Practicing Critical Thinking Skills Within a Pedagogy of Renewal

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Abstract: The COVID-19 "pivot" created challenges for instructors in adapting their teaching strategies to the various forms of technology available for virtual delivery. One positive outcome discovered for teaching an introduction to debate class was the use of Blackboard's discussion board feature to assess student learning regarding understanding and application of concepts of evidence and reasoning for an introduction to debate class. This essay provides an account of how I adapted my teaching strategies, the assignment for student participation created to assess student learning, and positive outcomes for students needing time to process arguments and respond in a virtual forum.

Introduction

What was gained and lost in the pivot from face-to-face class discussion to virtual class discussion in an introduction to debate course? To answer this question in a positive way, I discuss what made taking an introductory debate class difficult for some students before the pandemic, how using the discussion board feature in the Blackboard learning management system became necessary to maintain student engagement, and what I discovered as relevant and effective uses for the discussion board in place of traditional classroom question and discussion practice I utilized before March 2020.

Taking an introductory debate course without prior debate experience can seem daunting for some students. Many years ago, a position paper I authored for a developmental conference on forensics, quoted by James McBath (1984), described the complex cognitive scaling involved in developing proficiency in advocacy:

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> Creating an argument is the most complex cognitive act a student can engage in. To create an argument, students are required to research issues (which requires knowledge of how to use the library), organize data, analyze the date, synthesize different kinds of data, and evaluate information with respect to the quality of conclusions it may point to. To form an argument after researching, organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating, students must understand how to reason, must be able to recognize and critique different methods of reasoning, and must have an understanding of argumentation theory—the logic of decision making. The successful communication of arguments to audiences reflects another cognitive skill—the ability to communicate complex ideas with words. Finally, the argumentative interaction of students in a debate reflects an even more complex ability—the ability to process the arguments of others relatively quickly and to reformulate and adapt or defend previous positions. (pp. 8–9)

Students are not only trying to develop their cognitive understanding of abstract reasoning processes but deal with the affective and behavioral dimensions of advocacy in a 16-week class among other courses and social pressures. Although it might be possible to break all (or most) of the skills involved in advocacy down into discrete cognitive or communication practices, doing so might intimate students even more. The pivot during the pandemic forced me to think about what could be done (or tried) to cultivate the practice of discrete critical thinking skills.

I discovered that the virtual class discussion board feature in the Blackboard learning management system facilitated formative assessment of learning regarding recognition of types of evidence and reasoning. Prior to the pivot, I used post-debate discussions as opportunities for me to see how students formed an understanding of how different types of evidence and reasoning were used in the debates. However, class discussions assume ideal circumstances of student engagement. Post-debate discussions of argument strategies assume students understand strengths and weaknesses of logical, ethical, and rhetorical strategies, and can comment on those strategies in the immediate aftermath of listening to a debate in class. Some students might choose to remain silent or let other students lead the way. Some students are introverted, self-conscious, lacking in confidence, monitoring cell phones, or distracted by other interests. Transactionally, if there are no points assigned to participating in the discussion, and no clear example of what counts as an adequate response to the invitation to discuss argument strategies after a debate, students might forego participating in discussion. Despite my encouragement and gentle prompting to contribute, post-debate discussions have constituted inconsistent episodes of learning; lively on some days, challenging on others.

At the time of the pivot, I had no experience in working with virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Webex, or Microsoft Teams. Prior to the lockdown, I could not imagine a future where having this knowledge would be essential to delivering courses I taught to this point in my career. In the short time I had to transition to online learning, gaining training in a new technology seemed overwhelming; although in retrospect, learning how to use virtual platforms, now required of me, seems manageable. I chose to utilize Blackboard's discussion board feature to present the texts of speeches by students and to facilitate discussion of the arguments made by the students in their speeches. While not ideal for the experience of debating with the possibility of imminent response, nor for the limitations imposed on discussion immediately after the debate, the decision yielded an opportunity to assess student learning in ways I had not considered before the pandemic. In this respect, the shift required my students and

I to try something different in the way we approached learning about types of evidence and tests of reasoning.

