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ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY: A Cooperative Way to Debate

The purpose of this article is to introduce and explain a cooperative learning technique, Academic Controversy (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1996), also known as Cooperative Controversy, Structured Controversy and Structured Academic Controversy, that has potential for use in intercultural education and has support in both research and theory. Briefly, the technique involves a cooperative form of debate in which groups of four, divided into twosomes, take turns representing two opposing views on an issue before attempting to reach a consensus on the issue. The present article begins with a brief review of the potential educational benefits of controversy. Next, the Academic Controversy technique is described. In the final part of the article, variations to the technique are discussed, with some of these variations informed by cooperative learning principles.

Why Use Controversy

Controversies arise when people's views differ on matters considered important by all involved. Some educationists avoid controversies, fearing that they may lead to serious rifts, even violence, between students and may also arouse the displeasure of administrators and community members. However, for several reasons, educationists in many subject areas and at many levels of education utilise controversies.

(1) Perhaps the most frequently cited benefit of controversy is that it spurs thinking. Dewey (1916, p. 188) explains, "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity and sets us at noting and contriving Conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity".

(2) Controversy can also provide a glimpse of the complexity of the real world and encourage a tolerance of ambiguity (Budner, 1962).

(3) Encounters with a range of views on a complex issue can lead students to reexamine and possibly revise their own ideas (Piaget, 1975).

(4) Working with others to present one's position(s) in a controversy and hearing the views of others may lead students towards greater appreciation of the benefits of cooperation (Deutsch, 1949).

(5) Enjoying the struggle involved in researching, grasping and presenting views can provide intrinsic rewards that spur similar future engagement with the same or other controversial topics (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

(6) Controversies promote deep processing of information and ideas, rather than memorising of information for exams (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

The Academic Controversy Technique

A common technique for using controversy in education is the debate. However, one criticism of debate is that it creates a situation of negative interdependence among students, i.e., those on each side of the debate attempt to defeat those on the other side. For instance, if one side lacks information, this benefits the other side. Thus, what hurts one group helps the other. This feeling of negative interdependence may discourage sharing among groups and may lead to ill will.

In order to promote a feeling of positive interdependence (similar to the “All for One and One for All” slogan of the Three Musketeers) across all sides of a debate, Johnson & Johnson (1995) developed the Academic Controversy technique. While techniques in Education often have multiple variations, the basic steps in Academic Controversy are presented in the next paragraphs. The length of time for each step will vary based on such factors as the amount of time available in the curriculum, the amount of preparation students do outside of class and students’ level of engagement with the topic and the activity.

1. Students are in groups of four divided into pairs. Each pair is assigned one of two positions on a controversial topic, such as should humans eat non-human animals. For instance, one group of two might be assigned the position that we should eat our fellow animals, while the other twosome is assigned to argue in favour of the view that we should not eat them. Students are allotted time to prepare to present the best possible case for their assigned position, regardless of what their own personal view might be. While sharing and developing ideas with their partners, students may come to see the value of cooperating with others (Deutsch, 1949).
2. Each pair take a turn to present their assigned view, while the other twosome listen and take notes.
3. Each side engage in rebuttal of the points made by the other side and defence of the position which they had presented. Here is one of the places in the technique that might engender the cognitive conflict that Piaget (1975) spoke of. Furthermore, students need to think deeply to defend their assigned view, with facts, examples and reasons (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).
4. Here is where Academic Controversy begins to differ from the typical competitive debate. Students exchange positions and repeat Steps 1, 2 and 3 with their new assigned position. Again, they make their best effort to represent their assigned position. Just to be clear, Step 4 is actually three steps, as students repeat Steps 1, 2 and 3, but this time they represent the view that they had previously argued against.
5. Students are no longer part of a group of two, nor are they any longer assigned a position. Instead, in their group of four, they attempt to forge a common position, which

could be one of the two views assigned earlier and could also be another position on the issue. For example, they might decide that meat eating is okay but should only be done once a week. Students prepare to share this view with others. If a group do not reach a consensus, despite a sincere effort to do so, they prepare to report the various views of the group's members. Perhaps, this step provides students with opportunities to develop their tolerance for ambiguity, as they see a variety of possible options on the issue being addresses (Budner, 1962). Addition, it is hoped that students will enjoy the process of engaging others in vigorous, meaningful discussion, thus finding the activity to be intrinsically motivating (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dewey, 1916).

Variations and Viewing Academic Controversy Via Cooperative Learning Principles

Academic Controversy, like other cooperative learning techniques, can be varied in a number of ways. In this section, we look at possible variations, including those suggested by cooperative learning principles. For this purpose, some of the cooperative learning principles proposed by Jacobs and Goh (2007) will be used.

In Step 1, students form groups of four. Which students should be in which foursome and in which twosome within each foursome? The cooperative learning literature, as well as the literature on intercultural education, generally recommends the principle of 'heterogeneous grouping'. Factors that can be used in forming heterogeneous groups include past achievement, ethnicity, sex, nationality and first language.

