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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to survey some of the activities that fall under the umbrella of "debate" at Hong Kong University by focusing on a variety of disparate practices across the university, ranging from one-to-one argument to legal moots, from informal classroom discussions to departmental and cross-faculty debating events and participation in international competitions. It compares views from different sources on the importance of development and demonstration of argumentative oral skills through the medium of English. It briefly investigates the questions of professional relevance and pedagogic purposes of training in oral argumentation within the different departments with reference to cognitive and language skills development, and describes the current approaches and activities supported by these departments as well as the cross-curricular activities of the Debating Society and the English Centre. The paper goes on to consider implications for the university-wide English enhancement programme and to recommend further involvement of the English Centre, both in support of existing faculty and student debate programmes and in furtherance of its own course objectives. (Author)

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Interdisciplinary Dimensions of Debate

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This paper attempts to survey some of the activities that fall under the umbrella of 'debate' at HKU by focusing on a variety of disparate practices across the university, ranging from one-to-one argument to legal moots, from informal classroom discussions to departmental and cross-faculty debating events and participation in international competitions. It compares views from different sources (representing the Departments of Philosophy, Political Science and Law, and the English Centre) on the importance of development and demonstration of argumentative oral skills through the medium of English. It briefly investigates the questions of professional relevance and pedagogic purposes of training in oral argumentation within the different departments with particular reference to cognitive and language skills development, and describes the current approaches and activities supported by these departments as well as the cross-curricular activities of the Debating Society and the English Centre. The paper goes on to consider implications for the university-wide English enhancement programme and to recommend further involvement of the English Centre, both in support of existing faculty and student debate programmes and in furtherance of its own course objectives.

Introduction

Debating is one of the oldest teaching methods. Examples of pedagogic debate range from Greek philosophy schools and mediaeval law to the enduringly prestigious Oxford and Cambridge Debating Societies, among whose ranks a range of past and present British politicians and statesmen are numbered. In spite of, or indeed because of, its illustrious history, it is often condemned as an unrealistic, archaic skill, perpetuated in academic institutions but totally irrelevant to real life.

It is against this background that we consider departmental and faculty attitudes at HKU towards the teaching of debate, which we have chosen to define in its widest sense of more or less structured oral argumentation. Views were elicited from different sources (representing the Departments of Philosophy, Political Science and Law) in order to compare the faculty perspective of what students are required to do in terms of oral argumentation with that of the English Centre. Although the writers of the 'content

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subject' sections make no claim to be applied linguists, their practically oriented perceptions of language needs and their views on the efficacy of current practices are clearly of interest to the planning and implementation of the English Centre's programme of English for Academic Purposes, not least since it is essentially towards what we understand as their 'academic purposes' that such programmes are focused.

This paper emphasises the English Centre's interdisciplinary role; one which is seen, too, in the involvement of another non-departmental source of debating activity, also represented in this paper, namely the Debating Society. This Society, like the English Centre, has a university-wide brief, but has its origin and support within student organisations - the Students' Union and the Office of Student Affairs.

By addressing the questions of the importance placed on oral argumentation by the different departments and the current approaches and training provided, the paper aims to profile some of the departmental expectations in this area. Departmental perceptions of linguistic problems are also considered, so as to reach some tentative conclusions and recommendations on the role of oral argumentation within the programme for English enhancement.

Debate from the Point of View of Philosophy

Role of debate in Philosophy

Debate is discussion governed by rules. The degree of rule-governedness can vary. In mass debates, there may be a body of rules determining who can speak, when and for how long, restrictions on the form of address and fixed penalties for various types of transgression. There may even be rules governing how judges are to award marks for performance. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a debate between two people may be fairly unconstrained, but the discussion will be a little more formal, a little less heated, than a verbal brawl.

The quality of a debate may be assessed along several dimensions. An individual contribution, say, a speech, can be judged for both content and delivery. The content itself may be judged internally for sharpness - profundity of reasoning, aptness of analogy, shrewdness of wit, conciseness of expression, and so on - and externally for persuasiveness and relevance to what has gone before. A set of contributions may be judged collectively for coherence, and for the elegance with which a case is constructed or an opposing view demolished.

Philosophy is made for debate. It is frequently said that philosophy is a skill rather than a collection of putative truths. Getting at the truth may be the purpose of philosophical enquiry, but what characterises the subject is the means for pursuing that end, namely cogent and rigorous argumentation. Such argumentation is typically provoked by deep and contentious issues with a strong case to be made for opposing positions. Since, to put matters crudely, opposing positions cannot all be true, the pursuit of truth will involve attempted refutation, or attempted defence of a position against objections. Hence the prevalence of the dialogue form in philosophical writing (even though the dialogue may be with oneself).

Philosophical dialogue is disciplined in the sense that persuasion is to be effected by rational means, by valid arguments and the exposure of invalid ones, by clarification and the exposure of unclarity. So it is not just that philosophy is made for debate; much of philosophy simply is debate. Speakers at philosophical conferences are commonly required to submit their papers in advance; commentators are assigned to write critical replies, and these are sent to the speakers, who may prepare a written response. Thus debate is formally initiated and, with luck, when the paper is presented a fruitful discussion will ensue. Time allocated for discussion quite usually exceeds that permitted for the presentation of the

paper.

Pedagogic purpose of debate in Philosophy

Debate in Philosophy is a vehicle for the rigorous examination of one's own views and those of others. Although a common conception of debate is of a contest in which one competes for the sake of winning, it is important to recognise that competition is not an essential characteristic of debate. The ancient Sophists made a living from teaching techniques for winning arguments, but they were reviled by Plato and Aristotle, who saw quite clearly that engaging in discussion for the sake of winning is contrary to the philosophical enterprise, for truth is the likely victim.

In both the Islamic and the mediaeval Western tradition, debate became institutionalised as part of philosophical training, and codes for the conduct of formal disputation emerged. Disputations in the arts faculties of mediaeval universities were on the following pattern:

> First, the master in charge puts a yes-no question, giving some arguments on each side. Next, the respondens (sometimes called the promovendus) gives a short solution accompanied by a refutation of the arguments leading to the opposite conclusion. Then the presiding master in his role as opponens argues against the respondent's solution and refutations, and the respondent is allowed to reply. Another master could then argue against the respondent's new position. (Kretzmann et al 1982, p.23)

Walter Burley's *Tractatus de Obligationibus* and Roger Swineshead's *Obligationes* (from, respectively, the early and late fourteenth century) provide evidence of an emerging set of elaborate rules for what argumentative moves are enjoined or proscribed ('obliged') at any stage of a debate. The rules seem to be designed not for arbitrating disputes between opponents, but for facilitating clear, logical discussion. This conception is well captured in the title of William Heytesbury's famous *Regulae Solvendi Sophismata*.

Despite the fact that the code of obligations seems to encourage the orderly and unprejudiced examination of disputed claims, it is well known that many of the mediaeval debates were extremely violent. It is also worthy of remark that much modern philosophical intercourse tends to be highly confrontational, even abusive, in tone. Why this should be so is an interesting topic on which to speculate.

