

# Teaching Debate to Learners at Different Stages in Life

*Lorna S. Asami*

*Kanda Jogakuen High School*

## **Introduction**

This paper is a reflection from several years of teaching debate to both high school students at St. Margaret's Senior High School (立教女学院高等学校) as well as learners in their 50s and 60s in a private class who had considerably more life experience. When I first began teaching debate, I had a colleague, Magda Kitano (presently at Bunkyo University) who had prepared many worksheets for the students that I was able to follow as we taught different sections of second-year high school students. Another St. Margaret's teacher recommended Goodnight's (1993) book to me which I used to write the prints outlining the responsibilities for each speaker. As the course continued even after my mentor left our school, I conducted informal evaluations with the students who had learned to debate from us, and made further adaptations to the course and materials. I also found Krieger's (2005) paper which helped me immensely, and worked it into my course with the prints I was already using. After teaching debate for a few years, I introduced some of the high school debate resolutions to my private class of older learners who surprised me with their insights. Teaching debate has proven to me how valuable learning to debate is for a student's overall education no matter what their age.

## **Teaching high school students**

Two terms of approximately eight sessions each made up our debate course. Each session was 50 minutes. There were four writing assignments to be completed before the actual debate day, and if time permitted, one session following the debate was allotted for an announcement of the debate winner and evaluation of the speeches

with written comments and discussion. In the first term, the resolution for the debate was a simple, fun, even silly topic just to get students acquainted with the mechanics of debating. In the second term, the resolution was a fact, opinion, or policy issue that required significant research and preparation.

In the very first session, the basics of debate are introduced to the students. There are four people on the affirmative team and four on the negative. Resolutions (or propositions) are introduced and the process of debating that resolution is explained. Skills that are learned through debate, such as how to select good references to back up arguments, critical thinking and listening, and open-mindedness are discussed. The flow of a debate is introduced, and then students write strong versus weak reasons to support a resolution. The students' homework is to come up with resolutions to discuss in the next class.

Our second class focuses on learning how to support an opinion. Support consists of evidence (Krieger, 2005). We go through the different kinds of evidence such as examples and statistics. Classwork consists of providing a reason and supporting example and common-sense opinion for a given resolution. Finally, students use their own resolutions from their homework and write a supporting reason, example, and common-sense opinion to go with it. In the case that students can conduct online research in class, they can immediately begin to find statistics or other sources to back up their reasons.

In class three, students look at a compiled list of resolutions from their first homework assignment. Paired teams need to select a resolution from the compiled list to debate in class. After that is done, they receive a print reiterating the cross-examination debate structure (different roles in a debate) to record their resolution and who will fill each speaking role. Each student must select one affirmative role and one negative role. Students will not know which side they will be on until the starting time of the debate. Right before

the debate, we have one member from each team play “Rock, paper, scissors” and the winner picks a card from the time-keeper to determine whether they are affirmative or negative. (There is usually a lot of screaming at this point, the tension in the class gets so high.) Whoever wins the affirmative is usually very relieved as the students think it the easier of the two sides to debate. Something that is discussed somewhere along the line in class is the difficulty of debating the side that you do not actually agree. Before class is adjourned, each team of four members begins to fill out a print with information such as team name, resolution, and who will cover each speech.

In class four, teams complete filling out the form specifying who will do what speech. They begin to brainstorm a list of strong reasons that their opponents could use. They begin to form their rebuttals and write them out. The teacher circles the class and meets with each group to review their arguments and rebuttals, challenging the students to question their reasoning. The teacher passes out a print that explains each speaker’s responsibilities and the advantages of using the cross-examination debate format. Also, each student on both the affirmative and negative sides, receives a print to help them prepare for their speech. They also receive a research form to record the topic and source of their references. This print is turned in for a grade.

