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## Let's Debate: Active Learning Encourages Student Participation and Critical Thinking

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*Structured classroom debates (SCDs), whereby teams of students debate a question prepared outside of class, help advance two goals many political science instructors struggle to achieve with their students: classroom participation beyond the “usual suspects” present in every classroom and critical thinking and analysis of political issues. This article explains the methods used by the author and several colleagues to introduce SCDs into multiple types of political science courses based on the author’s extensive experience with conducting such debates in a wide range of classes, and the contributions such an approach has demonstrated on student understanding and communication of political issues. Topics addressed include differences in debate format and preparation for different class levels and sizes; how to accommodate students of different abilities through effective team and role management; grading options/methods of evaluation; and approaches to engaging the entire classroom in this active learning exercise. Evaluation of the merits of the approach also is provided based on a systematic analysis of student course evaluations and on comparative observations of the author and other instructors who have employed the approach.*

**Keywords** active learning, class participation, critical thinking, debate

The folk wisdom goes: never discuss religion or politics. Political scientists know better! Many of us encourage students to debate political issues in class. Fewer of us do so in a structured way, however. And even fewer integrate debate systematically into our syllabi and curricula. More of us should. Structured classroom debates (SCDs), whereby teams of students debate in class an issue prepared in advance, provide an important tool for helping our students to develop their critical-thinking skills and also can help professors to encourage productive classroom participation beyond the few students who often dominate classroom discussion. This type of structured debate differs in several important respects from the more casual debate instructors often employ as a discussion tool. First, it is integrated into course design and introduced at the beginning of the course as a core component of student learning and understanding of politics. Second, critical thinking skills are taught explicitly as an aspect of successful completion of multiple debate assignments. Third, students

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are assigned debate questions in advance and are required to work in groups outside of class to actively consider multiple lines of response to the question posed. Finally, students combine oral debate of the topic with a further development of their own views on the question in a follow-up individual written assignment.

This article discusses the value of integrating SCDs into several different levels and types of political science classes and provides a road map for how to do this. Issues addressed include differences in debate format and preparation for different levels and class sizes; how to accommodate students of different abilities through effective team and role management; grading options/methods of evaluation; and approaches to engaging the entire classroom in this active learning exercise. The findings presented are based on the author's experience with conducting SCDs in nine classes over the past five years, a total of more than 50 graded and practice classroom debates that included over two hundred students.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of other colleagues using the same format in the same courses (an additional 16 courses in all) add further insight to the analysis. The basic format of the debates has evolved somewhat over time and depended on the level of the course and number of students, but it is largely the same in each of the 9 courses (25 courses, when colleagues' courses are included). Class size ranged from 10 to 29 students, though the format discussed here would be appropriate for courses of up to 36 students. It might also be adapted for larger classes by conducting the debates in discussion sections (where they exist—either by a teaching assistant or the main instructor) or by offering debates as one of several options for graded evaluation.

Political science courses, particularly at the undergraduate level, have multiple goals. In addition to the basic transmission of content, most instructors seek also to teach students to think critically, to acquire basic research techniques, to develop skills of logical argumentation, and to improve writing and oral communication skills. Breuning, Parker, and Ishiyama (2001), for example, discuss how different levels and types of courses may focus on a different balance of these goals. SCDs contribute to all of these areas, including transmission of content. Successful use of this technique, however, requires an instructor to play multiple roles in the classroom vis-à-vis students. Similar to an instructor's role in collaborative/cooperative learning exercises (Wiener 1986) or encouraging student participation in general (Cohen 1993), instructors utilizing SCDs must focus on *setting appropriate tasks* for student debaters by choosing appropriate questions, *managing the classroom effectively* by setting up appropriate teams and conducting debates efficiently, *coordinating student group interaction* outside of the classroom as teams prepare for the debates, and *synthesizing lessons and information* communicated to the class as a whole after each debate. The pedagogical value of these skills and how they together build critical thinking ability is the subject of the next two sections, followed by an explication of the debate format itself in section four.

A new teaching approach, particularly one that requires a redesign of an entire syllabus, is a big commitment. It is reasonable to question whether it is worth the cost. Section five argues that it is, based on instructor experience with a phased introduction of the format over five years, and on student responses to in-class evaluations of the courses and their teaching approach. As explained further in section five, students consistently credit the use of SCDs as an effective method for encouraging classroom participation and generating discussion over a range of points of view. Moreover, statistical analysis of course evaluations indicates that the use of such debates leads to increases in student value placed on course readings

and assignments when compared to courses where such debates were not used. The broader literature on active learning techniques, discussed in the next section, helps to explain the basis of such positive results.

### Promoting Active Learning in the Classroom

The study of politics lends itself to the use of active learning tools to promote critical thinking. "Active learning" may be contrasted with "traditional" teaching methods of assigned at-home reading supplemented by instructor lectures and written work (whether by essay or examination) submitted by students in response. Active learning involves greater activity on the part of the student through such methods as collaborative learning, simulations, structured debates, or other forms of group and individual work.<sup>2</sup> Several articles have appeared recently to help instructors implement many such approaches, but few have examined the use of debate in political science classrooms—which is surprising given what would appear to be among the most common form of active learning employed by instructors of political science.<sup>3</sup>

The common goal among these activities is to alter the dynamics of the classroom away from one-way imparting of information from instructor to student during class time, and one-way reproduction of this knowledge from student to instructor for purposes of formal evaluation. One study in the natural sciences found that students retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see *and* hear, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they do *and* say together (Stice 1987, p. 293, as quoted in Smith and Boyer 1996, p. 691). This finding reflects poorly on teaching approaches centered on reading and lectures alone. At one level, political science faces a challenge beyond the natural sciences, where lab sessions often require/feature hands-on learning (Wilsford 1995, p. 221). At another level, however, it is precisely in tune with the discipline of political science to engage students in something at the core of politics: debate, discussion, and active listening in order to make reasoned decisions. SCDs can greatly enhance the number of students who actively participate in classroom discussion and the quality of student comments when they choose to speak, as well as students' oral and written performance in graded assignments. Moreover, such debates offer students exposure to numerous political views and a chance to critique actively the work of other students. Thus, SCDs encourage both participation and active learning, leading to greater retention and greater ability to utilize course concepts in future interactions.