One reason could be that, until very recent times, academic philosophy was dominated by men. According to a popular book by Deborah Tannen, the natural mode for dialogue between men is competitive, so debate will degenerate into a battle of wits (Tannen, 1991). This is, no doubt, an oversimplification, but it is true that many of the terms used for describing philosophical argumentation do come direct from the battleground. We talk of 'attacking an opponent's position', of 'destroying' or 'demolishing' his argument. A feminist author, Janice Moulton, has coined the expression 'philosophical duellism' for this, the prevalent mode of dialogue in modern philosophy. She suggests that it is not the most fruitful or productive mode in which to conduct our philosophical business.

It is not clear to me that Moulton is right. Philosophical debates are sometimes dispassionate and impartial examinations of the issues, but frequently the discussion is or becomes volatile and this is to be expected when people are arguing about views deeply entrenched within their belief-systems and to which they are strongly committed. Some useful pedagogical purpose could be served if the passion for passion were inculcated in students of all disciplines, just so long as commitment is distinguished from dogmatism, disagreement from hostility, resolve from rancour.

Historically, the practice of debate has proved a satisfying means of fostering the kind of intellectual skills and concern for clear, accurate expression which are valued in philosophy - and which

ought to be valued in every other investigatory discipline. There is therefore a clear case for its incorporation within the curriculum of all institutions of learning.

Practice of debate in HKU Philosophy Department

Given what has just been said about the centrality of debate in philosophy, it should be expected that debate figures prominently in the activities of the HKU Philosophy Department. And so it does, to the considerable intellectual and linguistic advantage of our students. We hold regular seminars in which a thesis propounded by a speaker is contested, at length, by members of the audience. Students get a sense of the give and take of argument, of discussion which is unimpeded by considerations of the relative eminence of the participants, and of people happily subjecting embryonic ideas to critical scrutiny. Our postgraduate students conduct a seminar series of their own, but it is open to all.

Another form that debate takes in our Department is individual tutorials in the second and third years. Several years ago, like many other Departments, we employed a system of small group tutorials for discussing student papers and matters arising out of lectures. But, even when the groups were very small, students tended to be unforthcoming. One might ascribe this to lack of linguistic confidence or (vaguely) to some kind of cultural inhibition, and there is a temptation simply to leave the matter at that. However, if one feels strongly that participation in debate is a serious aspect of a student's intellectual development and that a student is just not getting the most out of his university education if he fails to engage in it, one will not, as a teacher, be content to endorse lame excuses for inertia.

The Department of Philosophy's response to the problem was to introduce one-to-one tutorials, initially on an experimental basis. They proved so successful that all teachers now tutor this way despite the fact that it is very costly in terms of time. The benefits are enormous. A student knows that, for 50 minutes, he will have to give an oral defence of the views he has set out in an essay, and he comes prepared to speak. The dialogue is both intellectual exchange and intensive practice in oral argumentative English. Students are informed that part of their coursework mark is determined by the quality of the content of their oral performance. Although we have not tried to quantify the extent to which we are now producing students with significantly enhanced linguistic skills, the results literally speak for themselves.

Last year, the Department of Philosophy introduced two new courses on the history of philosophy. In one of them, called The Beginnings of Philosophy', the teacher, Tim Moore, made an innovatory attempt to encourage students to recapitulate the ancient form of philosophical debate as recorded in the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Some groups of students wrote dialogues and enacted them in front of the class. Other groups took to the streets and engaged members of the public in debate on philosophical (usually moral) themes. In the less bold version of this activity, students drew up a questionnaire, designed so as to elicit the extent to which respondents thought critically, were alert to contradictions in their views, were aware of difficulties for the positions they maintained and had in mind explanations to back their claims. In the bolder version, students selected groups of people and engaged them in debates (lasting an hour or more) and presented their results to the class, answering questions about their principles of selection, choice of topics and methodology, as well as substantive questions about the arguments emerging in the course of the debates.

One can easily imagine fruitful variations on this kind of activity. It would, for example, be interesting for students to tape-record a public discussion they had incited, to transcribe the dialogue in summary form (some very tricky problems of translation could arise here), and to write a continuation of the dialogue which either refuted a position propounded by one of the participants or put it on a firmer philosophical footing.

Students' perception of the effectiveness of these forms of teaching through debate are gauged from an annual assessment exercise devised by our Staff-Student Consultative Committee. (Reaction to

individual tutorials is very favourable.)

Another form of debate that we have recently instituted but not yet tested uses the electronic media, possible now that students have access to terminals across the campus. The Department of Philosophy has established a user group for staff and students, following a suggestion of Dino Chincotta. The Department of Computer Science was the first to establish such a group, but theirs is used mainly for the distribution of homework assignments and general chat. The function of the Philosophy User Group is primarily to provide a forum for philosophical discussion, and several discussion strings can be running simultaneously. The main advantages of this mode of debate are that contributions can be made at any time, that there is a record of the discussion to date, that it provides useful practice in written English and that it is therefore a useful alternative for those whose oral English is shaky or who simply do not think fast 'on their feet'.

Benefits of debate

It is very difficult to find reliable indices of the linguistic or philosophical benefits of debating. I have indicated some rough measures and to these could be added the intuitive judgements of those in a position to compare Philosophy graduates with other graduates from the Arts Faculty (for example, our graduates are reported as being notably lively participants in the Cert Ed. courses put on by the Faculty of Education).

But perhaps the most important benefits of debate are less tangible than linguistic proficiency and intellectual sharpness. Debate serves an important socialising function; it fosters a respect for the provisions within a civilized society for free discussion of alternatives versus forced adherence to authority. A colleague of mine identifies one of the main educational problems in Hong Kong as 'overcoming exaggerated respect for the teacher, which inhibits the progress of the debate we wish to promote'. One of the values of the kinds of debate I have been describing is that it helps to soothe unease students may feel at public disagreement, esp cially (for instance) public disagreement with a 'senior' person.

This end could also be served were students and staff to be on first name terms with each other. Here, I concede, there are difficult cultural barriers to be overcome, partly to do with the 'familiarity value' of Chinese given names. There is also a danger of 'cultural imperialism' in merely seeking to impose what seems right according to one's own cultural norms on to another culture to which those standards seem entirely alien. However, one Saturday night, one of my research students rang me up and said 'Great news, Laurence. I've had a paper accepted by a professional journal.' I take absolutely no credit for this success, but I could not help thinking that, were it not for his exposure in our Department to an atmosphere of debate on equal terms in a spirit of rational enquiry, he might not have summoned the courage even to submit the piece to a learned publication[2].

Debate from the point of view of Political Science

The role of debate in Political and Social Science

Debate in any meaningful sense can only take place within a society where free speech is guaranteed. Such a right to debate is guaranteed in Hong Kong by the Human Rights Ordinance. The significant part is Article 16, which specifically states:

Everyone may hold any opinion that he wishes. He has the right to express himself, and

[2] I am grateful to Mark Fisher, Tim Moore and Christopher New for suggestions relating to this part of the paper.