My version of "introduction to debate" is organized in two parts. The first half of the semester covers material from the textbook using lecture and group activities to gain knowledge and practice applying concepts. The second half of the semester is devoted to debates held in class. Topics are announced 72 hours in advance. Students are paired into teams and encouraged to research issues in the news prior to the debate to develop arguments. The second half of the semester asks students to develop behavioral knowledge in the role of advocates and judges. Students not assigned to debate or judge are encouraged to take notes in each debate and expected to discuss the argument strategies with the small amount of time remaining after class.

Shifting from a face-to-face teaching format to a virtual asynchronous format allowed me to create an expectation for participation for each student not assigned the roles of debater or judge while also overcoming obstacles to students contributing in the immediate aftermath of the debate. Students had time to process the debate, could re-read the speeches to search for examples, did not need to struggle to remember what was argued, or need to consult notes of debates made with limited practice, and could contribute without fear of immediate evaluation on the part of classmates (Brookfield, 2006, see Chapter 11). What I gave up through the more spontaneous, immediate response of a debate face-to-face helped me gain a greater degree of learning through making the debate accessible as a text in extended time, available for study. Prior to the pandemic I had believed that students would find the discussion after the debates useful as opportunities to apply concepts of evidence and reasoning, and for some students, an opportunity to discuss argument strategies. While I would try to draw out students who seemed satisfied to let others comment, some students found it difficult to contribute to a discussion immediately after the debate.

What is difficult about learning different types of reasoning and evidence? First, students need to be able to remember, identify, and recognize, and then be able to distinguish between different types of evidence and reasoning. As I note below, these skills require practice. Second, once these skills are developed, students can begin to make choices about what kinds of reasoning and support materials to use in creating arguments. Different types of support for claims have strengths and weaknesses. For example, statistics are powerful ways of talking about the extent of a problem but less engaging as support than a vivid example; examples, while appealing to the psychological understanding of an issue can be limited in persuasive value since an example illustrates only one instance (Campbell et al., 2015, see Chapter 4). Third, weighing evidence and reasoning for potential persuasive value in relation to one's audience reflects Bloom's higher skills of evaluating support materials used in creating arguments. Although an introductory class limits progress on this learning outcome, unless memory and application skills are in place, the possibility of creativity seems unlikely. Fourth, the promise of developing this skill depends on students having the opportunity to practice the critical thinking skill of recognizing different types of support materials, and then evaluating them as a higher order skill. Greater practice in evaluating support materials contributes to developing skills in analyzing the potential persuasive and strategic value of support materials. For instructors of introductory debate courses, the design issue is twofold: (1) how to create opportunities for practice and (2) how to create accountability on the part of students to practice?

Three types of debate propositions were covered in class: fact, value, and policy. Students were informed that debate propositions would be provided by the instructor and drawn from news articles in recent issues of the *New York Times*. Debate propositions were posted in Blackboard's "Announcement" feature for the entire class to see. Students scheduled to participate in a class session's debate were given "url's" of news articles as prompts when debate propositions were announced. Debate teams were composed of two students each; three students served as judges of the debate and were required to complete ballots assigning speaker ranks from 1–4 and speaker points on a five-point scale for six advocacy skills (evidence, delivery, organization, reasoning, analysis, and refutation) and provide a rationale for the decision. All other students not debating or judging were assigned to participate in a class discussion via Blackboard's discussion board feature. Students' names were listed for each role to indicate who was debating, who was judging, and who was "attending" and assigned to identify effective examples of reasoning and evidence use. To ensure that both the affirmative and negative team's arguments were discussed, half of the students "attending" as audience members were assigned to comment on the affirmative's arguments and half were assigned to comment on the negative's arguments.

