University. Students are mostly freshmen, non-majors, with little background and, initially, little interest. The very broad coverage mandated by the core requirement (the entire world from prehistory to 1500 CE) makes deep engagement with any particular culture or period difficult. Students, not surprisingly, tend to see history as a matter of memorizing facts rather than making arguments. Although they are able on the first day of class dutifully to articulate some reasons why the study of world history might be thought useful, they generally find it difficult to see connections between these abstract goals and what they actually are doing to study world history.

The disciplinary goals for this class include the ability to analyze primary sources, to understand and apply the historical method, and to see contemporary affairs in historical context, as well as the attainment of broad

cultural literacy. The goals also include development of the student's ability to read and write critically and analytically.

Student development goals relate to the attainment of enough perspective for the student both to enter into an imaginative empathy with other cultures and to be able to question the seemingly self-evident perfection of our own.

Citizenship goals include development of the ability to debate and to reason. As Paul Woodruff argues in *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea*, commitment to democracy is grounded in a belief in the ability of ordinary citizens in the aggregate to have enough wisdom and enough capacity to reason to be able to make appropriate judgments even in the absence of specialized knowledge.

I would argue that the development of wisdom that allows us to make judgments in the absence of specialized knowledge is somewhat similar to the division between experts and novices analyzed by Sam Wineburg (2001). As he has shown, expertise in academic disciplines is not just a result of the accumulation of factual knowledge. Rather, it is the result of having developed patterns of thinking appropriate to the discipline that lead the expert to see patterns, ask questions, and anticipate possibilities even in the absence of a full command of the data, so that, as he demonstrated, historians who knew relatively little factual information about particular situations nonetheless were able to analyze those situations in sophisticated ways, while novices who had demonstrated much greater familiarity with detailed facts were less able to do so (see also National Research Council, 1999). This is not to argue that factual information is of no value: after all, the experts developed their sophisticated ways of thinking through their analysis of data in other contexts. But it suggests that it is possible to generalize from a sophisticated understanding of one context to apply those habits of mind in other contexts. If we are not to surrender control over our future to technocrats, active citizenship in a democracy requires the development of habits of mind that can perceive patterns, ask sophisticated questions, and anticipate possibilities even without detailed knowledge: it is more useful to know some things well and deeply than to acquire a superficial mastery of a broad array of facts.

Debate Goals

Several years ago, when I began to integrate a series of debates into the world history class, my initial goals were simple: I hoped that debates would engage student interest and would provide a context in which readings of primary sources and short works of scholarship would be relevant. I thought well-chosen readings would reinforce engagement with the class and that this would encourage compliance with these assignments.

Initiating students into the study of history by inviting them to debate is also more authentic than asking them to memorize facts or write essay

exams. The aspect of the course that is closest to what historians actually do is the debates: reading, analyzing, evaluating both the work of scholars and the primary sources it is based on and using this study as the foundation to make arguments of their own is basically very similar to what historians do and also similar to the use one hopes they will make of history as citizens in the future. This approach would help students become more sophisticated historians (Walvoord and Breihan, 1990).

As the project developed, I realized that the questions for debate could be chosen not only with a view to exploring historically significant issues, making use of engaging scholarship and stimulating student interest, although these remained critical; they could also be chosen to encourage students to grapple with anomalies and challenge their own preconceptions. This experience in turn should reinforce their engagement. Thus the format of debate, in addition to fostering the attainment of disciplinary goals, could also drive students' personal development, contributing to what Ned Laff in Chapter One of this volume discusses as a personal "paradigm shift."