> give and receive ideas and information through any medium. The law may restrict his rights but only when it is necessary to take into account the rights and reputations of others, or for reasons of national security, public order or public health or morals. (Hong Kong Govt., 1990a)

In the last two years political parties have been created in Hong Kong and public debate on political choice has become more popular. The right to free speech is not, however, unchallenged in the region. For arguments against the concept of free speech and debate based on free access to information (with relation to Singapore), see Mahubani (1993).

Public debate is not just a right, however. According to Friedrich (1963, p.455), it has a crucial function within government:

> Speech and debating are the key to deliberative rule-making, as they are the basis of all parliamentary work of which rule making is of course only a part, though an important one.

It is significant in this context that the Legislative Council of Hong Kong (Legco) has markedly changed its role since the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984. For much of its existence, Legco was merely a rubber stamp for decisions made elsewhere, so that debate, in the parliamentary sense of the term, was almost completely lacking. In the last few years that situation has ceased to be the case.

Increasingly, the political parties and groups within Legco have used the adversarial method to put forward their positions on public issues. (For the rules, procedures and form of debates in Legco see Miners, 1991, Davies and Roberts, 1990a.) In the sense that critical discussion of proposals and actual policies are encouraged, this produces nothing but good. Indeed, an important part of democracy relates to the use of debate to educate and inform, in both formal and informal contexts.

The use of adversarial techniques in debate, however, can produce problems for those who are unaccustomed to the medium. For much of the time, political debates are concerned not so much with the presentation of objective truth as with an exercise in political persuasion, which of its essence involves selection of argument and rhetorical skills not necessarily constrained by objective reality. In some presentations truth, or even an approximation to it, is a secondary or even an irrelevant consideration.

In the light of this increasing awareness of the social centrality of political debate in Hong Kong, we might expect our students to involve themselves much more in the process than hitherto. Students in the discipline of political science have, in the past, found it difficult to analyse the role of rhetoric within political communication. This has always been a problem in the general conceptual approach to the teaching of government and politics, but it is clearly now becoming more important with the politicisation of the Territory.

Students need to be aware of how political debate can confuse as well as educate, and how such differences can influence political thought, attitudes and behaviour. This awareness is, in my view, an essential addition to a purely scientific approach to the study of political science. Far too often students of the subject are unaware of the cognitive dimensions of politics and believe that its study is somehow value-free. Indeed, it has been realised that the purely 'scientific' study of politics has major limitations if studied to the exclusion of other criteria.

If undergraduates can be sensitised into a recognition of the role, both positive and negative, of political debate, then much will have been achieved. In addition, the students at this university are actively involved in civic education in secondary schools, and are thus disseminating information on political developments. (For details of civic education see Hong Kong Govt., 1990b.) It is therefore essential that they should be aware of the nature and form that political debate assumes so that the

dangers of unconscious indoctrination are minimised.

While a degree of awareness can be developed by careful reading of legislative debates, relevant documents, party political platforms and the like, debate is an additional way of making students aware of the ways in which information can be biased. As 1997 approaches, the problem of making informed judgements that are free from political manipulation on political issues is becoming more urgent. Any means that helps towards a critical analysis of political debate in both its negative and positive aspects can only do good.

Appreciation and understanding of the debating process, of course, is one thing; active participation, whether as a learner or in real-life situations, is another. The latter depends crucially on the exploitation of oral communication skills, to which I turn next.

Oral communication in the Social Science Faculty

Within the Social Science Faculty and the University at large, there is considerable concern relating to the weaknesses of our students in certain areas of oral communication skills, particularly in the English medium. Whether these problems are rooted in the Cantonese culture, lack of opportunity to practise English, attitudes towards first and second languages or to faults in the secondary school system is not within the parameters of this paper. The fact remains that there are students who are unable or unwilling to use spoken English as a means of communicating.

It is often argued erroneously that, as testing of students is mainly through the written medium, there is no problem per se. This stance, however, ignores the intellectual and practical consequences of such a deficiency. In the first case, a marked reluctance to engage in debate and discussion during tutorials and seminars is not uncommon. Students may be unable or unwilling to pose questions or to pursue points they do not understand - to the detriment of their critical and analytical skills. While such reluctance is to the detriment of students' performance in this university, staff are quite familiar with the problem. When those students go on to study abroad for further degrees, however, they may find themselves at a disadvantage in the cut and thrust of the more oral tradition in British, American and Commonwealth universities.

As for the practical consequences, there is the criticism that many students applying for employment do not do themselves credit at interviews. Lacking spoken English ability, they fall back on prepared answers. When faced with unanticipated questions their inability to argue a point and sustain the argument is woefully evident. It is not just at interview that the standard of oral English may not be sufficient; communication in the employment situation itself may well require fluency and competence in presenting ideas.

Given the degree of concern, however, at English language deficiencies and the general lack of confidence, there are different initiatives for improvement within the Social Science Faculty. First, different approaches to encouraging more open discussion may be taken in seminars and tutorials by individual lecturers. Second, it is hoped that the Academic Communication and Study Skills course provided for the Social Science Faculty by the English Centre will help to improve oral as well as written performance. Third, the voluntary involvement of some students in the activities of the Debating Society is a positive move which is supported by the Political Science Department through substantial involvement in coaching.

Since of the initiatives listed above the first is a matter of individual practice and the second will be dealt with later in this paper under the English Centre section, I will direct further comments to the third initiative - that of the Debating Society, with which I have been involved in the capacity of coach for several years now. Although the Society is not limited to any particular faculty or department, the special association with Political Science is seen in the fact of our university team's competing in the

(inter-varsity) Political Science Debate.

Practice of formal debate in HKU

In the University of Hong Kong, debating in English is well-established. The Debating Society takes part in competitive debating both within the university and between HKU and other tertiary institutions, on both a national and an international scale. These international and 'inter-varsity' events in particular give debating a high profile, attracting patronage from within the community at large, commercial sponsorship and a large following among the student body generally, who support the team and attend the various debating competitions in the Territory.

Debating activities in the University of Hong Kong in general have increased quite dramatically in the last ten years. The main external catalyst for this development has been the number of tertiary institutions in the Territory who have organised sponsored debating competitions. Allied to that has been the marked internationalisation of debating in the Asian Pacific region. In the Association of South East Asian Nations, in particular, the medium of debating, whether as linguistic showcase or democratic forum, has been given increasing attention not only by academic institutions but by government and private bodies as well.

These debates give students the opportunity to compare their skills with those of other tertiary students in Hong Kong, and with those of visiting teams from abroad. They serve as an example to students who otherwise rarely see their peers voluntarily using English. Because the focus is on argumentation and the aim is persuasiveness, native-speaker fluency is not the main criterion for performance. Thus Hong Kong teams compete on an equal basis with native speakers as serious and respected contenders. In recent years the HKU team have won contests not just against other second- or foreign-language contestants but also against British and Australian university teams.