SCDs are not meant to supplant other methods of instruction and evaluation—however, research has stressed the need for a variety of teaching styles to be employed to keep student attention (U.S. Department of Education 1984)—but SCDs can be used to supplement other methods of classroom instruction and evaluation in a number of different types of political science courses. It should be stressed to students from the outset that SCDs are not meant as a recruiting exercise for the college debate team but rather are an integral tool to help both instructor and student achieve their goals for the course. Among these broader course goals, apart from conveying content, are the development of critical thinking skills, written and oral communication, research abilities, and teamwork. To be successful outside the classroom, it is important that students learn to convey their knowledge not only through formal essays and in-class examinations but also persuasively in formal

and informal oral communication. Solid preparation for the classroom debates and quality feedback on student performance from peers and the instructor can greatly further the attainment of these broader course goals.

### **Active Learning and Classroom Debate: Five Pedagogical Goals and Techniques**

Before explaining the mechanics of conducting SCDs, it is important to emphasize how such an exercise furthers active learning goals and the promotion of critical thinking. This section considers five areas of learning promoted by SCDs, drawing out pedagogical points derived from the author's experience and from previous studies on active learning and critical thinking. A summary of these points can be found in the table at the end of this section. In brief, however, an instructor should employ several techniques to maximize the return on class time devoted to SCDs over instructor lectures or other traditional practices—specifying clear evaluation criteria, conducting practice debates, employing a combination of group and individual grading, and, finally, drawing on debate skills and points raised to enhance the quality of postdebate discussion in the classroom. Each of these points is developed below, linking theories about active learning to the actual conduct of SCDs in practice.

#### *Clear Evaluation Criteria to Develop Critical Thinking Skills*

On the surface, classroom debates would appear to focus on the development of speaking skills, but in fact a successful debater cannot succeed with rhetorical flourish alone. More important are the lines of argument advanced, the evidence used to support one's case, the organization of one's argument, and one's ability to rebut the claims of the opposing team. The importance of each of these aspects to a successful debater should be stressed to students on multiple occasions for they are not just useful debating skills but useful skills for students and political scientists in general. Table 1 summarizes the

**Table 1.** Evaluation criteria for the oral debate component

- 
- Has the team provided clear, coherent arguments?
  - Has the team met the burden of proof, based on course materials and/or outside research?
    - In other words, is adequate supporting evidence provided?
  - Were presentations clear and persuasive?
    - Are the speakers easy to understand?
    - Do the speakers make eye contact with the audience?
    - Is the team's delivery both dynamic and effective?
  - Effectiveness of argumentation and reasoning
    - Were the arguments and counterarguments presented logically consistent?
    - Do the speakers find flaws or inconsistencies in their opponent's reasoning?
    - Is the team able to confront opposing arguments and rebuild their own case?

Overall, teams should be graded not only on the content of their presentations but also on the clarity and persuasiveness of their presentations.

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*Note:* "Staged" debates, where both sides prepare together both positions, are likely to reduce the ultimate persuasiveness of a team's position on the day of the debate, and therefore it should be recommended that teams not follow this approach.

areas the instructor should evaluate in the oral debate and follow-up written work. Circulation of these evaluation criteria in writing to students further encourages students to develop multiple lines of argument, with evidentiary support for assertions—factors often lacking in essays completed for different assignments before debates are conducted, or in similar classes where debates are not utilized.

In order to encourage students to spend adequate time thinking about both sides of the debate question, students should be compelled to prepare to debate both positions by having the instructor decide which position the student will argue only on the day of the debate.<sup>4</sup> Be prepared that this policy will be deeply unpopular! However, most students will come to value the wisdom of this policy as they learn to anticipate strong counterarguments to their own personal views through preparing both positions.<sup>5</sup> I have observed a marked contrast in the number of lines of argument and degree of support for them in the final essays submitted in my Introduction to Political Science course (where I do not yet use in-class debates) and my Introduction to World Politics course (where I do), which I attribute in part to the active learning lessons students internalize through their debate experiences in the latter courses. This difference persists despite my efforts to correct this shortcoming among many of my nondebate course students by pointing it out in class and stressing it on the typed-assignment handouts.

### ***Practice Debates to Enhance Speaking and Research Skills***

Students should not be expected to earn a significant portion of a final course grade in an exercise they have never seen or experienced previously. A first step toward improving student performance in the oral component of the debate—and to do their best on the assignment overall—is to have them participate in a nongraded “practice debate” and to receive constructive feedback on the initial performance. Participation in a practice debate can be credited as part of a student’s overall course participation grade: thus, if a student skips the practice session or is clearly unprepared, this grade would be lowered; by contrast, exemplary performance or simply a solid effort (even if the performance itself is shaky) would boost this grade.