World history is full of examples of institutions, practices, and beliefs related to class, race, gender, power, and spirituality that differ radically from what most American adolescents in the early twenty-first century consider to be obviously natural. But this project did not envision a reversion to an older, discredited vision of history, as "philosophy teaching by example," in the famous dictum of Lord Bolingbroke; it was not to be a grab bag of neat little stories that could be followed by the moral, like Aesop's fables. Instead, the exploration of these challenging cases would have to be embedded in a study of the social and historical context in which these ideas or practices made sense and seemed as natural to the people of that time and place as elements of our culture do to us today. Thus the readings and discussions would contribute to the goal of developing the capacity to move beyond the dualistic assumption that there is a right and wrong answer to every question ("I'm right and you're an idiot") to understand other points of view. While the initial reaction might be lazy tolerance that refuses to address complexity ("It's all good"), that is at least a step forward from close-minded judgmentalism ("Burn in hell, heretic!"). Many students remain at this relativistic level (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003), but ideally, students would gradually develop the ability to move beyond relativism and distinguish among various propositions and to offer legitimate support to a personal stand, based on an understanding of those ideas and consciously committing to a set of values (Perry, 1970). It is possible that debating issues where students must confront arguments on both sides may help students mature in this way.

The questions could also have a fairly direct link of some kind with current events. In this way, the relevance of the issue and the readings would not just be self-contained within the class (do the readings or you will have nothing to say in the debate), but also would clearly relate to students' personal worlds or public issues. It would encourage the habit of

mind of viewing current issues in a historical context. Mastery of information and of terms of debate on prominent issues could be empowering for students as well, thus providing yet another reason for students to get involved and reinforcement for those who did so.

As the nation began to gear up for the presidential election in the fall of 2003, and especially as campaigning accelerated in 2004, the deficiencies in the American culture of public discourse became ever more painfully apparent. In that context it seemed to me that another benefit that debates in college courses could offer is that students are asked to learn good intellectual habits that also enhance students' preparation as citizens. Debates encourage them to listen or read attentively, summarize accurately, reflect, take a clear stand, support that stand with evidence, and present their position effectively, including engaging with the opposing side by rebutting its counterarguments. As Graff (2003) points out, even crude debates can be a step in the right direction as long as they avoid attempts to score cheap points by misrepresenting opponents or by humiliating them rather than seriously engaging their ideas; in any case, such attacks are not true debates but rather, as Jon Stewart famously told his *Crossfire* hosts, are "partisan hackery" that on the national scene are hurtful to the country (Stewart, 2004).

For each debate I created a packet of primary sources and short pieces of historical scholarship. I also created a Blackboard on-line discussion thread. We analyzed the historical works in class and then debated the issue, using that material as evidence. Students wrote a short essay taking a stand on the issues we had debated. They also submitted related news reports to the on-line discussion and commented on their own and other students' submissions. Although the students were assigned a position in the debate, they were encouraged to take a personal stand in their papers, so they had the experience both of adopting and defending attitudes and values they may have disagreed with and the experience of defending a personal position with evidence.

A Concrete Example

The first debate I developed was "Women in Islam." It forces students to reevaluate common stereotypes of a monolithic and misogynistic Islam as well as to explore the contingent historical circumstances that shaped various practices. This experience fosters discussion of the variety of women's experiences in different Muslim cultures and encourages examination of students' own assumptions about modern American gender ideals as natural or inevitable. Beginning in 1999 I began having students read and discuss a chapter from Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992). In that chapter, Ahmed explores the implications for women of the coming of Islam through examining the lives of two of the Prophet's wives: his first wife, Khadija, who was more than ten years his senior and who as a wealthy widow had employed him in her business

and remained his only wife until her death; and Aisha, who married the Prophet when she was nine or ten years old and shared her position with many co-wives, although she was always considered to be his favorite. Ahmed analyzes the Qur'an and a number of *hadiths* (short narratives about the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions in the first generation of Islam, believed to be authentic oral traditions passed down in a chain of transmission from eye witnesses). She regards Islam as it developed historically as having severely circumscribed women's rights and women's lives. But her work makes clear that the interpretation that finds Qur'anic sanction for these limitations is not the only possible interpretation. Students were given the Ahmed text and asked to read the text at home and to identify the thesis, note the sources, and address the issue of the oral transmission of key information. In the following class or, often, two classes, students discussed the various texts in groups, then we opened it up to the whole class. The next class they debated. I asked them to come in with key points highlighted and to refer to particular passages of Ahmed's scholarship and to specific verses of the Qur'an or to specific actions or sayings of Muhammad to support the points they made in the debate. Finally, they wrote a short essay on the subject, using Ahmed's scholarship, the Qur'an, and the hadiths as evidence.