Within HKU, inter-faculty debates take place each year. These competitions should not be underestimated; as extra-curricular events, they are student-motivated and organised and generally well-attended by the student body at large. Faculty honour is a strong motivator of student performance, though competing teams regularly display widely differing degrees of skill. An obvious point here is that students who have had previous instruction in debating or argumentation, or who have taken part in moots, tend on the whole to turn in a more competent performance.

The quality of student debating at HKU

The HKU debating teams represent an elite of student debaters, who may spend up to three years of their university careers participating in regular debates and intensive training sessions. Their regular successes represent a great deal of time and effort, not just of the debaters themselves, but also of graduate ex-members and of individuals from the university staff who, on a voluntary basis, attend training sessions or provide other support.

When they first present themselves for debating training, the most obvious weakness of many of the students is their almost total lack of self-confidence. Their willingness to participate is evidenced by their self-selection for debate training, but it is still the case that they expect to be told what to say and have little faith in their own judgement.

This first major problem is aggravated by the second - their reluctance to use English. In comparison with Singapore, Malaysia or the Philippines, for instance, where students regularly use English to communicate among themselves, the gap is huge.

Further problems at a more detailed level are:

1 An inability to grasp the essential question in the debating proposition.
2 A lack of understanding of the need for rhetoric in a presentation.
3 An inability to grasp the points made by the opposition and hence to deal effectively with those points.
4 An over-reliance on a prepared set of notes and a refusal to modify the position in response to an unexpected position taken by the opponents
5 In rebuttal, an inability to pinpoint quickly the essence of an argument and a counter-argument.
6 A lack of humour, combined with fixed ideas which may be irrelevant.
7 Choice of the wrong line of argument.
8 An enormous amount of time and effort wasted on checking obscure and irrelevant detail.

These weaknesses are obviously not shared by all the debaters as some have had experience of debating before, but they represent the typical student profile in his or her first few exposures to the medium. Also, to some extent, those who present themselves for debating are self-selecting and generally represent a higher level of oral skill than is the norm. However, it cannot be denied that even the better students show residual traits of the kind described above.

Debating in the context of learning

As to the generality of my observations on students' performance, many, but not all, of the weaknesses in debating are reflected in tutorials. In many cases it is difficult to elicit responses from the participants - which largely undermines the role of the tutorial and seminar itself. That is, of course, unless seminars are seen merely as exercises in prepared written work by the students with oral comments from the tutor and without verbal input from anyone else,

The argument at this stage is that the teaching of debating skills can make a significant contribution to the wider pedagogic process in the educating of undergraduates, whether in the Faculty of Social Science or in the context of tertiary studies at large, especially where English is a second language.

In terms of oral communication, it is argued, exposure to debating provides a means of addressing some of the weaknesses regularly displayed by our students. It can improve the students' ability to communicate more confidently in oral situations such as tutorials and seminars. Beneficial effects are extended to written work where practice in debate preparation helps the student to identify the meaning of an essay question and to write in a balanced form, by weighing the opposing views before reaching a final conclusion. In reading too, debating encourages practical research and efficient and critical condensation of sources. In terms of a liberal education, the use of topics dealing with current issues widens the students' base of knowledge outside the narrow confines of subject field and hence encourages interdisciplinary thinking. In short, debating has a valuable part to play in reducing the inevitable weaknesses displayed by our undergraduate students.

A word of warning, however: detractors of debating regularly fail to grasp both the direct benefits of debating and the indirect rewards of its use. This may be partly explained by the well-intentioned but misguided efforts of some in the educational field. Worthy attempts to increase interest or involvement in their subject may, through lack of experience in teaching debating, fail to maximise the medium's potential. Especially where students are given no preparation, they merely go through the motions, producing superficial arguments. As a result, boredom and disillusion set in and the process is rejected in favour of safer, more familiar approaches.

Debating is not seen as a time-saving device. It requires singular commitment, thorough training and preparation. In order to avoid the aforementioned errors in teaching debating, the situation could be remedied by training courses for staff who wish to familiarise themselves with the ways of approaching

debating. Neither is it argued that debating should replace more traditional methods wholesale. It cannot and should not attempt to place itself on a pedestal. However, debating is a complement to the learning process and should be regarded as such.

In conclusion to this section: it is often mistakenly believed that the innate conservatism of our students is a barrier to improved teaching methods. The acceptance of this assumption itself often proves a barrier to beneficial innovation. It is argued here that if we as educators can bring ourselves to recognise that students are more receptive than conventional wisdom would have it, then attempts can be made to improve the generally weak points in our student body. This paper has, admittedly, dwelt more upon the negative points and has not made reference to our undergraduates' known strengths in many fields. However, if the intention of higher education is to produce students with wider capabilities than those found at present in our institutions, then this article will be seen as a move in the right direction.

Debate in the context of Legal Studies

Debate in the Faculty of Law

While the importance of oral skills and persuasiveness in competitive or adversarial settings in the real world of legal practice is undoubted, there is surprisingly little emphasis placed on orality within the Faculty of Law. There are really only two areas in which students may be obliged to engage in dialogue in English.

The first is in tutorials or small group sessions which are designed to stimulate discussion of legal concepts and their application. The reality, however, is that they are too often little more than mini-lectures punctuated by occasional comments from the stronger students. The 'Socratic method', teaching law largely through a process of rigorous dialogue (whether in lectures or small groups) and favoured by many strong North American law schools, is generally and for a variety of reasons (cultural, educational and linguistic) considered impractical.

The second area of orality relates to formal course requirements of which moots are the chief example, although recently students of advocacy have also been required to participate in a conventional 'debate' involving an issue that is not necessarily law-related. This paper will, however, focus mainly on the traditional LL.B. 'moot'.

Moots, in one form or another, have been a staple of legal education in common law jurisdictions for many decades. They derive, it is said, from the mediaeval disputatio, a procedure by which a student was required to prepare himself by advance study and then to sustain or attack a proposition in the face of opposition equally well-prepared (Sutherland, 1967, p.73). In the model most widely used now, the moot simulates a case argued before an appellate court.

Typically, the moot centres round a fixed fact pattern meant to represent the findings of fact of the lower court (trial) judge. The facts normally raise two distinct legal issues and are ideally crafted in such a way that the issues will be arguable or 'borderline', ie truly moot. Students participate in teams, two counsel for the appellant and two for the respondent, so that each issue will be addressed by a student on either side. Counsel for the appellant argue first, each for about twenty minutes. Counsel for the respondent follow. One counsel for the appellant has a right to reply briefly.

The Faculty's compulsory moots are argued in real courtrooms in the Supreme Court building (the Faculty lacks its own moot courtroom) before panels of three 'judges' who may be barristers, solicitors, government lawyers, actual judges or legal academics. At the conclusion of the moot the judges usually decide the case, with reasons, and, more importantly, provide a critique of the students'

performance.