Experience shows, however, that students generally will not prepare significantly for a debate for which they will not be graded. Therefore, some altering of the debate format is appropriate. For example, simpler questions may be assigned (such as over a well-known topic—like the current war in Iraq), the same question may be used for multiple debates that take place in the same class period,<sup>6</sup> and/or teams of more than the usual three may be considered (with two students sharing one of the debate rounds). Instructors should be up front about the less formal nature of the practice rounds and consider immediate oral feedback about team performance in order to benefit the entire class (and lessen instructor workload). These modifications of the debate exercise also allow practice rounds to take place in fewer class periods than the graded debates, an important consideration for larger classes. Just as with graded debates, however, they provide good opportunities to increase the quality and number of participants in classroom discussion after the debate exercise and to review important critical thinking skills. Thus, the classroom time they require is justified.

### *A Group Grade to Promote Group Learning and Teamwork Skills*

Apart from developing individual critical thinking and speaking skills, students will develop their group management or team skills through participation in SCDs. Instructors should stress to students that the development of these skills is part of the exercise; and that this exercise in many ways resembles “real world” work environments more than typical methods of classroom evaluation.<sup>7</sup> It is not possible to evaluate the true contributions of each team member merely from observing classroom performance on the day of the debate. Some team members will contribute more to debate preparation; others will shine in the actual debate. Therefore a group grade for this performance is warranted. In the event of a serious disparity in the effort or performance among members of a single team, the instructor may consider a modification of the group grade on a case-by-case basis. One might award an extra one-third grade (adding a “plus” to a B, for example) for a particularly strong in-class performance by a single team member, for example. Such adjustments must only be done in exceptional cases, however, lest the idea of a group grade be undermined.

Whether a grade is awarded individually or as a group, it is important to provide useful feedback on the oral component of the debate. The instructor should not underestimate the challenge within three-minute rounds simultaneously to manage the timing of the debate, to listen to the arguments posed, to evaluate oral skills, and to record this all into decipherable notes. It is useful to develop a “score-sheet” in advance, and to type out comments to each team member or group soon after class has ended while the debate is still fresh on one’s mind. Moreover, instructors should assign a letter grade (at least to oneself) immediately after the debate, and not wait until full comments are typed. One can always alter the tentative grade after the comments are written, but it can be hard to reconstruct the debate in one’s head if too much time elapses between the class session and processing of comments and the grade.

### *An Individual Grade to Reward Quality Writing and Careful Analysis*

The required written component to the debate may vary considerably. One approach is to require a group written handout to accompany the debate, though this misses an opportunity to evaluate individual analysis and opinion regarding the question posed in the debate.<sup>8</sup> In an introductory course, an instructor might limit an individual written response to a three-page individual essay outlining the student’s personal position on the topic of the debate, situated in the context of a broader argument supported by evidence. Specific references to course readings should be required in this essay—as they are in the debate itself. The logic of the shorter paper here, in part, is to allow for another written assignment later in the course, one that can benefit from lessons learned from the debate exercise. The individual grades for the debate are then based on a combination of in-class *team* performance and the quality of the personal essay submitted—typically 50% of the assignment grade to each component. It has been surprising how different individual essays have been from team arguments and performance. Early fears of too-similar papers emerging from team members have not materialized in practice.

In upper-level classes, longer papers (five or eight pages) may be assigned as companions to the debate topics, which may be focused specifically as a response to the debate question, or as research papers on related themes. One question to ponder is the due dates of the written component—prior to, the day of, and after the in-class

debate. There is merit in each approach, though having papers due the day of the debate tends to elevate the quality of the debate, while papers due after the debate tend to be enhanced by the earlier debate exchange.<sup>9</sup> In the case of longer essays, the written, individual component may be weighted more heavily than the group oral component. These two different grades may even be listed and weighted separately on the course syllabus.

### *Pointed Questions to Enhance Postdebate Discussion*

SCDs allow not only the debaters of the day a chance to participate actively in class and in their learning but also can actively engage many additional students. This is where the role of instructor as facilitator and synthesizer is most important. The simplest way to proceed after the debate is to open the floor to comments from other students. More productive is to designate a few students in advance as the “first responders” (perhaps students who do not usually participate as much as others, or alternatively by moving down a set roster over the course of the semester), asking them to consider specific questions raised during the debate, such as: “which of the lines of arguments raised by the debaters did you find most convincing?” or “what are two or three of the arguments raised by the pro side?” Since one of the instructional goals of using debates is to demonstrate to students how to differentiate different lines of argument, and how to anticipate strong counterarguments, asking students explicitly in class to pull out such lines of argument from other students’ debates is a useful instructional tool. After a few chosen students have spoken, the floor can be opened to other comments, time permitting. The value of this sort of exchange should not be underestimated. As noted by Cohen: “Frequently, students have not had to deal seriously with ideas significantly different from their own. Not discussing religion and politics is not only folk wisdom; it is a reality of the American political culture” (Cohen 1993, 242). That students see other *students* expressing different views, often with strong emotion and backed up by convincing evidence, can make a stronger impression on students than hearing an instructor convey a list of possible different viewpoints over an issue in a more academic fashion.

It also is possible to encourage active listening to the debates by offering or requiring of all students a written response to the debate, due at the next class period, or to implement some form of peer-grading. These can be valuable exercises, but also can require significant additional work on the part of the instructor. As a middle ground, an instructor might offer this option to select students who cannot overcome their fear of participating in classroom discussion actively (or those with limited oral English skills) or require one written response essay from each student to only one of the numerous classroom debates conducted over the course of the term (either as an opinion piece or as a researched writing assignment in an upper-level course). A colleague has experimented with having students grade each debate in class, writing a few comments to justify the grade. While this seems like a useful tool in principle, in practice many students may not take this exercise seriously, and it can be cumbersome for the instructor to manage. Again, one might consider a middle ground: Another colleague reports success in such an exercise when it is limited to a subset of the class, a rotating group of “evaluators” who complete a comprehensive worksheet about debate performance as part of their classroom participation grade.