Two student learning outcomes (SLO) were pursued in the assignment: (1) Identify types of evidence by correctly matching a type of evidence with an example to illustrate that type of evidence from one of the speeches posted in the discussion forum. (2) Identify forms of reasoning by correctly matching a type of reasoning with an example from one of the speeches posted in the discussion forum. These SLOs were based on Bloom's original (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) taxonomy of learning: *understanding*—students were asked to recognize, identify, and explain accurately types of evidence and reasoning in the debate speeches posted to the discussion board; and *application*—since each debate was over a different issue from the news students had to interpret examples of language use in new situations. Each debate was a new opportunity for students to convey their understanding of examples of evidence and reasoning. The assignment did not require students to remember the list of types of evidence and reasoning since they were listed in the prompt for the discussion board assignment. However, if students could not remember definitions of types of evidence or reasoning, they could review their text (Rybacki & Rybacki, 2012) or notes. Nor did the assignment require them to justify their choice of "best" or "effective" use of evidence or reasoning in comparison to other examples used. The two kinds of learning from Bloom's taxonomy would be understanding and application, appropriate for an introductory course in debate.

More importantly, I developed examples of contributions to the discussion board that contained the qualities of understanding and application that I was envisioning for the assignment. As noted below, the examples name the types of evidence and reasoning claimed to be effective, refer to the example of evidence and reasoning by quoting or paraphrasing from the speech transcript posted in the discussion forum, and provide a minimal explanation of why the evidence or reasoning was effective. The examples set a standard for a contribution that would reveal the accuracy of a student's memory of the concept used, comprehension of the concept applied, and cultivate practice in the application of the concepts so that the student's understanding could build the "muscle memory" of cognition involved in understanding reasoning processes at the unit of individual argument forms in support of stock issues. Last, I did a word count so that the student could get a sense of the length of the posting needed to address the content expectations qualitatively and quantitatively. If the student desired to gain points for attending class, despite the transactional nature of the assignment, posting in response to this assignment allowed me to read and evaluate the accuracy of the student's understanding and application of the concepts. The discussion feature in Blackboard allowed me to give feedback for each class session so that a student who desired to improve understanding of the concepts could do so with each posting. Below, I have presented

the detailed prompt posted on Blackboard in the "Announcement" field so that every student was sent the information for the class session's debate. The assignment and examples of how I hoped students would respond is provided below.

Assignment for Attendance and Participation

Please read the debate speeches posted in the Blackboard Discussion Board for the debate on the assigned date. After reading the speeches, identify the strongest example of reasoning and piece of evidence for the side you are assigned to comment on. Types of reasoning and evidence are listed below: Post your response to this prompt on the Discussion Board for the date listed for the debate.

Your posting should be no fewer than 100 words and no more than 150 words. Your posting should identify an example of *one kind of reasoning **and** one kind of evidence supporting a claim*.

You need to identify the type of reasoning and quote or paraphrase from the debate the example of that type of reasoning being used.

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Types of reasoning and types of evidence are identified below. If you cannot remember the definition/description of these types, you should review your notes and/or relevant chapters from the textbook.

Types of Reasoning

Parallel case? Analogy? Generalization from one or some to more? Classification?

Division? Reasoning from sign? Cause and effect?

Types of Evidence

Fact? Statistic? Example? Testimony? Definitions? Principles and values? Credibility?

Examples of Postings for Attendance and Participation

The best example of reasoning for the Aff/Gov team was the argument regarding *cause and effect* of pollution. The Aff/Gov team relied on cause and effect reasoning to show that lead poisoning would occur from chemical runoff of mining operations under the Trump administration's new rules. The best example of evidence used was *testimony* provided by a former Environmental Protection Agency administrator under the Obama administration. The former administrator said that in his judgment, the lead runoff from mining operations would threaten the health of people downstream. Because he has served as an administrator in the EPA and because employment in the EPA requires expertise and experience, this was an effective use of support. (114 words)

The best example of reasoning from the Neg/Opp was an argument based on the form of reasoning known as *classification*. The Neg/Opp argued that there were two legal frameworks involved, federal and state level. They argued that not all states should be classified as in need of protection from water pollution. Further, they argued that if a state's governor or state legislature thought that more stringent protection was needed than that provided by the Trump administration's new rules, they could pass such a law. The strongest piece of evidence they provided came from a member of the Trump administration who offered this distinction as a legal *fact*. Since this was not a case where the Trump administrator relied on expertise to interpret other facts, it was less an example of expert testimony and more an example of a fact in describing the relationship between state and federal levels of governance. (150 words)

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