

Critical Debate Collaborative Learning Technique



Day One:

Can be held in your classroom or a library classroom.

1. Propose a resolution on a controversial topic in your field which your students have studied, for example, Resolved: Scientists should be free to pursue genetic research, which could have enormous benefits to humanity, or Resolved: The United States should make it easier for illegal immigrants to legally live and work here. The topic must be engaging and relate to students' lives.
2. Pass out slips of paper and ask students to write their name on the paper and also indicate which side of the issue they prefer, affirmative or negative, without consulting others.
3. After the papers have been collected, explain that students will be required to argue a position that is the opposite of the position they hold in order to deepen their understanding of the issue and clarify their viewpoint.
4. Assign half to the affirmative side of the issue and half to the negative side of the issue. Insofar as possible, assign students to argue the opposite of their beliefs.
5. Explain the ground rules and assign students homework of doing research and then getting together to prepare their arguments.
6. A librarian can be invited to class to share a LibGuide and encourage students to ask for help on their research outside of class time. If time permits and you are holding class in a library classroom, you can schedule this class for a library classroom and have students begin their research.

Day Two:

Can be held in your classroom or a library classroom, if your room will not accommodate the debate set-up.

1. Have the classroom set up so two partners will sit across from two partners to debate. Pair teams representing opposing sides and start the debates (five minutes per side, ten minutes total).
2. Give time to prepare rebuttals (10 min.) Announce and allow time to present rebuttals (such as five minutes each side, ten minutes total).
3. Have a whole-class discussion to summarize the important issues and to give students the opportunity to discuss the experience of arguing opinions they do not hold, and the importance in a democracy of citizens being informed and listening to and trying to understand others' viewpoints.



Possible Written Components:

- A writing component can be added by having students work together on a course management site to draft the four best arguments for their respective sides. They could be asked to share them during the next class period.
- A short follow-up paper could be assigned addressing issues students clarified, surprises they encountered, new information they gained, or sources they used to validate new information.

Concepts

- There are issues so complex that they are difficult to solve.
- There are reasons not everyone thinks the same as you do.
- You can gain a better understanding of issues by looking at both sides critically.

Skills

- Using databases to find articles
- Choosing search terms
- Locating scholarly articles
- Skimming
- Recognizing quality indicators in sources
- Summarizing important points
- Presenting arguments succinctly
- Reflecting on what was learned

Adapted by Deleyne Wentz from Elizabeth F. Barkley, K. Patricia Cross and Claire Howell Major, *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Jossey-Bass, 2005): pp. 126-131.