In sum, as summarized graphically in Table 2, SCDs can promote broader discussions, encourage students to participate *and* promote better critical thinking and writing—both for those involved directly in each debate and for others in class

**Table 2.** A step-by-step approach to classroom debate: Pedagogical rationales

| Step   | Pedagogical rationale   |
|--|---|
| 1. Explanation of approach and evaluation criteria             | Engage students in learning goals; develop critical thinking skills.  |
| 2. Practice debates with oral and written feedback             | Calm nerves; flag potential problems; develop speaking and research skills; develop group-management skills.  |
| 3. Graded debates with a group grade and team-focused feedback | Further develop speaking and research skills, and group-management skills.  |
| 4. Individual written assignment to follow in-class debate     | Codify critical thinking skills developed in oral debates; reward individual effort and mitigate free-rider problem.  |
| 5. In-class postdebate discussion                              | Draw entire class into each debate exercise; expose students to multiple viewpoints on controversial issues; develop critical skills regarding required course reading. |

as well. Interested in giving it a try? The next section offers a step-by-step primer on one tried-and-true approach.

### **The Mechanics: One Tested Format for SCDs**

Managing the classroom effectively is, of course, important in any teaching setting, but the use of SCDs places several new demands on instructors. Instructors must first master the debate format and effectively communicate it to students; they must constitute appropriate teams and encourage students to play appropriate roles within them; and they must achieve a balance in postdebate discussion between constructive criticism of points raised by debaters and broader lessons that should be conveyed to and discussed among the class as a whole. Time management also is critically important. This section details specifically the mechanics of conducting SCDs using a format that has been employed successfully in a number of different types of political science courses—from integrating SCDs into a syllabus, mastering the format itself, and developing appropriate debate questions to numerous practical questions that should be anticipated.

#### ***Incorporating SCDs into a Course Syllabus***

Incorporating SCDs into a course requires careful planning at the outset. Use of the debate format outlined below requires a minimum of 20 minutes of class time and ideally would use closer to 35 minutes to allow for a broader discussion following each debate since the promotion of a wider, more constructive discussion is an important benefit of implementing this active learning approach. With a maximum of 6 students participating as debaters in each session, a class of 30 students would require five debates to be held to accommodate every student once. Moreover, as discussed above, it is important that students be given the opportunity to develop

their debating skills and to see how a debate works in *practice rounds*, further adding to total required class time. One issue that can be challenging for an instructor planning to incorporate SCDs into a course is accurately anticipating the number of students who will enroll in the course, since this affects the number of class sessions required for debates. Here it is best to err on the side of caution, and to replace unneeded debate sessions after the syllabus has been printed with additional lectures, outside speakers, video supplements, or simply further discussion.

How a graded debate fits with other course requirements also must be addressed in initial course planning. Since the debate experience benefits written as well as oral performance, it can be useful to have a separate written assignment due after a paper based on the debate in order to give students an opportunity to employ critical thinking and research skills learned through the debate exercise on another assignment. As a general suggestion for those teaching on a semester system, instructors should consider conducting practice debates early in the semester (in order to acclimate students to the format and to encourage classroom participation early in the semester), graded debates and related essays midway through the semester (immediately before, after, or in lieu of a midterm examination), and final essays and/or examinations at the end of the semester. Those teaching on a shorter, quarter system may be required to weight debates more heavily in the total grade, or could consider follow-up essays based on the debates.

### ***Introducing the Debate Format to Students***

My colleagues and I have used the following debate format in scores of in-class debates over the past five years, as outlined in Table 3 below. Once exposed to the format—ideally through practice rounds—students quickly acclimate to the structure and pace of the exercise. It is especially important for students to understand the different roles team members can play in preparing for and executing the debate.

Each debate lasts a total of 18 minutes—three 3-minute rounds for a “pro” and a “con” team. Time limits should be strictly observed, which often requires cutting off students midsentence. Although it is tempting to allow students to finish their thoughts, this can drag on longer than expected and therefore compromise fairness to the other side. In addition, a minimum of 15 minutes of subsequent class discussion is encouraged, to facilitate broader student participation beyond the four to six students directly involved in the debate. Three-minute rounds may seem quite short, but unprepared students quickly learn in practice rounds how long this can be. For well-prepared students, having to prioritize actively among different lines of arguments is a useful analogy to the requirement in written papers to prioritize due to space constraints. In upper-level courses I have experimented with 30-second pauses between each round to give students more time for an effective rebuttal, which seems to work well for especially well-prepared and motivated teams but also often results simply in unused pauses.

Two 2- or 3-member teams (3- or 4-member teams may be used for practice rounds) constitute each debate group.<sup>10</sup> Each team's members may be selected *based on* student preferences, or simply assigned—the former is more popular with students, the latter more efficient and better supported by research on group classroom exercises. Varying student level, breaking up social cliques, and other aspects of diversity (gender, race, or ethnicity, for example) of each team are strong pedagogical reasons

**Table 3.** Three rounds of structured debate

- 
- (1a) Team One presents the affirmative position—3 minutes
    - The **argument** (s) is introduced
    - **Evidence** is submitted to support the argument
  - (1b) Team Two presents the negative position—3 minutes
    - The argument is introduced
    - Evidence is submitted to support the argument
    - No direct response is made to Team One
  - (2a) Team One reintroduces the affirmative position—3 minutes
    - **Secondary arguments** are introduced
    - **More evidence** is submitted
    - The negative position's evidence and arguments are **rebutted** (anticipate!)
  - (2b) Team Two reintroduces the negative position—3 minutes
    - Secondary arguments are introduced
    - More evidence is submitted
    - The affirmative position's evidence and arguments are rebutted (anticipate!)
  - (3a) Team One rebuttal—3 minutes
    - Respond directly to opposing team arguments
    - Sum up key points of your team position
  - (3b) Team Two rebuttal—3 minutes
    - Respond directly to opposing team arguments
    - Sum up key points of your team position
- 

+Each team member may speak in only one round. Each team will decide jointly the order of speakers. Each team member must speak once.