Before I adopted classroom debates, I had used this text as the basis for class discussion. I assumed that the personal nature of the subject—biographies of real individuals and an exploration of marriage in another culture—would be inherently interesting to the students. This proved to be true. When I tried to make it more engaging, and especially to engage all students, not just the most verbal, by converting the discussion into a debate, that required a question—ideally something relevant to the modern world, a question that the students could discuss with the evidence from Ahmed's book and from the Qur'an. So in August, 2001, as I prepared for the coming semester, I revised this assignment. I decided to make it a debate about the policies of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan: Were the Taliban's policies mandated by the Qur'an, permitted as one valid interpretation of the Qur'an but not required, or did they violate the letter or the spirit of the Qur'an? In order to make sure, as best I could, that the students took the Qur'an seriously, rather than dismissing the issue of what the Qur'an said and just giving their own opinions, I included a role-playing element: students were to write the essay as Muslim editors of a Middle Eastern newspaper; for them and for their readers, their editorial would be valid only if it effectively engaged in interpretation of the Qur'an.

At the beginning of September 2001, it was not to be expected that American college freshmen knew anything about the Taliban regime, so students were referred to an Internet site put out by an Afghan women's association that described the restrictions the Taliban regime imposed on women. Later that fall, of course, the regime became the focus of the news. As America prepared for war, the State Department posted on the Web a

White Paper on the plight of Afghan women. Before we reached the origins of Islam in class, Islam, its teachings, the Taliban regime, and their policies on women had all become front-page news throughout America and much of the world. Students debated vigorously, they used the Qur'an as evidence for their positions, they generally used Ahmed appropriately, and they had a lot of fun. Students felt empowered by their (relatively) deep understanding of public issues. Some students also noted in their on-line discussion the interesting fact that although the Taliban had been in power for years, it was only when America was gearing up for war with Afghanistan that the plight of Afghan women inspired public outrage on the part of the American government.

Growing Pains

Debates and the writing assignments that follow, by asking students to perform authentic historical tasks, expose weaknesses that remain hidden if students only repeat what they have heard in a lecture or answer factual questions. Bringing these weaknesses to the surface is therefore a good thing, making it possible to address these deficiencies and in the long term overcome them.

In the debates, as also in other contexts, one of the hardest things for students to do is to learn to engage in explicit commentary on what they are doing. I see this in several different areas: When evidence is contradictory, they tend to accept one view and ignore rather than rebut the other. An example is in the use of the Qur'an in the debate described above. A key verse is translated in two different ways that dramatically change the meaning and in turn powerfully affect the overall position of women in Islam. One translation says that the husband of a disobedient woman who has tried to change her conduct by admonition and by refusing to sleep with her may beat her. The other translation of the same verse says that women must be obedient to Allah, and that a woman who is unwilling to sleep with her husband must be left alone in the sleeping quarters, and he should only go in to her when she is willing. So one translation enjoins obedience to husbands for women as a religious duty and sanctions a husband beating a stubbornly disobedient wife. The other commands women to be obedient to God and prohibits what today we would call spousal rape. The translator of the second version explains in a footnote that the key issue is a term that can mean "beat" or can mean "have intercourse"; he says it cannot mean "beat" in this context because Muhammad is known in authentic hadiths to have said that one must not beat one's wife, and in another well-attested tradition the Prophet says one must not beat women at all. Although this issue was discussed in class, no students in their papers addressed the fact that there were two alternative versions of this text or discussed why they chose one interpretation over another.

I suspect that one reason students do not engage in this kind of commentary is that many students have been told in high school that they

should never use “I” or “you” in a formal paper. Of course this often leads to ponderous writing and tortured passive-voice constructions. More seriously, it also probably contributes to the idea that formal writing is impersonal, presenting “just the facts,” and refers neither to the author nor to the reader. Although the goal is laudable, it is a barrier to the development of an effective argumentative style. We should make clear that far from being weakened by argument on why translation A is more likely to represent what was said than translation B, academic writing is strengthened by this kind of commentary.

