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## Practice Papers

# University students' perceptions of the use of academic debates as a teaching methodology



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## ABSTRACT

Recently, there have been numerous innovations in the field of education. Teaching methodology is one of the areas that have received the most attention. Given that context, this paper focuses on academic debate as an activity that fulfils the short-term objectives of individual and collective learning, comprehension, and stimulation, along with long-term objectives that are more focused on research, analysis, and communication processes. Debates motivate students' active learning through preparation, presentation, defence, and classmates' participation and interaction. Those who comprise the debate audience also learn a great deal from their observations. Therefore, this article seeks to alleviate the lack of research on the effects of topical debates by presenting results from various experiences of undergraduate and master's students in the field of tourism. Data collected from post-debate surveys of students are analysed to identify their opinions of academic debate through a valuation of not only various items from different theoretical works but also the debates' actual execution. The results show that academic debate presents students with an interesting opportunity to develop diverse and relevant learning and critical thinking abilities through active learning, taking into account the importance of the group's interest in and preparation for the debate topic.

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## 1. Introduction and literature review

Because learning occurs in various forms during the educational process, instructors should use a wide range of didactic resources. In recent decades, we have seen a movement in higher education toward the promotion of new active learning methods, defined as methods that allow students to participate in high-level intellectual activities that include analysing, synthesising, and evaluating a given assignment (Scannapieco, 1997). In this sense, active learning differs from passive learning in that it involves complex thinking processes and improves the retention, assimilation, understanding, and appropriate application of course content. Learning is more effective when students actively analyse, debate, and apply content than when they passively absorb information (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Accordingly, students benefit when instructors use learning strategies that promote active participation.

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Although there are various forms of active learning strategies, academic debate is a particularly interesting technique. Debates foster students' active learning by giving them the responsibility to understand course content, an approach that completely transforms their perspective from passive to active (Snider & Schnurer, 2002).

Cattani (2003: 67) defines debate as “a competition (a challenge) between two antagonists in which the two contenders seek the approval of a third party (judge, auditorium), unlike what occurs in a simple discussion. Even issues that are considered impossible to resolve can be debated with the objective of persuading others.” Thus, the distinctive element of debate is its search for the approval of third-party participants. Therefore, debate is considered a form of oral controversy based on the systematic presentation of opposing arguments about a specific issue (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). As a result, we consider academic debate to be a competitive intellectual activity with the principal objective of communicating ideas.

Academic debate should not be considered as an end in itself, but rather as a method for rational and consensual problem solving (Blanco, 2013). Despite debate's history as a teaching strategy, at universities debates are restricted to students who participate on debate teams (Bellon, 2000). However, research has shown that debates can be successfully used in a wide range of disciplines (Budesheim & Lundquist, 2000; Dundes, 2001; Garrett, Schoener, & Hood 1996; Keller, Whittaker, & Burke 2001; Musselman, 2004; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Scannapeico, 1997; Vo & Morris, 2006).

This methodology can bring many benefits to students, including an increase in their motivation to learn and consequently to master course content, along with an improvement in their research skills, empathy, and oral expression and communication skills (Schroeder & Ebert, 1983). It has been proven that debate foments creativity because participants must think about not only what will be said but also how it will be said (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Similarly, Berdine (1987) has found that debate requires extensive oral communication abilities because students must defend their points of view and directly and quickly respond to the questions that they are asked. These tasks are not mechanical, but practical drilling is useful to debate better and more quickly. Tumposky (2004) has added that debate participants must also anticipate what their opponents are thinking.

Academic debate as a teaching tool reconciles the short-term objective of acquiring knowledge with the long-term goal of training the mind to think analytically and critically (Vo & Morris, 2006). In this sense, the evidence suggests that debate improves logical and critical thinking (Roy & Macchiette, 2005) by requiring students to adopt a range of perspectives and to be objective and unbiased in evaluating various stances towards a problem. This method forces students to transcend their own prejudices towards an issue (Schroeder & Ebert, 1983), at least temporarily. To conduct a good debate, students have no alternative but to carefully analyse positions that may be diametrically opposed to their personal opinions. In such situations, students might have to defend positions that they oppose and attack perspectives with which they agree. This exercise helps the individual to have a more open mind (Berdine, 1987). Moreover, students must apply reason and identify fallacies in opposing arguments and must clearly establish the elements that justify or weaken their own points of view, thus illustrating how aspects relevant to a given discipline are often not clearly defined because they are subject to differences and opposing visions. It has also been shown that the competitive element inherent in debate acts as a motivator (Schroeder & Ebert, 1983). Students also seem to both enjoy debates and recognise their value (Landrum, 1991). One reason that students like debate is that they are able to manage their own learning experiences through personalising and appropriating course content (Doody & Condon, 2012).

Finally, learning in debates does not appear limited to students who directly participate because audience members also seem to learn a considerable amount (Moeller, 1985). Students benefit from their interaction with other students during the debate process. Roy and Macchiette (2005) maintain that debate requires participants to develop active listening skills, whereas Tumposky (2004) discusses how interaction with other students during the debate process stimulates greater cognitive development.

Despite its benefits, academic debate also has its detractors. Some believe that that academic debate reinforces dualistic positions, that (in some cases) some students cannot adjust their abilities to process clashing opinions, or that debate contributes to reinforcing beliefs about the debated issue. Accordingly, it should be emphasised that although debate allows students to evaluate two opposing perspectives on an issue, some problems can obviously be viewed from more than two perspectives. However, debate does not allow for the multidimensional evaluation of a problem (Schroeder & Ebert, 1983).

Discussions require open disagreement, which some students associate with negative interpersonal or emotional qualities such as hostility or fighting (Goodwin, 2003). This association can make them hesitant to participate in debate. Some students can also find debate to be an unfamiliar activity; accordingly, they might resist innovation and prefer activities such as classroom discussion or group exercises, in which they already know how to learn (Goodwin, 2003).

The theoretical review and empirical evidence collected in the literature show how debates represent a tool to enhance learning. The student takes an active part in the process by not only showing more interest in the subject and its contents (short-term objectives), but also by working in the acquisition of other generic skills (long-term results). It is essential to implement these skills (communication, information search, teamwork and critical thinking) to successfully perform the debate activity. This feature, inherent to academic debate, makes it different from any other active learning methodologies and constitutes its main advantage over them. Another added value is that transversal/generic skills in any given subject may be extrapolated to other subjects regardless of their content.

Although in recent decades much research has been published describing the benefits of debate as a teaching instrument, few have focused on the effects or the results of studies conducted on in-class debates (Kennedy, 2009). Furthermore, no studies on the use of in-class debates in tourism classes have been published to date. Accordingly, this paper examines the conceptual and procedural aspects of debate in order to offer empirical evidence about the results of its use in the field of tourism.

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