



Socially-based Curriculum Unit: Debating – Building Productive Talk on Social Issues

Unit Title: Debating: Building Productive Talk on Social Issues

Time Frame (number of lessons or days required): 5 lessons

Unit Developer(s): Rita Boyd

Developed for Course Name and Course Code:

Learning Strategies: Skills for Success in Secondary School, GLE2O

Strand(s) and Curriculum Learning Expectations Addressed:

Learning Skills Strand

LSV.01 – identify and use a variety of literacy skills and strategies to improve reading, writing, and oral communication in everyday contexts

LS1.02 – identify and use oral communication to support reading, writing, and positive interaction with others (e.g., asking questions to clarify meaning, using a think/pair/share strategy in problem solving, brainstorming to generate ideas, making oral presentations of group work)

Interpersonal Knowledge and Skills Strand

IKV.01 – identify and describe the knowledge and skills necessary for successful interpersonal relations and teamwork

IK1.02 – identify and describe positive teamwork skills (e.g., sharing ideas, managing tasks, offering constructive criticism, using conflict resolution strategies) used in different learning environments

IK2.02 – describe how interpersonal and teamwork challenges (e.g., inability to listen actively, interpersonal conflicts, negative peer influences) affect their learning

IK3.02 – use appropriate teamwork skills (e.g., encouraging participation of group members, planning and delegating tasks, sharing decision making, showing respect for diverse points of view) in a variety of learning situations

Desired Results

Unit Description:

The learning outcomes for this unit are to develop oral communication skills as a way to support reading, writing, and positive interactions with others, and to apply interpersonal and positive teamwork skills in a debate. Students will gain knowledge about and have opportunities to refine the different ways to offer constructive criticism, to communicate a difference of opinion with a peer, and to improve their own communication style.

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This unit was originally developed for special education students in Learning Strategies. The debate format and balloting have been modified to suit this class, but may be adapted as needed. The activities are built around a daily social issue or a news event specifically chosen for discussion, which is scaffolded throughout the unit from personal reflection, then to partner sharing, then to small group discussion, and finally to whole class debate. The performance tasks are both formative (fun, daily debate exercises on “lighter” topics) and summative (a formal *Debate* with rules, judged by an objective audience (i.e., fellow teacher, a group of older students, administrator in the school) on current social issues.

Enduring Understandings / Learning:

The “big idea” that students will gain from this unit is that we are all responsible for each other in a community, in which every person’s success or failure does impact on that community, and thus ourselves. This unit allows students with learning disabilities (often the students in Learning Strategies classes) to focus on and become more involved in current social issues. Debating has inherent value as a student-centered activity. Students must learn to think quickly, speak succinctly, and listen actively. Thus, debating provides students opportunities to move from passive listening to active listening. Students gain newfound respect for their peers, understand the value of solid research and presentation skills, and develop a greater respect for the strength of a team-approach to problem solving. Teachers may select any current social issue for debate, as dictated by the knowledge and needs of their class. Ultimately, students will begin to see where their individual strengths lay in debating, and in the bigger social picture, that they have a voice and valuable opinions to contribute to their own society.

Assessment Tasks

Performance Tasks and Other Evidence That Will Demonstrate the Knowledge and Skills Acquired:

- student participation in warm-up “mini-debates,”
- participation in class discussions,
- peer descriptive feedback,
- self and peer assessment,
- “L” column of KWL chart,
- culminating activity: class debate

Assessment Criteria:

- teacher observation and anecdotal notes, self/peer/team evaluation, modified debating rubric



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Unit Planning Notes

Prior Learning Necessary (if any):

None.

Preparation Notes (if any):

- podium (or music stand);
- large classroom in which desks can be reorganized;
- cue cards;
- Teacher resource: Beyond Monet: The Artful Science of Instructional Integration, by Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser, chapter 11: *Academic Controversy and Team Analysis*;
- copy of video The Great Debaters for extension activity

Learning Plan

Lesson 1

Warm-up

Hand out Debating K-W-L chart (Appendix A.)