Another major weakness of student writing is the reluctance to engage contrary evidence (Graff, 2003). There is a strong tendency to ignore it, perhaps because students do not recognize the contradiction, perhaps in the hope no one else will realize that it is there. My expectation was that the debates would make that head-in-the-sand strategy impossible: someone would be bound to bring up inconvenient evidence, and students would then have to deal with it during the debate, and this would carry over to their essays. This proved unduly optimistic on my part.

When the students almost all failed to address contrary positions in their papers, in spite of having confronted them in class and in spite of having a written rubric that indicated this was essential to an A paper, I added a new step for the first essay, a debate on Athenian democracy. In addition to the assignment sheet, students were also given the self-check sheet (see Exhibit 3.1).

Students were instructed to bring their drafts to the class session before the essays were due. They used green pens I distributed to mark up their drafts, labeling the thesis, their use of textual evidence, their confrontation of counterarguments, and so on. If they discovered their essays lacked any of these components, they were encouraged to write in either specific information or a note such as “check Thucydides on this.” They were instructed to revise their papers and turn in both the marked-up draft and the final draft. To help them make the transition to being better editors of their own work, at the next debate I had them draft their own self-check sheets in class using the writing assignment, and I then posted a final version on Blackboard, combining the strongest points raised in class. I also suggested that as they wrote papers in other classes, it would be useful for them to use the assignment to make up their own self-check sheets and review their drafts to make sure they had fulfilled all the requirements before turning in their final papers.

This process helped; a majority of the essays were improved by the self-check list, and none were actually made worse. Students’ notes to themselves included reminders like “add more primary sources,” “check Critias,” “counter-arg here!” Sometimes the in-class recognition that changes were needed did not actually lead to making changes in the final draft. There were also instances where the self-check revealed misunderstanding on the part of the student, so that he or she thought a criterion had been met when

Exhibit 3.1. Writing Assignment Self-Check Sheet

Your assignment asks you to make an argument on the assigned topic and says that an excellent paper will do the following:

- Include a clear thesis
- Offer specific evidence from both primary and secondary texts to support your thesis
- Make clear how that evidence supports your position
- Address and rebut counterarguments

Using the green pen provided, mark your draft essay as follows:

- If your thesis makes a specific claim, place a check mark here: _____ .
- Underline your thesis with a straight line.
- Circle instances in which you provide specific evidence from the texts to support your argument.
- Add up the number of times you use evidence from primary sources and write that number here: _____ .
- Add up the number of references to the scholarly work (whether to agree with or disagree with it) and enter the number here: _____ .
- Use a wavy line to underline specific statements that show how a piece of evidence supports your argument.
- Put brackets [] around passages where you address and rebut counterarguments.
- If any element is weak or lacking, use the green pen to insert a reference or phrase to remind yourself what you need to revise at home. Mark these revisions with a star.

Your paper should now be covered with green—symbol of life, of growth, of hope!

At home, revise: strengthen, clarify, add evidence, make explicit connections between your evidence and your thesis, confront alternative arguments, polish your writing, double-check grammar, spelling, and usage.

Turn in the marked-up draft, this sheet, and your final revised essay on the due date for this assignment.

it had not. This allowed me to clear up misunderstandings I would not have known existed if I had not seen on their self-check sheets and marked-up drafts their own view of what they had done.

Yet another weakness is that even when students adduce a piece of evidence to support their position, they very rarely state explicitly how this evidence is to be read or the point it supports. It is as if they thrust their argument and the evidence before reader, side by side, and to them the connection is obvious and does not need to be made explicit. The self-check sheet asked them to note whether they had made clear the links between the evidence they offered and the point they were trying to prove. Some of the check sheets included notes like “Add sentence here,” or “Explain: So what?” As with the other material, they were not always successful in translating this into effective argumentation, but the realization that such connections were needed was a step forward in itself.

Results

There is no doubt that the debates help toward the goal of engagement. The vast majority of students state in anonymous end-of-term surveys that for the second half of the world history sequence, they would prefer a debate class. When I was teaching two sections, one with debates and another discussing the same materials, but without debates, the non-debate class referred to the other as the “fun class.” They finally pressured me into allowing at least one informal debate in their class as well. Even those (10 percent or fewer) who would have preferred a class without debates usually say that they dislike debates because they hate to speak out in class or they hate the pressure they feel to talk. Only a few students over several years have said that they think the debates are a waste of time. As well as student preference, it is worth noting that more than 90 percent of the class typically participates in the debates, compared to much lower rates of class participation in less-structured discussions.