It should be clarified here that many of the students might be visibly panicking at the thought of having to prepare so much material for the actual debate. I usually stop the class at some point and explain the time frame and what is expected of them. I reassure the students that if they do not have the English to say what they want to on the debate day that they should try their best and that we will try our best to understand their speech. I do not detract points for ungrammatical English. I tell the students that I do not want them to use a computer translator to prepare their speeches, but that they can say what they want to in Japanese first during the debate and we will all try to help them say it in English. This seems to calm them down and they have

always tried their best in every debate. The level of the students' English as well as motivation level in this school is very high, thereby allowing us to attempt such an ambitious type of public speaking. In the case that the students need more time to prepare their research and arguments, additional classes can be inserted at this stage to complete research or to do a practice run before the actual debate.

If all goes smoothly, class five or six becomes the actual debate day. As previously mentioned, teams draw a card to determine which resolution would begin and who will be on the affirmative and negative side. While the first teams are preparing themselves, the remaining students who will be the audience are given a print to take detailed notes on each speaker's arguments. Also, each student is given a voting sheet to judge which side they think won the debate and who gave the strongest argument of the debate and who gave the weakest. These worksheets are to be used in discussion following the debate and submitted to determine the winner of the debate. These prints are also turned in for a grade.

Following the debate, we try to have a day to review what happened in the debate. Students discuss the resolutions, and those who gave speeches tell about how they felt and how they see their performance. The audience might share their opinions of who they thought did especially well and ask for clarification of any points for their notes that they must submit. There tends to be so much class discussion that it is easy for the teacher to facilitate the discussion without having to give too many personal opinions.

It is rewarding to hear how much everyone learned through their successes and failures, and a good number of students have told me personally that debate was their favorite activity in our class and wished it could be a year-long course. It was also rewarding to see students become more open-minded as they tackled topics that they had preconceived opinions on such as whaling, or that children should be raised in the countryside as opposed to the city. Sometimes the unexpected would happen in a debate, as when in a

first-term beginning debate, the resolution was on that it is acceptable to dig the small shijimi clam meat out of your clam shell in miso soup with your chopsticks, (or whether it was a faux pas). Both the affirmative and negative sides had prepared a great number of arguments and the debate turned comedic when they were able to quickly rebut each other without hesitation on the subject about eating a tiny clam. Such lines as, “We should not consider tradition to be more important and waste food when people in other countries are going hungry” received applause from the audience. Above all, it was great to see students enjoying themselves so much.

Debating helps students to grow intellectually. They learn how to think on their feet and must be open-minded to prepare both the affirmative and negative sides of the debate. It isn't easy to prepare the side that they do not actually support.

### **Teaching older adult learners**

After experiencing success with teaching debate to the high school students, I introduced some of the second-term resolutions to my private class of older adult learners. They showed a great amount of interest in the topics that the high school students had debated, and I asked them for their opinions for both the affirmative and negative sides. Although the ideas that were discussed in this private class were not researched, and we did not have a formal debate in the way that the high school students did, the adult students were well-informed and usually able to recall news reports they had heard, or newspaper articles they had read on the subject, and have a lively discussion on the topic. It always impressed me how these students always had a life story to share on just about any topic. It did help that one student was a lawyer and another had been an English teacher for years. All the students were well-traveled and were able to share stories of their experiences in other countries as well. I often felt that they had more to teach me than I could teach them. This class never shied away from controversial issues that were in the news and often would bring up political or economic topics up in our discussions that high school students did not. I was very privileged to

facilitate these discussions and help this class to be able to explain things with the nuance they wanted to convey.

### **Ending comments**

Debate is a way of opening up a discussion in a class to look at different ideas and viewpoints in an organized and logical way. It allows people to state ideas that they may not necessarily agree with themselves, and as a result encourages open-mindedness. As we discuss different viewpoints with each other, sometimes our own opinions may change, even slightly. Debate teaches us to listen carefully and critically, and think on our feet. It has been a fun activity for many students which has been a great reward for this instructor.

### References

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