Ask students to individually complete the section "K" *What do they already **know** about debates?*

With their elbow partner (another student sitting nearby,) students share their responses.

Next, ask students to individually complete the section "W" *What do they **want to know** about debates?*

With their elbow partner, students again share their responses.

With the whole class, teacher takes up "K" responses, accepting all student answers, and writes them on the board, then does the same with "W" responses.

Teacher explains the "L" column of the KWL chart (*What have they **learned** about debating?*) will be revisited and completed by the students at the end of the unit.

Teacher Input

1. One thing that will eventually come out of the discussions is that debating involves speaking, discussing, arguing, convincing another person of something. Students will need to know what are the criteria for a



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Lesson 1 (cont.)

strong point in an argument. Teacher writes on the board/overhead the **criteria for a strong point**:

- 1) **it is clearly stated**
 - 2) **it is logical**
 - 3) **it is convincing to most people**
2. Teacher introduces debating vocabulary through the handout Debating Terms (Appendix B-Teacher Copy; Appendix C-Student Copy). Teacher explains each term and writes them on the board/overhead and students copy onto their handout.
 3. Teacher hands out How to Disagree in an Agreeable Way (Appendix D) and reads over with the class. In the columns of the handout, students may wish to add more of their own phrases. Teacher discusses with students the appropriate language to use when disagreeing with someone. Make a **t-chart** on the board, and ask students to contribute examples of things one might **hear** and examples of things one might **see** around the room during a debate. Remind students that body language (eye contact, tone of voice body posture) communicates just as much as words do.

Student Practice

The Devil's Advocate – Cooperative activity (Appendix E). **This game brings into practise the knowledge acquired about the criteria for a strong point, debating terms, and how to disagree in an agreeable way.** Students are placed in partners and presented with a proposition from the handout. Teacher/student decides who will debate for the Affirmative and the Negative side of that proposition. Students have three minutes to generate points for their Affirmative/Negative side. Teacher says "Begin" and for one minute, the student stands up and argues for the affirmative side. After one minute, teacher shouts "Switch." His/her partner must now stand up and argue for the negative side. At the end of the debate, students are given positive feedback and constructive criticism from the rest of the class. These "light" topics should be opportunities for students to practise quick thinking, develop strong points in an argument, and have fun!

Lesson 2

Warm-up

Students can play a variation of the *Devil's Advocate* activity. Now they must prepare arguments for **both** sides of the proposition. Allow students to select different propositions than what they have already done. One student will stand up speak for one minute, defending the affirmative side, and when the teacher says "Switch," right away **that same student** must argue for the negative side. This activity is scaffolding the students' research skills from one side of the debate, now to both sides of the debate.



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Lesson 2 (cont.)

Teacher Input

1. Review notes from last class (criteria for a strong point, debating terms, how to disagree with a peer.)
2. Teacher puts one of the following quotations on the board/overhead, or selects another quotation or proverb:
Success requires a special quality of mind, not the highest. Edgar Z. Friedenberg
A sentence that has shock value carries more information than one that does not. Frank Ogden
Co-operation is no longer simply advantageous; in order to survive it is an absolute necessary. Pierre Elliott Trudeau
It gets easier to fool other people as you get older, but a lot harder to fool yourself. Edward Phillips

Teacher gives students four or five minutes to prepare a two-minute speech on the quote. Timekeeper makes sure the students know how much time is left during both the planning time and the speech. Students present their speeches to the class, and receive feedback on what was most convincing, and why.