Some moots are more realistic than others, if real appellate advocacy is taken as the model. Most are unrealistic in that the fact patterns tend to be cryptic and sketchy - merely concocted for the exercise - and that the number of issues and the time for argument are artificially limited by considerations of fairness and by administrative constraints. In addition, while moot judges are almost exclusively concerned with testing the students' knowledge and analytical powers, real appellate judges normally focus on achieving the correct result, deriving whatever assistance they can from counsel to reach that goal.

While moots are meant to be adversarial, student mooters tend to be less concerned about (or even conscious of) their opponents than would be the case in a traditional campus debate (or, for that matter, in a real appeal). Moots differ from the traditional debate in that a vital element is interrogation of the participants by third parties - judges are expected to put questions to the student counsel on both sides. In addition, there is virtually no scope to take issue with facts - indeed, the facts are normally regarded as unalterable - so that there is arguably somewhat less room for creativity and invention, though skilled advocates would maintain that novel and creative legal arguments win cases.

Most students in the Faculty of Law have had no comparable experience prior to their compulsory moot. They will have had no formal advocacy training apart from a brief preparatory lecture and what is contained in a short faculty handbook on mooting. The prevailing view seems to be that what is really important in the process is the student's knowledge of the area of law involved, supplemented by thorough research of the issue. The exercise seems to be seen as a test of his legal understanding and ability to reason - simply an extension of his education in the classroom.

While the primary purpose is to enhance the student's legal reasoning and analysis skills, it is argued that 'the appellate litigator must learn the basic principles of public speaking so that the manner of delivery does not detract from what is being said' (ABA Committee, 1985, p.140). This is indubitably more problematic in the case of second-language speakers.

The function of moots in legal education

The pedagogical aims of moots in law school curricula are poorly defined if they are defined at all. This is perhaps not surprising as there tends to be little offered in undergraduate programmes (certainly in English jurisdictions) that could be called formal instruction in appellate advocacy. The focus is usually on how the moot participants' performance should be evaluated, rather than on how moots ought to be used as a teaching device.

It is nonetheless assumed that moots are an important part of the course of study. One observer of the moot court programme at Harvard put it rather grandly:

> To suppose that this elaborate procedure is no more than a complicated extracurricular law game or the teaching of a practical trade technique, is to miss the point by a wide margin. This 'disputation' is an academic process as old as universities. When any man, lawyer or not, has learned to perceive the precise point of cleavage between two contentions, has learned to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant considerations bearing on these contentions, has schooled himself to accept reasoned opposition in good grace, he has gone far on the road to becoming a rational being and a useful adjuster of other men's controversies. (Sutherland, 1967, p.344)

If a catalogue of the educational aims of law school mooting were to be made, it would probably include the following:

First, to encourage thoroughness in research, creativity and sound organisation, including putting the argument in a logical manner.

Second, to develop legal reasoning and analytical abilities: specifically, the ability to identify material facts, to apply substantive legal principles to facts, to distinguish authorities on the law or on the facts, to apply authorities by analogy, to develop senses of discrimination and flexibility, to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments, and to consider facts and laws in their historical, social and economic settings. Indeed, it has been argued that as an exercise in application of the law and judicial creativity mooting can be more effective than conventional classroom techniques (Dobson & Fitzpatrick, 1986).

Third, to provide experience in responding to an opponent (or a judge) in an adversarial, if not overtly combative, setting.

Finally, to provide a simulation of appellate advocacy as a preparation for litigation practice. This function of mooting, however, is not without its critics. 'Legal realists' such as Jerome Frank dismiss the relevance of mooting to professional training:

> [This] ersatz teaching ...resembles what would be the incompetent training of future navigators if restricted to sailing small boats on freshwater ponds (quoted in Kalman, 1986, p.170; see also ABA Committee, 1985, pp.129,146 and Davis, 1981, pp.683-4).

Nonetheless, the professional advocate must possess an ability to collect, organise and analyse material; an ability to persuade and to think on his feet; an understanding of human nature and the ways of the world; and mental and physical stamina (Wilkinson, 1991, pp.1-6). As a preparation for professional practice, mooting certainly does no harm to those who aspire to become advocates, although it is fair to say this objective is normally regarded as secondary in undergraduate law school moot programmes.

A competent legal argument (whether in a moot or in a real-world legal setting) is characterised by two main elements: on the one hand, content, including organisation; on the other, delivery, including linguistic aspects. It should be appreciated that, historically, the first element has come to assume far more prominence than the second. While the first legal experts were orators or indeed rhetoricians, the role of rhetoric in English law has over time become marginal and subsidiary to the substantive law and the force of logic (Goodrich, 1986, pp.194-5).

In the modern world of appellate litigation, content - in the sense of thorough preparation on the facts and on the law, and anticipation of opponents' arguments - is pre-eminent. Linguistic ability is taken for granted. Arguments are presented in businesslike, rather than oratorical, fashion - at least in American and some Commonwealth jurisdictions. Many would maintain that in English jurisdictions, including Hong Kong, the trappings, niceties and formalities of speech are perhaps more favoured than is the case elsewhere. This may have had an influence on student mooters in the Faculty, who occasionally give the impression that preoccupation with formalities can overcome lack of content.

The quality of student mooting at the Faculty of Law

Obviously it is difficult to generalise as to students' performance. A few students display exceptional mooting skills that belie their lack of experience. However, many Faculty members and moot judges from the profession would maintain that the quality of mooting of the average LL.B. student at the Faculty is somewhat below the standard of law school mooting in other jurisdictions.

The main problem is undoubtedly content. Moots expose the average student's deficient legal

skills: insufficient knowledge of the substantive law, weak powers of analysis, inability to balance and assess the weight of issues, and inflexibility of thought. As Erskine (1819, p.597) remarked, emphasising the primacy of this solid grounding: 'No man can be a great advocate who is no lawyer. The thing is impossible.'

Other difficulties, lying ostensibly in the area of organisation, may actually be symptomatic of the same root cause. Fuzzy arguments, inability or unwillingness to simplify or summarise, unclear conception of purpose, obsession with voluminous case authority to the exclusion of common sense, and fixation with formalities - all are telling signs of an inability to come to grips with the issues or, worse, to understand the case at all. In many instances, a judge's request to 'summarise your argument in two minutes' results in consternation and confusion. The reality (seemingly never grasped by students) is that in moots as in professional advocacy the most effective arguments are often surprisingly simple and uncluttered.

A related problem is one that might be labelled 'set-piece thinking'. Even when a student has thought about the issues, there seems to be a reluctance to stray from the perceived safe haven of one's own prepared case. The symptoms become obvious: script reading, failure to respond or even to pay attention to the opponents' arguments and thus a failure to defuse them, and, worse, failure or inability to respond to the judges' queries. Most students experience immense difficulty when forced to abandon their set-piece arguments to consider, for example, changed facts and hypotheticals ('Would your submission differ in any respect if the trial judge had found instead that...?'), or even to recognise 'lifelines' thrown from the bench ('Isn't it your position that...?').

There are several reasons for the poor mooting performances of Faculty of Law students. In the traditional conservative English LL.B. curriculum, there is little if any emphasis on teaching advocacy skills. Those (relatively few) who do gain experience in voluntary moots have some modest advantage, but generally students cannot visualise the process and have little guidance.

