

GROUP DEBATE: A WAY TO STEER THE DISCUSSION AND ENHANCE PEER LEARNING

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Teaching-learning challenge

During my courses Russian foreign policy and Multilateral institutions and global governance I taught at Charles University and Anglo-American University I noticed three issues that needed to be addressed. First, students tended to form nation-based groups and were unwilling to mix. By staying within the nation-based group, they were limited in their views by prevailing visions and were not confronted by alternative points of view. This posed a problem of their integration into a broad student community.

Second, the difference in the learning style was apparent. For instance, the U.S. students tended to dig deeper into the subject, seek out alternative literature, and pose more questions than home students. Third, when it comes to home students (those enrolled on permanent basis), they typically felt that they did not have sufficient language skills or grasp of literature when compared with their American peers, they tended to underestimate their knowledge and competencies and felt shy to contribute in class activities. The main challenge I was confronted with was to engage all students in peer learning.

Pedagogical method

Based on my colleagues' and my own experience as a teacher and student, I decided to introduce an academic debate at the semester's end. In some courses, this activity takes place during the semester. My choice of timing for the debate was informed by a willingness to provide students with enough room for advancing their knowledge and formulating their view at their fullest.

A week before the academic debate, the students were divided into three groups based on their preference for one of the following statements: Russia is a rising, declining, or great power. Each group received the same three articles discussing the topic. Then, the students were encouraged to seek arguments in support of their statement in other sources. On the day of the academic debate, the students joined their respective teams. All were given 10 minutes to prepare their opening statements. This time was spent by the team members to formulate a common position, since typically students preferred to prepare for the debate individually. Another observation concerned students' preference to discuss arguments in class rather than arrange a team meeting prior to it.

After presentation of opening statements, each team was given five minutes to prepare their reactions to each other. Then, the debate commenced. As a lecturer I took on the role of a moderator and I also occasionally raised new issues that students had overlooked when preparing their statement (Beardsley 2011).

When trialling this method in the past, I randomly divided students into groups. However, this led to the situation when the students held opinions different from other group members. Feeling dissatisfied, they started to switch places with their colleagues. Therefore, in the next semester I decided to change the approach from random assignment to letting students decide on their group. Random assignment was kept only in case that the groups had a very disproportionate number of students.

The course, the students, and the teacher

I applied the method during my course on Russian foreign policy where the topics offered enough room for formulating and presenting one's opinion. The course was offered to B.A. students and was usually attended by a group of 15 individuals, out of whom some 40% were international students. Out of these, approximately 25% were U.S. students, another 20% - EU exchange students, and the rest—home students. All of them studied either International Relations or Politics and Societies.

In order to address the needs and diverse levels of previous student knowledge, I developed five main assessed tasks. First, there were very short essays at the beginning of each session. This assessment task aimed at motivating students to read and refer to the assigned literature when formulating their views on the current Russian foreign policy. Secondly, I introduced a test to monitor student progress. Because it was scheduled for the middle of the semester, I was still able to make necessary changes in the curriculum and provide additional guidance to underachieving students. These changes included a more involved guidance from my side for the final essay and advice on more robust engagement with literature and alternative sources to improve the quality of students' contributions in in-class discussions.

Thirdly, there was a classical assignment in the form of a final essay aimed at assessing students' overall knowledge gained during the course as well as their academic writing skills. Fourthly, participation in class discussions contributed to student grade as well. Fifthly, students were asked to write a summary of their group debate, in which they were expected to make use of all skills employed in the first three assessments. Overall, these assessed tasks provided students with opportunities to enhance their understanding of the topics as well as develop their rhetoric and argumentative skills. Engaging students in various assignment types, I was also hoping to give students an opportunity to identify their strongest skills and to enjoy learning in this course.

After trialling the debating method at the semester's end at Anglo-American University, I introduced it at the Charles University, where I taught the same course. There, the ratio between home and international students was lower: approximately 25% of the students were international. The group behaviour with such a small number of international students vis-à-vis a homogeneous group of home students (the rest being mostly Czech or Slovak) represents a classic case

described by Pleschová (2020). Home students tend to be more active, while international ones are less engaged.

Being an international lecturer myself (born in Russia, having studied in Germany, and teaching in the Czech Republic), I know from my personal experience how important it is to have the motivation to contribute in class and to be heard. When teaching this course, I introduced a learning method that I used to favour as a student: using pre-class time to find various sources that offered different perspectives on the problem, prepare a statement and arguments that support or contradict it.