3. Using the speeches, the teacher shows students how to turn a statement into a proposition for the affirmative side and the negative side. Inform students that a debate speaker begins with the word “Resolved.” For example:

Statement	Proposition for the Affirmative team	Proposition for the Negative team
<i>Success requires a special quality of mind, not the highest.</i>	<i>Resolved: Success requires a special quality of mind, not the highest.</i>	<i>Resolved: Success does not require a special quality of mind, it requires the highest.</i>
<i>A sentence that has shock value carries more information than one that does not.</i>	<i>Resolved: A sentence that has shock value carries more information than one that does not.</i>	<i>Resolved: A sentence that has shock value does not carry more information than one that does not.</i>

Student Activity

Tell students they will be re-examining their own arguments from the Warm-up activity in order to begin to debate. Tell students to make a chart with the headings *Arguments For* and *Arguments Against*. Review the criteria for a strong reason in a debate (from Lesson 1). Students will highlight their top two or three reasons, ranking them from the strongest reason to weakest reason, for both their *Arguments For* and *Arguments Against*. Students then underline what they consider to be their two or three weakest reasons. Do this for both the *Arguments For* and *Arguments Against*. Students discuss and defend their choices with a peer.



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Lesson 3

Warm-up

Co-operative Activity: Think-Pair-Share

Students think of current issues in the news today, from school topics, to local concerns, to world news. Ask students to come up with at least three current issues. Students share with an “elbow partner.” Then the class shares as a whole. Teacher makes a list on the board/overhead of the topics. Teacher uses co-operative technique think-pair-share and students turn the statements into an affirmative or negative proposition. Remind students that each speech in a debate begins with the word “Resolved.” Students stand up and take turns stating the affirmative and negative propositions.

Teacher Input

Handout copies of Student Advice on Debating (Appendix F). Read over as a class and discuss.

Student Activity

Tell students that they will begin to practise debating. This is an opportunity for students to begin to hone their speaking/presentation skills, then work on developing their research skills at a later time. They will use their arguments from yesterday's/ last class' lesson. Recall that they selected one proposition and ranked the strong and weak reasons in the *Arguments For* and *Arguments Against* columns.

Teacher now puts students into partners who used the same proposition, and assigns one partner to defend the affirmative side of that proposition, and the other partner to defend the negative side. It is important to tell students that debaters are not usually given a choice of sides; they must accept and argue for the proposition they are assigned. Students will speak for two minutes and defend their proposition, and then their opponent will do the same. There should be a non-verbal signal established to warn speakers when ten seconds are left in the speaking time.

After each “mini-debate,” the teacher and the rest of the class should offer constructive criticism (use prior lesson *How to Disagree in an Agreeable Way* to establish appropriate phrasing of comments.) Encourage critique on both the presentation style (tone of voice, pacing, eye contact, gestures, etc.) and the choice of supporting facts/research.

Teacher should guide discussion toward why it is important to prepare rebuttal notes. Tell students that when an opponent's point is left unchallenged, it makes it appear to the judge(s) that the speaker is unable to debunk that point.



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Lesson 4

Warm up

Students play a variation of the *Devil's Advocate* activity, but now with topics focusing on social justice and human rights. Teacher hands out Topics for Debate (Appendix G.) There are eleven topics from which to choose. Students select a proposition and, for five minutes, brainstorm arguments for both sides of the proposition. One student will stand up and speak for one minute, defending the affirmative side, and when the teacher says "Switch," right away that same student must argue for the negative side. Allow several students to select the same topic in order to generate discussion around strong versus weak arguments. This activity is scaffolding the students' research skills from one side, then to both sides of a "lighter" debate topic, now to both sides of a current social topic.