The creation of the self-check sheet, as opposed to my commenting on drafts, was originally driven by time constraints. Yet this is an instance in which one can make a virtue of necessity: I think students learned more from checking their own work and trying to grapple with what the assignment really asked of them and how well they had fulfilled it. And the comparison of what they thought they had done with what they actually had achieved made clear to me certain misunderstandings that I could then try to forestall before later debates and in teaching the course in the future.

The tie-in to current events has also been a success, furthering both the disciplinary goal of encouraging students to see contemporary events in historical context and the citizenship goal. Obviously, current events have provided a great deal of material related to the debate on Islam, but we do not depend on a national tragedy to make history relevant and interesting. Students have gone beyond Afghanistan and Iraq in their posting of current events. To my delight, in addition to discussions of the veil as something imposed upon women, students have addressed situations in which a majority has refused to allow women to observe the veil, such as the recent French prohibition of expressions of religious identity in public schools, including a ban on wearing head scarves, or the refusal of the Turkish parliament to allow a female elected representative to take her seat when she refused to abandon her head scarf. A couple of students have even applied the idea of the tyranny of the majority, a concept discussed in relation to Athenian democracy, to this kind of imposition of a secular orthodoxy upon a minority.

While I have no longitudinal data to prove it, it is possible that the debates will address the well-attested problems that exist in the transfer of learning outside the classroom. The combination of active student participation in learning in the debates with explicit exploration of the links to current events outside the classroom may help these students to avoid those pitfalls.

Students also indicate in the anonymous surveys that they feel they have changed. Some describe this in purely academic terms, stating, for example, that they have learned the material better for having to defend it. Others say they have learned to think on their feet or to speak before a group. Occasionally a debate will have even more personal meaning for a student. One Muslim student, who dressed modestly but did not cover her hair, told me that reading the primary sources and scholarship on Islam had given her arguments to use against those who pressured her to wear a head scarf: she felt she could defend the legitimacy of her choice in a way she had not been able to do before.

In all of these areas, therefore, the project has been to some degree a success. But this is a limited and fragile beginning.

In a research project that grew out of the development of the series of debates, I also analyzed essay exams to see whether experience of debates stimulated more sophisticated intellectual achievement even in treatment of issues that were not part of the debates. Ideally, the experience in the debates should promote this kind of thinking applied to other issues as well. Unfortunately, the study did not demonstrate that kind of broader transformation. I imagine that there are several reasons for this. For example, students could not necessarily change in quantifiable ways after a single semester, or the skills of debate don't generalize to other forms of argumentation. This kind of more generalized sophistication would probably appear, if at all, much further along in the student's intellectual development. Partly, it may take many experiences over many domains before the habits of mind become generalized. In accordance with the concept of the paradigm shift discussed in this volume by Ned Laff, preconceptions do not fall before the first piece of contrary evidence; it is only over time and as many contradictions accumulate that the existing paradigm finally crumbles.

The fragility of student development is a strong argument for intentionality in setting goals and in designing assignments and other activities to further those goals. Certainly, students who have participated in debates do begin to think more critically about history, and the surveys and students' spontaneous comments suggest that they also begin to apply their historical knowledge in their own real-life situations. This is only the first step in a lifelong journey.

References

- Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., and Stephens, J. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Graff, G. *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

- Mill, J. S. *On Liberty and Utilitarianism*. New York: Bantam Classics, 1993. (Originally published 1859.)
- National Research Council. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999.
- Perry, W. G., Jr. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. Austin, Tex.: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.
- Stewart, J. *Crossfire* [television program], CNN, October 15, 2004.
- Walvoord, B. E., and Breihan, J. E. "Arguing and Debating: Breihan's History Course." In E. P. Walvoord and L. P. McCarthy (eds.), *Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990.
- Wineburg, S. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Woodruff, P. *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

ANNE OSBORNE is professor of history and chair of the History Department at Rider University.

Copyright of *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* is the property of Jossey-Bass, A Registered Trademark of Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.