The root cause for the under-performance of students in mooting cannot simply be attributed to the lack of formal advocacy training or experience in the LL B, though such training might of course improve matters to some degree. The main problem, however, - weakness in legal skills - pervades students' legal studies generally. The reasons for this are complex, and may be related to cultural, educational and linguistic circumstances.

Most LL.B. students in Hong Kong come directly from secondary school, and are arguably not ready to cope with professional studies. Many students' English language skills are simply inadequate to allow them to adapt to, absorb and benefit from traditional legal studies to the extent that, or on the level that, more mature, native English-speaking students do. The reality is that many students struggle to pass exams using methods that served them in secondary school, without acquiring a sufficient grip on substantive law or, even more important, on legal analysis and method.

It is perhaps ironic that moot judges at the Faculty are instructed, in assessing students' performances, not to take into account English language facility. It is thought that this would be unfair; very few students possess language skills strong enough to allow them to present an argument of a high standard in moot court. But elegance in the actual presentation or delivery of the argument is no more than cosmetic. The borderline case will be won or lost (and the mooter's performance judged) on the basis of preparation, knowledge of substantive law, quality of analysis, ingenuity, anticipation, perception and the myriad other ingredients that make up the real lawyer. It is in this area that the debilitating effect of inadequate English language skills will be felt most, and will have to be addressed.

Debate in the context of English Language Studies

Oral argumentation in the English Centre

The courses run by the English Centre are of a rather different category from those in the Philosophy, Law or Political Science Departments. By 1994/95 the Senate schedule of June, 1991 envisages that all undergraduates in HKU will have an English enhancement component in their curriculum, which will be provided for the different faculties by the English Centre.

As part of the enhancement programme, oral argumentation has been specifically targeted in recent curricula developed by the English Centre for Social Science and for Arts students, particularly in the area of testing. Both courses require an assessment of students' oral performance in tutorial-like discussion before joining and after leaving the course. This assessment aims to measure students' improvement as a result of their first-year studies.

In class, course materials have provided for at least one assessed formal discussion/debating performance per year. Apart from seminars, which are left largely to the discretion of the teacher and may be devoted to a variety of different purposes, students may or may not have further direct practice of oral argumentation.

Since rhetorical organisation is an important focus in the teaching of writing skills, it features strongly in essay-writing classes. Although this aspect is well-addressed in the current materials, the more confrontational aspect of argumentation has been especially problematic. The role of opposing arguments and differing opinions, of personal stance and of refutation especially, has raised problems for teachers and materials developers alike (Pickard, 1993).

As far as oral skills are concerned, the current focus in English for Arts and Social Science courses is on oral presentations, in which the combative element is generally lacking. Questioning of the student presenters or any challenging of their stance from the floor are options rarely exercised on these occasions.

Student problems in argumentation

Although they may well engage in lively discussion outside class, HK students are often reticent in tutorials. When students are invited to 'discuss' (in test situations and in content subject tutorials), their performance often leaves much to be desired.

In such situations, 'interactivity' is all too often reduced to the superficial acceptance of any stand whatsoever - 'I agree with him/her'. This formula regularly precedes a round of repetitions and reformulations of so-called 'personal' opinion (often a blatant rehash of the recommended source).

On the other hand, teacher encouragement and elicitation tends to create a very predictable pattern of interaction, with few student-initiated 'turns'. In the English Centre's testing procedures, the teacher has, in recent years, been instructed to play a minimal role in eliciting responses and as far as possible to allow students to volunteer their contributions. In practice, a surprising number of students choose to remain silent, or to make a minimal contribution.

A feature of many classroom discussions is that there may be no division or variety of opinion. Instead of polarising participants, opinions tend to converge on what is thought to be a safe, moderately liberal line. While this integrative strategy may well facilitate harmony in a particular social group, it is not always appropriate in the academic context. Such ready consensus gives students little practice in dealing with potential or real disagreement, in challenging or defending a stand - abilities taken for

granted elsewhere as worthwhile educational objectives.

There would seem, therefore, to be potential for development of the teaching of argumentation, and a need in this area which the English Centre could usefully address. One such attempt is the present small-scale piloting in the EAS course of a set of materials concerning 'Controversial Issues'. Another closely associated approach to the teaching of argumentation would be to encourage the inclusion of debating as a regular component of the curriculum.

Debate in the ELT context

In the broad ELT context, the generally-favoured 'communicative approach' appears to under-rate formal debate. When it is found, it is all too often grouped under 'Games and Discussions' as an occasional stand-by or filler for a less-than-serious Friday afternoon slot. In such cases, the aim of the exercise is 'free expression' of whatever intellectual quality, while the nature of the topic under discussion is generally considered to be of minor importance, and real controversy an actual drawback.

Ur (1981) lists among the 'disadvantages' of debate 'the limited scope of its subjects (social, political or philosophical controversies)'. She does concede, however, that "many students (particularly the more adult and intellectual) enjoy this kind of discussion; and the skills of oratory and dialectics are learned and exercised in debate better than anywhere else."(p.105)

Resistance to debate as a classroom activity may in part derive from a common but mistaken identification of 'genuine discourse' with 'real conversation' (Ur, op cit, p.6). Conversation is by no means the only 'genuine' discourse type within the academic community, where seminars and tutorials require very different communicative skills.

Indeed, criticism of debate on the grounds of inauthenticity is particularly ill-justified in the case of tertiary studies, where social, political or philosophical controversies are the order of the day (see, for instance, the Philosophy and Social Science sections of this paper). As far as tertiary studies are concerned, one problem faced by students is that their secondary school English skills may not be instantly transferable to tasks which require a more 'academic' approach. Argumentation is a case in point: in the academic sense it is a far more principled procedure than 'argument' in the conversational or lay sense of 'disagreement' or even 'exchange of insults' (cf the 'verbal brawl' mentioned in the Philosophy section of this paper). The confrontation of opposing views in an academic setting seems to require not just a definite stand on a particular topic but also a skilful, systematic defence of it. Some teaching of the appropriate moves is necessary if students are to perform better in academic argument.

Although regularly grouped together, discussion and debate are not synonymous terms. The debate format has different advantages over discussion, for several reasons. Unlike informal discussion, which allows for free opinion, both role-play and debate assign certain positions to the speaker and limitations within which to operate. Participation is on a predetermined pattern which even the most reluctant of speakers will not be able to avoid, or the most forthcoming to monopolise.

Unlike academic essays, which are essentially heavily subject-focused, the topics of debates may legitimately range from more or less specialist areas to issues of general interest. Far from detracting from content studies, awareness of current issues represents an essential, though not always explicitly formulated, component of any tertiary curriculum. In this way, debating appears to offer access to the language of argumentation without the problem of inherent superficiality, or the burden of intensively subject-specific content.

Pedagogic aims of debate in English language studies

The argument proposed here is that, linguistically and pedagogically, debate can be exploited at

the tertiary level for a range of academic skills - skills of analysis, rhetoric, expression and presentation - and for a variety of purposes.