\*\*Each round may include one or two speakers for practice rounds only.

for instructors to constitute groups (Occhipinti 2003, 70–71). However, if debates run over the course of several weeks and feature a variety of different topics, it might also be reasonable to constitute groups based on topics of particular interest and timing of the assignment vis-à-vis other student obligations. If this aspect of student choice is introduced, however, instructors should still heed the issues raised by Occhipinti and others since a key component of this learning approach is to push students to think beyond predictable, comfortable approaches.<sup>11</sup>

Once teams are composed, members should be encouraged to adopt a division of labor in their preparation and classroom execution that plays to the team's strengths. For example, the first debaters of each team have ample time to prepare a well-thought-out opening statement. The second debaters, and especially the third, must think on their feet to refute and to respond to the opposing team's arguments, claims, and evidence on short notice. Thus, shaky or nervous public speakers should be encouraged to assume the first-round position. The division of labor each team adopts also plays an instrumental role in how effectively it prepares for the debate—through such activities as researching, developing multiple lines of argument, preparing note cards with supporting evidence, anticipating counterarguments, and holding mock debates to develop presentation skills. Instructors should stress in class that such brainstorming and practice sessions are an important part of the assignment exercise and are necessary to prepare adequately for the in-class debate. This assignment is, in part, about the *process* of developing different lines of argument, weighing the relative strength of each. Instructors also should

stress that individual team members will have to judge *individually* in their written assignments which arguments they will stress. Postdebate classroom discussion might include asking individual students to discuss how they reached the conclusions they did in their preparation sessions. As Wiener discusses with collaborative learning exercises, the instructor should be interested, “in the way the students come up with their consensual answer, the rationale for that answer, the opportunities for debate among groups, the suggestion of how knowledge in a discipline is arrived at rather than in leading students toward an already acknowledged ‘right answer’” (Wiener 1986, 55–56). Such questions are at the core of an active learning approach.

To allow for this sort of reflection and preparation, each team should be given the question to be debated at least one week in advance of the debate,<sup>12</sup> but—as discussed in the previous section—their particular stance (affirmative/pro or negative/con), and thus the presentation order (since the pro position always begins a debate), is determined with a coin toss immediately preceding the debate. Before the debate begins, all students in the class should be reminded of the questions being debated—best is to write it on the blackboard or project it on a screen—and given a few broader questions to consider (or to jot notes on) while actively listening to the debate (as discussed in the previous section).

### ***Crafting Appropriate Debate Questions***

Setting appropriate tasks is important for any active learning exercise that seeks to encourage students to explore and to analyze a question posed, rather than simply search for the “right” answer. With SCDs in particular, it is vital to choose questions that have answers that can be argued strongly from two (or more) sides. An additional level of active learning would be to involve students in the crafting of some of the debate questions. I have done this successfully in upper-level courses where debates fall late in the term, allowing students to develop some advanced knowledge of the subject (and their particular interests within it) before they are asked for potential topics. The specific wording of the question and related readings can then be determined by the instructor. Table 4 lists some questions recently used in courses on international politics. Ideas for questions for other subfields can often be sparked by consulting newspaper op-ed pages, review questions published in many textbooks, or one of several supplemental textbooks published that are organized around debate topics.<sup>13</sup>

Once good questions are crafted, students should be encouraged through careful description of debate evaluation procedures to develop multiple lines of argument in response to the question, supported by evidence found in course readings and outside sources. Teams should brainstorm together possible lines of argument and research them collaboratively. The extent to which instructors require outside research should be considered in advance. Typically, introductory-level course questions should be able to be answered using course reading (often a supplementary reader); upper-level course questions may fruitfully require additional research.

### ***Other Practical Considerations***

Moving systematically beyond the traditional lecture and discussion format requires careful planning. The instructor plays multiple roles in managing SCDs—“set manager,” timekeeper, evaluator, and discussant among them. The previous section

**Table 4.** Sample debate questions for international politics courses

- 
- **Introduction to World Politics (undergraduate)**
    - Resolved: “Terrorism is a global problem and must be addressed at the global level, preferably by an international organization.”
    - Resolved: “Human rights are universal and therefore transcend culture and national boundaries.”
    - Resolved: “Nonweapons-induced threats to the environment, such as so-called ‘global warming,’ should be considered together with other national security concerns.”
  - **American Foreign Policy (upper-level undergraduate)**
    - Resolved: “U.S. government institutions—not nonstate actors—are the most important actors today promoting the further expansion of democracy and human rights world-wide.”
    - Resolved: “A renewed U.S. government policy focus on democracy promotion will lead to a safer environment for the United States in the coming decade.”
    - Resolved: “Leading a multilateral humanitarian intervention in Darfur would be in the United States’ national interest.”
- 

offered advice for managing many of these multiple roles. The practical considerations of “set manager” are discussed here.

