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Attacking Ideas, Not People: Using Structured Controversy in the College Classroom

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In the United States, we believe that the defining aspect of living in our democracy is citizen participation. Unfortunately, according to recent surveys (e.g., Harwood, 1991; Creighton & Harwood, 1993), many people believe that such participation is useless. People lament over "politics as usual": debates of issues being dominated by the loudest voices and the most extreme opinions. Many people seem willing to express what their opinions are regarding social issues. But they are unwilling, if not unable, to discuss the evidence on which those opinions are based or to resolve differing opinions in a constructive manner.

Fortunately, college students from all over the country report that they do want to become more involved in the political process. But they expect their campus life--both inside and outside of the classroom--to offer opportunities to develop their "voices" (Harwood, 1991; Creighton & Harwood, 1993). Structured controversy is a classroom technique, first described by Johnson and Johnson (1979), that helps students learn the value of working collaboratively to solve social problems. On a societal level, structured controversy shows students that they can influence what happens around them. On a personal level, it helps students to develop positive attitudes about themselves, their classmates, and their education.

In my version of structured controversy, students choose a controversial issue related to the course in which they are enrolled, prepare pro and con arguments based on course material, debate the issue formally in class, and engage in small-group discussions to discover common values and solutions. Although I have used structured controversy only with college students in psychology courses, it could be adapted easily for other age groups and academic subjects (Johnson & Johnson, 1979; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). Using structured controversy involves three steps: preparations, argumentation, and collaboration (Watters, in press).

Step 1: Preparation During the first week of the semester, students listen to an introductory lecture on debating theory. Students learn what constitutes an effective argument and what advantages and disadvantages exist for using different kinds of evidence. Two to three weeks prior to the in-class debate, students choose a topic relevant to course content, often one that has been in the news. Students translate their topic into a specific question that would be amenable to a yes/no (or pro/con) treatment. Students individually prepare five pro and five con arguments during the weeks prior to the in-class debate. Each argument must contain an assertion plus evidence. The evidence can consist of a theory, concept, or study from our textbook or class discussions that supports the assertion's validity. Students also prepare essays describing their own opinions on the topic.

Step 2: Argumentation On the day of the in-class debate, students bring the arguments they have prepared. I draw an imaginary line to bisect the class into pro and con sides. The first 15 minutes of the 75 minute class period is devoted to small-group discussion. Students talk in groups of two to four to choose what they feel are the strongest arguments for their side. Each group chooses one person to record what they discuss.

During the next 30 minutes, each side takes its turn presenting arguments. Students volunteer to speak on behalf of their side, and others volunteer to offer additional support. After one side has

presented an argument, students from the other side may challenge it, and students from the first side may respond as appropriate. This "argument followed by free discussion" procedure is repeated four times (pro, con, pro, con), and I record all arguments on the chalkboard or overhead transparency.

Step 3: Collaboration Students drop their advocacy of one position and reconvene in small groups for 10 minutes. Their task is to examine all of the arguments we have discussed, and to discover values that people hold regardless of their specific position. Then, we reunite as a large group for 10 to 15 minutes to propose solutions that would reflect those common values and be agreeable to both sides. Finally, I ask students during the last 5 to 10 minutes of the period to write about their own opinions again: whether their opinions have changed as a result of the debate, or whether they hold stronger or weaker versions of their original opinions. Instructors who have 50- to 60-minute class periods can modify this procedure in several ways. They might devote one class period to the argumentation step. They might omit the pre-debate work, in which students collaborate to find their strongest arguments. Perhaps students could write their final individual reflections as homework, rather than devoting class time to it. Regardless of the modifications that instructors might choose, it is essential to devote sufficient time and careful effort to the three steps of preparation, argumentation, and collaboration.

Comparisons to Other Methods

Traditional Debating Structured controversy capitalizes on the benefits of traditional debating and collaborative learning, while avoiding many of the drawbacks. In traditional academic debates, students defend one side of a controversial issue. Students are judged on their communicative skill and academic preparation. Proponents of academic debating emphasize the benefits for personal development, educational enhancement, and career preparation (Klopf & Cambra, 1979). Because structured controversy includes a modified version of the traditional debate, one might expect similar benefits. Kohn (1986) cites many studies to show that competitive situations, despite common myths to the contrary, actually hinder performance, diminish self-esteem, create anxiety, and foster

hostility. Structured controversy is designed to avoid these outcomes, by emphasizing small-group work and by not declaring anyone the "winner" (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Because students prepare arguments for both sides and are randomly assigned to defend one side, students learn to debate assertively rather than attack individuals aggressively (Gudykunst, 1994).

Collaborative Learning Since the early 1960s, educators have recognized that collaborative pedagogies, rather than competitive ones, afford many educational, psychological, and social benefits (Gamson, 1994). Collaborative learning helps to develop "connected" knowing. It welcomes all perspectives into the community of knowledge, and capitalizes on the wealth of experience shared through conversation (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Structured controversy is consistent with this vision of connected learning, both in process and in outcome. Students nominate possible debate topics, and vote to choose the one that is most interesting to them. They discuss the topic in small groups and share the ideas they have prepared individually. Personal experiences and opinions are validated as important sources of knowledge. Ultimately, students drop their advocacy of one side of the issue, and search for values and solutions agreeable to everyone. The role of the instructor during structured controversy is that of "moderator"--one who reminds students of procedure, keeps track of time, and mediates any conflicts that arise. Students are empowered to teach each other. The benefits of such collaborative pedagogies, in contrast to competitive ones, are well-documented: increases in learning, self-esteem, self-confidence, and interdependence (Bouton & Garth, 1983; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993; Kohn, 1986).

Educating for a Peaceful World As educators, we know that learning has cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects to it. Structured controversy is effective because it addresses each aspect directly. Cognitively, students are challenged to apply course material to real-world issues, thereby learning that material more thoroughly. Affectively, students discuss issues that are important to them. They gain confidence in their abilities, and they clarify their

values. Behaviorally, students participate actively in their education. They practice skills that will help them to contribute positively to their communities. Morton Deutsch echoed the sentiments of many contemporary educators and scholars, when he wrote that "schools have to change in basic ways if we are to educate children so that they are for rather than against one another, so that they develop the ability to resolve their conflicts constructively rather than destructively and are prepared to live in a peaceful world" (1993, p.510). It is never too late to begin this re-education. Our college students are eager to transform their idealistic visions into reality, and our classrooms provide a vital context for such learning. Structured controversy is just one example of what Deutsch meant when he said that we must begin "educating for a peaceful world."

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