1. **Analytical skills.** These are primarily cognitive and concerned with the in-depth analysis of a particular issue through consideration of the relevant data. Understanding of an issue is encouraged in the case of debate by preparation of both sides and by the arbitrary allocation of stand.

As a team effort, the formal debate structure also encourages full exploration of the issues entailed by a certain stand in allocating different internal argumentative duties and participant roles to each member of the team. It encourages original and independent lines of argument to be taken by each speaker in support of an overall position.

In common with written discourse it necessitates a high degree of preparation and organisation, including the anticipation of opposition points. Unlike written argument, however, the inevitable degree of unpredictability in the opposition's line and the rebuttal opportunities offered by the moment require unplanned deviations and on-the-spot flexibility. Close monitoring of the other team's performance and direct confrontation of points at issue are prerequisites for successful rebuttal and spontaneous improvisation. In this rather limited sense, debating is highly interactive.

2. **Rhetorical skills.** Reference to training in rhetoric is not always well received, owing often enough to the multiple ambiguities of the term itself. But attacks on rhetoric are not new - since Socratic times (explored earlier in this paper), there has been a tradition of resistance to rhetoric as the 'mother of lies', and by extension as devious and unfair use of language.

If we follow Leech (1983), however, a standard definition of rhetoric is in the broad sense of 'public persuasion'. And as a form of persuasion debate is certainly among the most stylised. It is in this very stylisation, however, and in the full procedure of argument and counter-argument that some guarantee of balance and objectivity is to be found. TV advertising or charitable appeals may attempt to persuade, but without any of the carefully counter-balanced weighing-up of the debate structure.

The right to reply is guaranteed in debate. No matter how thorough a debater's preparation, it is unlikely to convince unless it addresses the issues and challenges raised by the opposition. It is probable that a training in the rhetoric of debate thus provides not so much a practice in the art of deception but in the evaluation, perhaps in anticipation and counteraction, of argument that is intended to persuade.

In a more specifically linguistic sense, 'rhetoric' is often used to describe those skills concerned with organisational features of argumentation - the marshalling of facts (assertion, substantiation); their use for a particular purpose (exemplification, generalisation) - and of listener orientation (introducing, summarising, recapping, concluding). The cognitive development and awareness of such features of disputation will relate to written and oral argumentation alike.

3. **Expression skills** Such skills entail the realisation of conceptual intentions through the medium of language. In the case of second language use, it may well be that the language employed for the previous processes is not the target language, although it is clearly desirable that EAP encourage a direct move from thinking to expression in English - cf Professor Harris's 'intellectual fluency' (Harris, 1989). Student informants report that the pressure of time in debating, especially in rebuttal, as opposed to essay-writing discourages the use of translation.

Expression skills include the use of accurate grammar, lexis and pronunciation as well as an appropriate academic formality-level, where a smattering of optional archaisms ('honourable judges' or 'worthy opponents') should not detract from the fact that by far the larger part of language used is a combination of the general 'core' with some features (evidenced in more rigorous citation or

substantiation and careful attention to logical coherence and cohesion) which are particularly associated with the academic register.

An essential part of debate training is the analysis of actual performances and subsequent feedback, for which video recording is particularly useful. Such replay gives an opportunity for focused language improvement, at whatever level, since teaching can directly address student needs and, with the evidence of those needs directly confronting them on video, students will take correction a great deal more seriously.

4. **Presentation skills** This final skill category includes features of 'public speaking': certain aspects of pronunciation, such as features of discourse prosodics (for example stress, tonal variety for emphasis or effect); special language effects, such as strategic redundancy (repetition, parallelism); and para-linguistic skills, such as the proper use of notes, eye contact and the like.

A proficient public performance creates a favourable impression of the speaker as competent, confident and in control of the medium. Along with other displays of verbal virtuosity - sermons, campaign speeches, lectures, story- or joke-telling, or even Labov's Black American 'sounding' contests - debating joins the ranks of speech events where the overriding purpose is to gain recognition and approval for an extended 'floor-turn' (Labov, 1973). In such cases, an aesthetic or emotional response or appreciation is expected, not just a data transfer, and it is to this end too that the communication is focused.

In end-of-course questionnaires on current courses, students regularly cite improved confidence in oral presentation as their major achievement (in spite of the intended priority given in the curriculum to written skills). There is little doubt that demonstrable gain in this area is possible, and indeed regularly achieved. This success could be extended into the area of oral argumentation, which should arguably transfer better to seminar discussion skills and add an extra disputative dimension to the non-combative oral activities at present undertaken.

What, then, is the negative side of debating? The disadvantages of debate as a 'communicative activity' (in the by now traditional language-teaching sense) derive principally from its rigid framework. Such discourse features as turn-taking, agreement and eliciting response are highly distorted by the set format. So too the proposition/opposition structure encourages a polarised, though controlled, confrontation. A pragmatic inauthenticity is encouraged in that, unlike discussion in a normal social context, the preferred outcome is not the negotiated compromise. These limitations mean that in practice debate can never replace discussion as the principal medium for informal exchange of opinion. In training and skills development, however, debating has much to offer students over regular discussion in view of the systematic treatment and active participation it encourages.

Conclusions

Perceptions of language competence

The perspective that has been sought in this paper is of staff perceptions of student needs and performance across departments and disciplines, in relation to the purpose and efficiency of a particular teaching device. While the objectivity of any evaluation may be questioned as a consequence of informants' individual roles, a virtue is made of the fact that, in this paper, such judgement is a result of personal experience in specific debate programmes. As far as generality is concerned, the informants present their particular involvement as an integral part of their subject teaching and as such related to departmental policy.

It should be acknowledged that little exists in the way of hard evidence or analysis of student problems in oral English at HKU. Yet it is clear that, in the departments represented here, English skills have a widely recognised role. A popular opinion among both students and teachers seems to be that there is widespread weakness. The impression is, at worst, of marked reluctance to engage in discussion; at best, of superficial fluency disguising contributions that in fact lack accuracy or are off the subject.

These points are all too easily confused: one popular argument seems to be that students are reluctant to speak because their English is weak, and that it is weak because they are reluctant to speak. Interestingly, the departmental contributors to this paper appear to agree, though not always explicitly, that some of the students' apparent problems in English may well be culturally influenced. One sensible explanation offered for apparent passivity is that a cultural tradition of respect for teachers and a reluctance to outshine their peers appear as simple unwillingness to engage in discussion.

Another angle on the apparent clash between students' general socio-cultural norms and those of the academic community is that in our own teaching methods we may well contribute to the confusion. It is suggested that teachers play a role in perpetuating the status differential of informant/informee roles so that students have little exposure to the more equally status-balanced co-discussant roles (see the Philosophy section in particular).