Ideally, formal debating lights (yellow for 30 seconds remaining, red to stop) would be available as an aid to students. In practice, a watch with a second hand is all that is necessary. Loudly calling “30” for 30 seconds remaining, and “10” for 10 seconds remaining works acceptably—though it does at times rattle certain students. Classroom characteristics also must be considered when planning for the debates. At a minimum, there needs to be space for six students at the front of class, ideally behind a row of tables or desks. In classrooms with moveable desks, instructors should consider arranging all desks in a circle, to facilitate subsequent discussion—though the time it takes to return a classroom to its original configuration also is a consideration. Such practical questions are easily handled with some minimal advance planning.

Finally, despite the stress placed here on advance planning, it is important to maintain a degree of flexibility and discretion when utilizing such an active learning approach. Apart from the occasional need to adjust a group grade to account for individual contributions (or lack thereof), another issue that unfortunately presents itself once in almost every class is the student who misses a scheduled debate. It is up to the instructor how to handle such cases, but if necessary it may be possible to reschedule the student for a later debate or to accept simply the written component of the debate under extraordinary circumstances. It is unfortunate, however, that this situation also often affects negatively other team members, which may require some form of creative grade compensation. Although rare, it has happened before that an individual student is simply unable to perform adequately in front of a class despite ample preparation, which also may suggest some accommodation on the part of the instructor. This latter issue of “stage fright” is likely to be flagged initially in the practice debate, however, and therefore often can be prevented in the graded debate by addressing this possibility early.

Is tackling all of these practical questions worth the effort? My experience with this technique, that of colleagues, and student responses to the technique as

expressed orally, in course evaluations, and through demonstrated improvement of oral and written skills all suggest that it is. Further research employing more quantitative and comparative indicators is warranted, but initial findings are discussed in the following section.

### **Evaluating the Result: Instructor Observations, Student Responses, and Areas for Further Research**

The active learning literature is replete with assertions that nontraditional approaches to classroom instruction are worth the additional time they often require over traditional classroom lectures, term papers, and in-class examinations. Experience with conducting SCDs in a number of different types of courses suggests these assertions are correct, based on author interpretation of skill differences among students who participated in classroom debates versus those who did not, analysis of statistical data collected from student responses to standardized course evaluations of both types of courses, and cross-tabulation of discursive student responses to open-ended questions posed on evaluations of courses employing SCDs. Still, there is room for improvement in technique, and also on measurement of concrete results. Not all students will embrace equally a new format, and extra care should be taken to reach out to those who express concerns. Moreover, further quantitative data derived through more appropriately targeted questions on student evaluations and, ideally, comparative analysis across similar courses using different instructional approaches would be useful in advancing research findings on active learning approaches to instruction such as SCDs. Some initial findings along these lines are discussed below.

#### ***Postdebate Skill Improvement***

Most undergraduate political science courses seek both to convey useful content (knowledge) about the discipline and the actual conduct of politics together with seeking to improve overall student academic skills such as oral and written communication abilities, research techniques, and methods of analysis. While it may seem that the use of SCDs enhance primarily the latter set of goals—through an emphasis on critical thinking, oral expression, and written follow-up—the integrated use of SCDs also enhances the transmission of content and ability to convey higher level theory by forcing students actively to think through implications of certain theory or arguments and to organize supporting evidence in such a way that they can express their views on the subject directly.

Two methods of measurement allow instructors to see how SCDs contribute to such learning. First, one can compare student skills before and after SCDs are utilized. Second, one can compare student skills between different classes where SCDs are used in one but not the other. To date, findings in these areas are based on instructor experience and judgment, but observations in these areas strongly suggest that use of SCDs is a quite effective method to generate enhanced and better-informed student participation, to develop student writing, and to instill a better working understanding of political concepts and practice. For example, final essays in introductory courses that employ SCDs tend to be stronger than those in introductory courses that do not use SCDs—particularly in the areas of more developed lines of argument and additional addressing of strong counterarguments. In different

upper-level courses where debate papers have been due the day of the debate or at a later date, papers in courses where they were due at a later date have been markedly more developed and supported. This is likely due, in part, to the simple fact that students in the latter case had to—essentially—prepare a rough draft of a paper before the due date in order to complete the in-class debate portion of the assignment, but even this effect is a positive result of conducting such debates. In addition, however, courses that did not use SCDs but required a rough draft of a paper to be turned in prior to the final paper did not show the same level of positive effect, suggesting strongly that the active learning mode of debate preparation contributed to an independently positive effect.

### *Student Evaluations as an Indicator of Success*

Another method of determining the value of an active learning approach based on SCDs is to use standard student course evaluations as an indicator. This section examines data from six courses that employed SCDs with nine courses that did not. Ideally, such comparison would take place using questions specifically designed for this purpose. Unfortunately, course evaluations more often are set by the college administration and are designed with traditional classroom approaches in mind. Occhipinti (2003) notes this as well in the context of cooperative team learning exercises. This is a limitation of the findings presented here. However, of the pool of questions available to be analyzed across courses, one question seems particularly relevant to evaluating the value of SCDs: “Readings and assignments were a valuable part of this class.”<sup>14</sup> As seen in Table 5 below, in all three categories of analysis—total courses (15 total), upper-level courses only (8 total), and introductory courses only (7 total)—courses utilizing SCDs scored higher in this category.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to infer that students at least perceive value in the SCDs approach. The difference is most pronounced in upper-level courses: the three upper-level courses where debates were utilized scored an average of 4.69 on this question (on a scale of 1 to 5), versus an average of 4.41 among the five upper-level courses where debates were not utilized. Moreover, the total score (absolute value) was higher in each of the three cases of where debates were used than the five cases where they were not. The response to the introductory-level courses did not show a significant difference between those courses that utilized SCDs and those that did not. This

