

STUDENT EVALUATION OF CLASSROOM DEBATES

R. ERIC LANDRUM

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Students assessed the benefits of classroom panel debates. Students read about controversial issues in psychology and participated in a classroom debate, with those students not on the panel writing papers on the debate topic. Student evaluations indicated that both the debate and the papers helped them realize that each issue has two sides and that these assignments helped them to consider viewpoints they might not of considered on their own.

The classroom debate is a popular method of generating discussion, providing students with the opportunity to practice oral communication skills in debating, and critical thinking skills in preparing for the debate. In psychology, there are a number of instances where the classroom debate has been successfully employed (e.g., Dodd, 1988; Kirkendall, 1966; Lewin & Wakefield, 1983; Moeller, 1985). In general, faculty members report that students have been sensitized to the topic area by engaging in class discussions.

The panel debate method described here is a modification of the panel discussion suggested by Rubenstein and Slife (1988). In addition to the panel debates, students wrote short papers on each controversial issue when not participating in the debate. The subjects were 597 students in Introductory Psychology classes at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale during the Fall 1988 and Spring 1989 semesters.

Each student in a section participated in one panel debate during the semester and wrote papers on the remaining topics. Panels consisted of six students, three arguing on each side of the issue. Faculty evaluation of debate performance was based on: (1) Did the panel present a rationale for their side of the issue with the use of em-

pirical evidence? (2) Did the panel effectively counter or respond to opposing criticisms? and (3) Did the panel effectively criticize or question the arguments or statements of the opposition?

Paper assignments were made the week prior to the panel debate for all non-panel students. Papers were graded using these criteria: (1) Did the paper summarize both sides of the issue? (2) Did the student clearly state his/her position on the issue? and (3) Did the student use the empirical evidence available to support her/his views in the paper? Students were informed at the beginning of the semester about the criteria for grading both panel debate performance and papers.

At the end of each semester, students completed a course evaluation which included questions concerning the panel debates and paper assignments. Those questions and the results are presented in Table 1.

Professors use panel debates in hopes of enhancing students oral presentation and critical thinking skills. The student evaluations in this study substantiate to some extent these beneficial effects.

References

- Dodd, D.K. (1988). Responding to the bereaved: A student panel discussion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 33-36.

Table 1
Percent (%) Responses on Panel Debate/Paper Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
PANEL DEBATES					
For my topic, our group worked well together.	16.0	40.4	19.1	14.9	9.6
I knew what was expected of me as a panelist.	19.8	58.7	10.6	7.4	3.5
Speaking in front of the class was a good learning experience.	19.4	49.7	17.0	8.8	5.1
Being on the panel made me think about both sides of the issue.	16.0	40.4	19.1	14.9	9.6
After being on the panel, my original opinion about the topic changed.	4.9	6.9	23.1	38.5	16.6
Being on the panel exposed me to ideas and views I might not of considered on my own.	12.9	52.7	15.3	12.8	6.4
In general, being involved with the panel debates was a good learning experience.	19.8	49.7	16.9	8.0	5.5
PANELS					
The feedback received from the graded papers was adequate.	8.2	40.2	20.8	16.8	14.0
Writing the papers helped me to consider both sides of an issue.	15.3	50.1	15.0	14.1	5.5
The papers were hard to write.	3.9	11.0	15.3	47.0	22.8
Writing the papers helped me to organize my thoughts.	8.4	38.9	26.1	20.9	5.7
Writing the papers was a waste of time.	9.9	19.3	25.0	36.5	9.4
Reading the articles showed me that much of psychology is controversial and still unsettled.	16.9	59.1	16.4	5.2	2.3
In general, writing the papers was a good learning experience.	10.6	44.9	23.9	14.3	6.2
SUMMARY					
The panel debate format should be kept in the course	22.2	44.0	15.5	10.4	7.9
The requirements of writing a paper over each panel debate topic should be kept in the course.	14.4	42.3	22.7	12.2	8.4

- Kirkendall, L.A. (1966). Using a student panel in teacher education on sex standards. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 28, 521-523.
- Lewin, L.M., & Wakefield, J.A. (1983). Teaching psychology through an instructor-debate format. *Teaching of Psychology*, 10, 115-116.
- Moeller, T.G. (1985). Using classroom debates in teaching developmental psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 12, 207-209.
- Rubenstein, J., & Slife, B. (1988). *Instructor's manual Taking Sides: Clashing views on controversial psychology issues*. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.

Author Notes

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Thomas O. Mitchell and the 1988-1989 Teaching Assistants of Introduction to Psychology at Southern Illinois University - Carbondale.

Requests for reprints should be directed to: Dr. Eric Landrum, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin - Platteville, Platteville, WI 53818-3099.

**REPRINTED FROM VOLUME 25, NUMBER 3
SEPTEMBER 1991 ISSUE OF COLLEGE STUDENT JOURNAL**