In support of this view of speaker roles, it is interesting that many students when addressing their classmates in English Centre presentations favour a rather patronising approach: "I hope you will pay attention to what I am going to say", followed at the end by "And I hope that the topic is now clear to you". In adopting this tone they are identifying with what they see as the role of the teacher. One consequence of this view is to discourage interaction; any form of questioning by the audience in such circumstances is perceived as highly risky, since it clearly implies lack of attention on the part of the informee, or lack of clarity on the part of the informant.

It is clearly an over-simplification to claim that such class-room roles and patterns of interaction are simply due to some assumed aspect of the students' own culture, ie that 'Chineseness' values passivity. Some attention on our own parts to deliberately changing pedagogic patterns of interaction, to encouraging critical evaluation of ideas, and to reinforcing expectations of challenge and defence, may play a vital role in the remedying of passivity in our students.

The practice of debating in HKU

In what ways is debating used within HKU?

1. **Professional formation** The first function of debating as described in this paper makes a distinction between professional formation and pedagogic aims. In both law and political science there exists a clear professional application of the skills of debate, namely in advocacy and, for the future politician, in various types of political assemblies. In these departments the practice of debate is externally motivated by professional requirements (though clearly to a different degree in the different departments since only a small proportion of political science students will actually take up politics as a career).

It is likely that the future relevance to students of the skills of public speaking, however, can be extended to those in other departments that were not canvassed during the present exercise: it is probable, for instance, that any kind of business studies department would anticipate their graduates being heavily involved in future professional activity that entailed an immediate application of the skills we have associated with debating.

2. **Testing** The pedagogic purpose of debate, however, is not viewed solely as practice for a particular professional application. Another current practice at HKU relates to testing. This function associates

debate with evaluation procedures and formal course requirements (see Law and English Centre sections above). Such uses emphasise performance, and are not concerned to maximise the teaching potential of the medium.

3. **Teaching** As part of an undergraduate programme, however, debating appears to fulfil a more genuinely instructional function - as part of the exploration, by challenge and defence, of the foundations of knowledge. In all subjects, the research aspect in particular involves the testing of new ideas against existing frameworks.

The perceived value of debate as a teaching device relates to the rhetorical organisation of content. It is interesting to note that, from the evidence of the subject sections, organisation may not be readily associated with English language skills. This may in part be due to a limited view of English teaching as preoccupied mainly with sentence-level grammar rather than with textuality or text grammar and extended discourse features.

4. **Extra-curricular activity** A fourth function, most apparent in the cross-faculty, extra-curricular incidence of debating competitions, is the voluntary use of debating by the students for quasi-recreational purposes, to practise their English and to interact with their peers.

In spite of the oft-repeated complaint that students are reluctant to speak English, HKU's Dean of Students, Bill Brandon, confirms the apparent anomaly of widespread student interest in debating in English. It would seem that cultural characteristics seem to favour debating over other forms of English use: Hong Kong students appear to enjoy public competition and team activities where the individual may shine, but with the reassurance of peer-group approval (an avoidance of the 'tall poppy' syndrome). The celebrity status of the Debating Team is evidence of this.

That the initiative for such events should come directly from the students is of particular significance in view of widely assumed attitudes towards English use among students. In this way, student debating competitions appear to encourage similar effects to the Philosophy Department's one-to-one teaching, by providing ways of encouraging students out of their patterns of linguistic reticence and into more dynamic models of student/student and student/teacher communication in English.

What has been demonstrated in this paper, then, is that various types of debate are pervasive throughout HKU at several different levels of academic activity. The current practice of debate extends significantly not just to the teaching of the departments and faculties but also to the voluntary activities of the student body. Culturally, teamwork seems to suit the students' present social orientation and to form a bridge to academically appropriate behaviours.

An interesting feature of current debating activities is that they are not limited to the university campus or to the tertiary institutions. School and university debating competitions act as a focal point and exemplar of students' English language proficiency. Public presentations contribute towards a better image for our students and help prepare them to meet the outside world - an aim which will come more and more to the fore the closer they come to graduation. As one debater recently addressed his audience, "Ladies and gentlemen, honourable sponsors and future employers ...".

Debate programmes appear to provide links to the community at large. Adjudicators and sponsors are drawn from the ranks of HK's prominent figures - judges, politicians, businessmen and academics - while newspaper coverage and RTHK TV shows present student debates to a wider audience. For whatever historical or practical reasons, there is broad-based support for debate as a worthwhile pursuit.

Developing debate within the English enhancement programme

As we have seen, debating activity takes place in various pockets throughout the university. In view of the fact that debating already enjoys widespread support within the university, it provides a valuable opportunity for collaboration among faculties, English Centre and student bodies. It is suggested, therefore, that the English Centre could usefully extend its activities in support of existing debating programmes within faculties and departments.

The potential of debate as a teaching device, though widely recognised outside ELT circles, has for too long been underestimated by the ELT profession at large. This oversight should be remedied in the context of tertiary English language studies, where debating provides useful access to the study of argumentation and fulfils a need that is not so readily met by other teaching techniques. As far as English Centre course objectives are concerned, debating could be further exploited in the enhancement programme where it is consistent with the general aims and objectives of EAP courses.

In line with the objectives of academic communication, we would hope for transfer of oral debate skills to tutorial and seminar performance (given an appropriate climate for student-initiated turn-taking and for more active discussant roles to be taken on). It is interesting that, while student-needs analyses have drawn attention to the need for written skills, student questionnaires over the last few years reflect the student perception of primary weakness in oral fluency. This perception reinforces the subject teacher views expressed earlier in this paper.

Although debating is primarily an oral activity, it is not unreasonable to look for a spin-off effect mentioned in the previous departmental sections - the potential cross-reinforcement of oral and written argumentative skills. Oral argumentation can be directly linked to academic writing - the main aim of EAP classes and the most important skill for academic success. While writing is undoubtedly our main target for academic purposes, however, too much homework or a large proportion of writing in class meets with understandable opposition in a heavily loaded curriculum. Any oral activity which might have beneficial repercussions on writing therefore warrants attention.

In terms of topic selection for enhancement activities, another major advantage of debate is that it provides issues that can ensure student interest and personal involvement, and these, although not subject specific, are generally perceived as part of the students' wider education. It is to be hoped that student motivation and involvement in English enhancement activities might be raised by introducing relevant and interesting issues as the vehicle for language improvement and development of academic communication skills.

For these and no doubt other reasons - to be observed and monitored in practice - focus on oral argumentation through debate training could prove a useful field for exploitation in cross-curricular courses provided by the English Centre in English for academic purposes[3].

A final comment

The comparisons made in this paper, between different departments and the English Centre, are an attempt to learn from each other and to share experiences from very different standpoints. They also aim to encourage inter-faculty dialogue with colleagues, an initiative which is actively pursued by the English Centre. This paper has merely scratched the surface of one particular area of inter-disciplinary collaboration - oral argumentation. It is to be hoped that further work in this and other areas of

[3] I am much indebted to Wesley Wong, whose help with both general student views and answers to specific questions has been of great value in the preparation of this paper.

inter-disciplinary concern will promote greater understanding of the interaction of language and subject content in the context of second-language tertiary studies.

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