**Table 5.** Student evaluation scores for perceived value of course readings and assignments

| Course level                 | Quantity | Scores per course         | Mean score |
|------------------------------|----------|---------------------------|------------|
| Upper level—with debates     | 3        | 4.63, 4.67, 4.77          | 4.69       |
| Upper level—without debates  | 5        | 4.3, 4.31, 4.44, 4.5, 4.5 | 4.41       |
| Introductory—with debates    | 3        | 4.26, 4.29, 4.38          | 4.31       |
| Introductory—without debates | 4        | 4.15, 4.29, 4.32, 4.44    | 4.30       |
| Total—with debates           | 6        | As above                  | 4.50       |
| Total—without debates        | 9        | As above                  | 4.36       |

+Actual wording of survey question: “Readings and assignments were a valuable part of this class.” Scoring is on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 indicating the highest degree of agreement.

finding requires further research to explain, ideally beginning with a more targeted measurement.

Analysis of the value of structured debate should not be limited to one partial question on a standardized evaluation. As a supplement, students who took courses utilizing SCDs in the past year (three courses total) were asked explicitly to comment on the perceived value of the teaching approach to the course in the open-ended response option provided on standardized student evaluations. Tabulation of student responses here was conclusive: of the 49 respondents, only 3 wrote that they thought that the use of debates detracted from their learning opportunities, while 24 thought it benefited their learning, and 20 did not comment either way.

Student responses to classroom debates have been overwhelmingly positive, as conveyed both through oral comments inside and outside of class and on written student evaluations of the courses conducted at the end of each semester. No student in any class the author has taught has explicitly objected in a written course evaluation to using debates as part of classroom instruction, though some criticisms of specific practices have been raised and are discussed below. Reporting of a few comments from past students (Spring 2005 course evaluations) conveys that students perceive that their learning is enhanced by a teaching method that includes the use of SCDs—by exposure to a broader range of viewpoints, students are more informed about an issue and more confident in their writing:

Introductory Student: “I feel that taking this course has helped me form opinions on various important topics. I hope they are also more informed opinions because of the variety of views I heard.”

Upper-Level Student A: “The debates are productive. They allowed me to write a more knowledgeable paper and understand information in a more informed manner.”

Upper-Level Student B: “I went home with two sides to an argument—both equally strong that I questioned my own opinions and grew as a student and critical thinker.”

Overall, students regularly write in written course evaluations that the debates enlivened the classroom atmosphere, allowed students to hear and critically to consider different views on the same subject, improved their ability to generate multiple lines of argument on a given topic, and, in a separate vein, helped many to overcome or to lessen a fear of public speaking. Students also regularly have commented that the number of their fellow students drawn into discussion surprised them. In the words of one student: “Good in-class discussion. Everyone *interacted*. Professor Oros created an atmosphere that encouraged this type of interaction.”<sup>16</sup>

Granted, this type of anecdotal evidence does not conclusively prove the value of in-class debates. Student comments on what and how they learned from this exercise do, however, correspond to findings reported in more comprehensive studies on the value of active learning approaches to building critical thinking skills (e.g., Brookfield 1987; Cohen 1991, 1993; Occhipinti 2003; Paul 1990; Smith and Boyer 1996).

### ***Regular Areas of Student Concern: Suggestions for Instruction***

Of course not all students are satisfied with all aspects of the debates. A small minority of students typically raises concerns that can be grouped into three

categories. Although few students have raised such concerns, the fact that a few tend to raise the same points across different classes suggests that their concerns should be taken seriously, and attempts to reach out to this type of student should be made.

First, some students—especially at the introductory level—complain that the debates take time away from lectures and from discussion of assigned readings. This certainly cannot be denied. Over time, the author has lessened the number of students who express this concern by taking more time in class to explain the pedagogy behind the debate exercise, and by introducing a few “take away points” to each class session dominated by the debates—a sort of mini-lecture. Effective postdebate synthesis or discussion may be especially important to reaching and satisfying students expressing this criticism. For example, during these sessions the instructor can ask students to comment on which course readings were most helpful in preparing for the debate, and why. At times, it also may be useful to go further by asking students to critique individual readings beyond just whether they were helpful—for example, by asking about key terms used, for a summary of the main argument advanced, or for perceived limitations of the work.<sup>17</sup> In this way, students are drawn actively into the process of criticizing a text, and synthesizing information, rather than simply summarizing a text or writing down key points about a text from an instructor’s lecture.

Second, some students—again, especially at the introductory level—object to the weight of classroom participation (including the practice debates and discussion after each debate) in the calculation of the final course grade. Given the anonymity of the student evaluations, it is not possible to say for certain which type of student most often would raise such an objection, but it seems likely that such students are either (1) the smart-but-shy types or (2) the slackers. As discussed above, there are a number of ways to draw out the first category of student in the classroom debate exercise, and there is a clear pedagogic value in doing so. As for the latter category, it can be surprising to see through the employment of an active learning technique such as SCDs how some students who appear to be “slackers” in a standard classroom format can become engaged in classroom discussion. Still, some students will prefer a classroom environment where they can dutifully repeat instructor lectures and course readings on written examinations, regardless of instructor explanation of an alternative pedagogy. To some extent, this must be accepted—though students can be encouraged to seek such traditional formats in different courses early in the term.