Teacher Input

1. Tell students that the culminating activity for this unit will be a whole class debate. The question to be debated is **Which has more impact on Canadian society: violence or compassion?** As a class, create the affirmative proposition: *Violence has more impact on Canadian society than does compassion* and negative proposition: *Compassion has more impact on Canadian society than does violence*. Student should write them on the lines at the bottom of the handout (Appendix G.) Teacher assigns students to either the affirmative or the negative team.
Note: Learning Strategies classes tend to be small, but the teacher may assign different debate topics from Appendix I in order to keep teams to a cohesive and manageable number.
2. Handout to students a copy of Teaching the Debate (Appendix H) and read over the two pages together. On page 1 is the timing for the debate. The number of speakers may be modified to fit the needs of the class. The Judge or the Chair may also be modified (i.e., it may be the teacher, a guest teacher, an administrator, or a small group of senior students.) On page 2 of Appendix H are the room set-up suggestions. Remind students of appropriate behaviour if they are sitting in the audience. Tell students to make effective use of the *Planning Notes* section of the handout by getting the numbers and email addresses of their team members in order to communicate after school hours.
3. Handout copies of Student Notes for Rebuttal (Appendix I.) This handout is to help students organize their rebuttal arguments while listening to their opponents' speeches. These notes should be shared during the 3-minute planning "Break" during the debate.
4. Handout copies of the Debate Rubric (Appendix J.) Read over with students, highlighting key words and phrases. Tell students they will be evaluated individually and as a team, but all students must submit their preparation notes, cue cards, and rebuttal notes. The teacher uses discretion when evaluating a student during the debate, taking into account the IEP of the student.

Student Activity

Teacher should try to give debate teams at least two classes in the library and/or computer lab in order to research the proposition, gather evidence, share notes and plan rebuttal statements. Remind students to define



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Student Activity

Teacher should try to give debate teams at least two classes in the library and/or computer lab in order to research the proposition, gather evidence, share notes and plan rebuttal statements. Remind students to define the terms “violence” and “compassion” first. As a class, brainstorm a list of places where they can begin to look for evidence of violence or compassion **impacting** Canadian society (i.e., news, historical events, famous people, etc.) During the debate, the Judge(s) should have a Voting Ballot (Appendix K) for this debate *Which has more impact on Canadian society: violence or compassion?* or a general Voting Ballot (Appendix L) for use with other debate topics.

After all debates, teacher should debrief with students about how they felt during the debate, what they think they did well individually, and how effective they were as a team. (Note: Beyond Monet: The Artful Science of Instructional Integration, by Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser, is a valuable resource to teachers, particularly chapter 11: *Academic Controversy and Team Analysis* which has a page on Team Assessment.)

Finally, students return to the very first handout Debating K-W-L Chart (Appendix A) and complete the “L” column “*What did you learn about debating?*” Ask students to share their answers with the class.

Lesson 5 – Suggested Extension Activity

Teacher Input

Teacher gives copies to students of the handout Movie Guide: The Great Debaters (Appendix M.) Read over the handout with students to guide their viewing of the movie. The movie is age-appropriate, rated PG, and blends the two aspects of the unit: social justice and debating.

Student Activity

Students will view the movie The Great Debaters (2007) approximately 115 minutes. During and after the movie, students will complete the Movie Guide.

Check for Understanding

Teacher will take up the students’ answers to the questions, which may vary from student to student, according to the depth and strength of their literacy ability. Teacher should focus much of the discussion about the movie on debating skills and the social issues of the time, i.e., human rights and social justice.



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Attachments

- Appendix A Debating K-W-L Chart
- Appendix B Debating Terms – Teacher Copy
- Appendix C Debating Terms – Student Copy
- Appendix D How to Disagree in an Agreeable Way
- Appendix E The Devil's Advocate Co-operative Activity (2-page handout)
- Appendix F Student Advice on Debating
- Appendix G Topics for Debate
- Appendix H Teaching the Debate (2-page handout)
- Appendix I Student Notes for Rebuttal
- Appendix J Debate Rubric
- Appendix K Voting Ballot
- Appendix L Voting Ballot (General Use)
- Appendix M Movie Guide: The Great Debaters

Other Possible Course Applications

This unit was originally developed for special education students in Learning Strategies. The initial reason for creating the “oral” unit was to develop students’ ideas for writing. (This author is a big believer in using productive talk as a precursor to writing.)

This unit is easily adaptable to any English, History, Geography, Science or Civics class because it focuses on oral communication skills and teamwork skills. Modification will most likely be necessary in the choice of topics for debate, choice of topics for the warm-up activities, and most likely for the debating rubric. Teachers are strongly encouraged to use a more formal criteria on the debate ballot (which can be accessed on the internet) with academic-level classes. Good luck and enjoy!