In Steps 2 and 3 of Academic Controversy, pairs present to other pairs. Two cooperative learning principles relevant here are 'equal opportunity to participate' and 'individual accountability'. Equal opportunity to participate seeks to avoid the problem of one pair member taking over the group and not affording to their partner opportunities to interact with the other pair in the foursome. This problem may be especially important if differences exist in the typical interaction patterns of the various cultures of group members. The principle of individual accountability addresses the opposite problem: one partner attempts to evade participation. Ways to promote equal opportunity to participate and individual accountability include:

- (1) using turn taking procedures, possibly timed so that each turn is approximately of the same length;
- (2) allowing adequate time for students to prepare and perhaps asking them to write out their points or to represent them visually, e.g., in a mind map;
- (3) scaffolding via teachers, peers and materials so that lower achieving group members are indeed prepared to take part and so that their partners recognize that they are in fact ready to do so;
- (4) involving students in choosing topics so that they will be more likely to want to participate;
- (5) encouraging students to use a range of modes, other than speaking, to present their views, such as visuals, role plays, and poetry/song (Cohen, 1994).

In Step 3, as well as in the later steps, the cooperative learning principle of ‘explicit teaching of cooperative skills’ can be useful. This involves students in thinking about why such cooperative skills as disagreeing politely and praising others are important, how these skills can be deployed and how well the students themselves are using the skills in the Academic Controversy activity. Sometimes, students and teachers need to understand that cooperative skills will take different forms in different cultures, e.g., cultures differ on the appropriateness of eye contact during discussion. Another aspect of teaching cooperative skills concerns providing time for students to reflect on how well they worked together in their groups. This time may enable students to better understand why peers act as they do and how best to communicate with them.

Related to three of the above mentioned principles of equal opportunity to participate, individual accountability and cooperative skills is the cooperative learning principle of ‘maximum peer interaction’. This principle has two aspects: quantity of peer interaction and quality of peer interaction. Quantity of peer interaction looks at how often students interact with each other, rather than listening to the teacher, interacting with the teacher or working alone. Quality of peer interaction looks at whether students are employing thinking skills when they interact with peers, in contrast to participating in some kind of rote exchange, e.g., practicing a multiplication table. The quality of the exchange can be seen in the incidence of, for example, planning, giving of explanations and examples, questioning, making of predictions and proposing of compromises.

In Step 4, group members switch their assigned positions. When I have used Academic Controversy, sometimes students ask to skip Step 4, because they believe that all they will be doing is repeating what the other twosome said in Steps 2 and 3. I offer two reasons for the value of doing Step 4 with the same partners:

- (1) Students should be able to think of other supports for their assigned position or other ways of explaining those supports.
- (2) There is great value in “putting oneself in the shoes” of people with each of the two assigned positions.

However, what I have also done and what is suggested by D’Eon and Proctor (2001) is what they call Double Switch, i.e., pairs not only switch positions on the issue under discussion, they also switch the pairs with whom they are debating. For example, the twosome who initially argued in favour of meat eating change places with the twosome in another group of four who were arguing for the same position.

In Step 5, culture again plays a key role, because of different cultures’ views of the value of consensus and how to achieve consensus. Here, the cooperative learning principle of ‘positive interdependence’, explained earlier, becomes particularly important. Based on this principle, educationists encourage students to take the very reasonable view that they “sink or swim together” with their groupmates. Indeed, when students feel that all their groupmates are important and that by helping groupmates they are helping themselves, positive interdependence can be said to exist among group members.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) propose nine ways of promoting positive interdependence. One of these is for groups to understand that they have a common goal: in this case, to try to strive for a consensus of the issue they are debating and to be ready to share that consensus or whatever their members' views are with others. A second means of promoting positive interdependence involves facilitating the establishment of a group identity, something similar to what sports teams and other organisations attempt, e.g., via a special name for the group, a mascot, a motto or a handshake or cheer. To allow time for this identity to grow, groups often stay together for a while, such as ten weeks, rather than students changing groupmates every time they work together.

Finally, one other cooperative learning principle that can inform the use of Academic Controversy is 'cooperation as a value'. The concept involves students seeing cooperation, rather than competition or individualism, as the first option in their dealings with others. Thus, cooperation as a value attempts to spread the feeling of positive interdependence beyond the small group to the entire class, beyond the class to the school/educational institution and so on until positive interdependence embraces other countries and species. One means of infusing cooperation as a value in Academic Controversy might be to move beyond talking about the issue being debated. In addition, students also discuss how they – alone, with peers and with others – can act on the beliefs they expressed in Step 5. For instance, if a group decides that that reducing meat consumption would be worthwhile, they also discuss how they and others can do that and then implement their plan and monitor the implementation.

Conclusion

The successful use of Academic Controversy has been reported in a wide variety of subject areas (D'Eon & Proctor, 2001; Green & Klug, 1990; Hammrich & Blouch, 1998; Johnson, Brooker, Stutzman, Hultman, & Johnson, 1985; Overby, Colon, Espinoza, Kinnunen, Shapiro, & Learman, 1996). When I first read about Academic Controversy, it was love at first sight, as the competitive nature of the typical debate, with both sides looking to derisively attack any perceived weakness in their "opponents" so that they and they alone could emerge victorious clashes with my view of what education should be.

Thus, I was anxious to use Academic Controversy, as it maintains the educational benefits of controversy, while blending in the benefits of cooperation, in order to facilitate an environment that encourages everyone to take part, to learn, to support the learning of others and to address important issues. Intercultural Education offers many controversial issues for students to debate. The supportive environment promoted by cooperative learning techniques such as Academic Controversy makes it more likely that these issues can be addressed not just as academic topics to debate in class but also as real world matters that require real world actions.

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