Third, some students raise objections to various aspects of the format of the debates, while not criticizing the overall exercise. This was the case with the three students who criticized the debate exercise in open-ended comments reported in Table 5 above. Such quibbles are rare, but include objections to the pro or con position being decided only on the day of the debate, to whether or not there are pauses between each round to allow students to prepare more fully, to the due date and length of the written assignment, and to the group component of the assignment grade. Orally, students often express frustration while learning to coordinate and to work with their groups, but such concerns rarely is expressed in writing—perhaps reflecting the ultimate value students perceive they have derived from the exercise by the end of the term.

In sum, the debate format outlined here seems to serve the purposes both of instructor and student. That it might additionally lead to higher marks for the

instructor on student course evaluations might encourage some to undertake a redesign of an existing course to accommodate this exercise.

### Let's Debate the Conclusions!

It is easy to understand why instructors might shy away from integrating SCDs into their courses: they require a rethink of existing syllabi, raise coordination issues with and among students, introduce a higher level of uncertainty of outcome in individual class sessions and simply might not be feasible for large lecture courses. The potential payoff is great, however. Moreover, apart from pedagogical issues, encouraging students to think through political issues, to discuss them not just with friends but also with those holding different views, and to listen to opposing arguments enhance citizenship skills vital to a resilient democracy and vibrant civil society. Encouraging classroom participation in this way may well encourage citizen participation in the long run: a goal that all political scientists should enthusiastically embrace.

### Notes

1. This includes two graduate-level introductory courses on world politics, four upper-level undergraduate courses (two sections of American Foreign Policy, and two courses on Asian politics), and three introductory undergraduate sections of Introduction to World Politics.

2. Cantor (1953) sets out an agenda for active learning for a previous generation. The number of studies urging a change to this long-standing classroom dynamic surged in the 1980s and 1990s as educators sought to respond to changing university demographics and a growing body of research into effective teaching practices. U.S. Department of Education (1984), Chickering, Gamson, and Barsi (1989), and Carnegie Foundation (1990) are useful compilations of more recent research into the area of active learning. *PS: Political Science and Politics* has been at the forefront of covering active learning techniques for the discipline of political science, though by design such pieces are quite short. See especially Cohen (1991, 1993), Occhipinti (2003), and Smith and Boyer (1996).

3. Leow (1995) and Wiener (1986) offer short discussions of the use of classroom debate in their respective disciplines, Spanish and English.

4. Be forewarned—students can be very clever: initially I determined pro and con positions on the day by flipping a coin and having the winning side choose their preferred position. It turned out that a number of teams had negotiated with their opponents in advance which side to take, allowing them both to prepare only one position. I eliminated such “staged debates” by having the coin toss determine the pro (heads) or con (tails) position for Team One each session.

5. Deciding which position a team will argue on the day also avoids a potential argument about a student being forced to research only a position with which the student does not personally agree—an outcome some instructors would like to encourage, while others seek to avoid in certain moral issues. I have tried debates where students were assigned one position in advance and the result was a far less impressive debate.

6. This should be avoided in graded debates due to the advantage the second-round teams have after hearing the topic debated once before. However, in practice debates this repetition, conversely, can have value in allowing students to see improvement in lines of argument and presentation after earlier groups receive oral feedback.

7. This latter point may not be the first of an instructor's pedagogical goals but can help to get students interested in a new form of classroom management and evaluation. Wilsford (1995) writes convincingly that “most undergraduate education . . . takes place in an interactive vacuum. A typical example: Attend class conscientiously, take good notes, do the reading, and you too will get a good grade—without having spoken to a single fellow student, nor, most often, with the teacher! Most workplaces, however, are exactly the opposite. Most of what

students will accomplish as employees will be collaboratively based, in team projects and in interactions with peers and all layers of an organizational hierarchy” (p. 224).

8. I did employ this approach, however, in a professional master’s program, where many students had experienced a professional group work environment. Thus, the grade for the debate assignment was entirely group based, while other assignments allowed for individual evaluation. Occhipinti (2003) stresses the need for individual accountability in group work—see page 69.

9. This view is based on cases where I have allowed papers originally due on the day of the debate to be resubmitted, with revisions, the following week. Across the board, the resubmitted papers were improved by incorporating new points brought up in the debate and responses to points raised by the paper authors during the debates.

10. It is likely that at least one team of only two members will be necessary due to uneven student numbers; this is preferable to four-member teams. Some students seem to prefer a smaller group and therefore forming two-person teams usually does not pose a significant problem. In such cases, team members should each present one round and share the remaining round.

11. I tend to allow practice debate teams to form almost entirely based on student preferences, using this as a guide to how graded teams might be composed differently if necessary. For example, I separate particularly weak performers in the practice debate into different teams for a graded debate and also work to separate social cliques.

12. I typically provide all of the debate questions for the course early in the semester and allow students to express preferences for particular topics. Thus, some students know their debate question well in advance of the debate date.

13. The *Taking Sides* series by McGraw Hill is specially designed around a debate format—including debate questions and supporting articles—and is updated regularly and available in five different subject areas of political science (*Political Issues, Legal Issues, Global Issues, World Politics, and American Foreign Policy*); other article compendia such as *Annual Editions* and *Global Studies* provide good source materials and also typically include review questions that often can serve as inspiration for debate questions.

14. Here, unfortunately, readings and assignments are conflated, but as they are in fact co-related to the debate exercise, this is only a partial problem.

15. I do not have comparable data for graduate-level courses.

16. Upper-level undergraduate course, spring 2005—emphasis in original comment.

17. Cohen’s (1991) “five-word game” exercise—whereby students are asked in advance of class to come prepared to offer five words to summarize a particular reading—offers another innovative way to engage students in actively critiquing and synthesizing ideas from course readings. See especially pages 699–670.

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