Collected sources of data and analytical method(s)

During the course on Russian foreign policy I taught at Anglo-American University and Charles University, I collected data via anonymous student feedback questionnaire surveys that are standardly used at both universities. The surveys included questions like perceived relevance and usefulness of course materials, fairness of assessment, etc. While the feedback questionnaire administered at Anglo-American University focused more on lecturer-student relations and communication, the survey at Charles University emphasized the organisational side of the course, for example by asking students to agree or disagree with a statement like: 'Tests, tasks and other duties were corrected and results communicated in a timely manner'. In both surveys, students could choose from four options that ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Students' participation in the surveys was voluntary.

Aside from these surveys, I used peer feedback from the Dean of the School of International Relations at the Anglo-American University who observed one of my classes. This feedback consisted of assessment of various elements of my teaching and student learning: from my punctuality as a lecturer to my ability to maintain control over the class. Finally, I draw from my observations of how students learnt in class.

Findings

Student feedback collected via anonymous survey revealed their satisfaction with the group debate as a learning method. This feedback was overwhelmingly positive, ranging from 'really liked' to 'pretty interactive'. More than 93% (15 out of 16 students) of students at Anglo-American University who took the course in the winter term 2017, strongly agreed that 'the instructor encouraged discussion and questions'.

Students from Anglo-American University appreciated the method more than their peers from Charles University. Out of those eight students who completed the evaluation at Charles University in summer semester 2018/2019 (the course was attended by 23 students), 40% agreed that the course was 'very good' while another 40% called it 'good'.

Overall, students' feedback suggested that the method helped to achieve expected outcomes. As one student noted in his anonymous feedback: '[...] as you could see in the last seminar, we are able to discuss these topics and give our own opinions when it's approached in a good way (e.g., basically discussing a for-against statement)'. This comment was most encouraging and motivated me to use the method also in the future.

Comments from the peer observer did not focus on the final group debate, as the observer was present at one of the lectures in the middle of semester. The observer, however, positively noted my ability to engage students.

From my observations of student learning I noticed that academic debate at the end of the semester helped students motivated students to work with a broader list of literature, to better understand various topics covered in the course, they also saw how interlinked all the issues were. Students—especially those who did not participate much in the class discussion during the semester—got engaged and repeatedly contributed during the academic debate. I could see that this activity enabled those who felt insecure during in-class discussions to prepare their arguments beforehand and voice them publicly. It allowed me as the lecturer to assess learning outcomes in a complex way: material learned, student ability to identify alternative perspectives, formulate arguments and exchange them in class.

Thus, I believe that academic discussion at the end of semester can be best applied in classes, where students have similar pre-class knowledge (e.g., all are either master-level or bachelor-level). Based on the described experience, I would also advise motivating students to prepare for the discussion in groups rather than individually so that they could engage more in peer learning and practice their negotiation skills prior to the debate.

Replicability in a different context

After applying the method at two universities with different ratios of international students, it seems that it fits perfectly in various classrooms. It allows students to enhance their academic skills, including, for example, finding alternative perspectives on the problem, crafting arguments and preparing elaborated statements based on different sources. More importantly, the method helps to create a motivating atmosphere for home and international students to learn from each other.

I believe that the method is fully applicable in other courses. Ideally, the lecturer's role should be limited to guiding the debate (including preparing the topics and questions), facilitating it, or appointing an advanced student as a facilitator. Moreover, when teaching Multilateral institutions and global governance I learnt that one needs to consider prior theoretical knowledge that students might need. Students who miss such knowledge have major difficulty engaging in a debate. This was confirmed during the summer semester 2017, when the group consisted of M.A. and B.A. students. While the former could build upon their knowledge of theories of IR, the latter had

not taken the course on theories and relied mainly on the assigned literature on Russian foreign policy, which substantially decreased the quality of their argumentation.

Conclusions

This contribution discussed a learning method that I developed for the course on Russian foreign policy: a group debate on three statements: Russia is a rising, declining, or great power. This method motivated students to formulate their own views on the problems studied in the course, it proved to be highly engaging and it encouraged peer learning among home and international students who previously tended to learn isolated from each other. Given that issues from Russian foreign policy tend to be highly debated among students as a result of what they learn from media, I would recommend the method for similar courses rather than for more theoretical courses.

References

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Summary

This contribution discusses a group debate as a learning method used on a course on Russian foreign policy. One of the main challenges that motivated me to develop this method was international and home students' heterogeneity in terms of their knowledge and learning strategies and lack of peer learning in this course.

The outcomes of this method were assessed via student feedback surveys, peer feedback and own observations of student learning. Collected data signalled that a group debate served well the student needs and helped them to achieve the intended course outcomes. Students appreciated the group debate, as it allowed them not only to voice their opinions but also to back up them with arguments rooted in literature. The method enhanced student ability to work in groups, encouraged students to use various literature sources that offered different perspectives on the studied problems, and helped them to structure their arguments. It fostered the sharing of students' views, and thus, engagement.

Keywords

group debate, international students, Russian foreign policy, student engagement



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