

Structured Academic Controversies

In the Living Environment and other science courses, students are introduced to some topics that have at least two credible positions – pro and con. Their study may engender such questions as “Should genes be manipulated to produce new varieties of organisms?”, or “Should the habitat of endangered species be protected to prevent extinction?” These issues could be narrowed to a specific organism if desired. These topics may be taught using a cooperative learning structure frequently called a structured academic controversy (Johnson and Johnson, 1987).

In order to use this strategy, the teacher must prepare two packets of materials, one that includes hand-outs supporting one side of the issue and another supporting the other side. Each packet may include a summary one or two-page write-up if time is short, or extensive materials such as articles, addresses of web sites, video clips, etc. when several periods will be used. One to six periods works well for this activity, depending on the complexity of the issue, the depth to which it is researched by students, how material will be shared, and how the project will be assessed. Many variations are possible.

For an academic controversy, each group should be composed of two pairs of students – one initially pro and one initially con. Try to include students who are initially on both sides of the issue in each group in order to prevent group polarization. Students should be informed that the goal of the activity is to reach consensus on the issue evidenced by (for example) a report that will be evaluated.

In conducting an academic controversy, the teacher should divide the allotted time into five segments. During the first, pairs of students read the material favoring one position and very briefly discuss it between themselves. During the second segment, each pair presents its position to the other pair. Pairs critically evaluate the opposing positions, defend their positions and compare strengths and weaknesses of the two positions. During the third, pairs read the material that favors the other position and very briefly discuss it between themselves. During the fourth, pairs present the view that opposes their original position as forcefully as they can. In the last segment, all four members of the group abandon their advocacy roles in order to reach a common decision that supports a particular position. They write a group report with all of their names attesting agreement. The report includes a rationale and supporting evidence. The report can take a position that is intermediate to the two presented positions, if the whole group chooses.

Reports can take many forms; they can be extensive or brief. When conducting a structured academic controversy for only one or two periods, you may want to give students a form you design to keep them on task and guide their study. Among items you may want to include on your form are the following:

- What is the issue?
- What is the pro position?
- What is the con position?
- What side did you favor before you read this material?
- What are three facts that support the pro view?

Definition: Fact-information that we take to be true because it is widely accepted (Slife, 1998).

- What opinions have been expressed to support the pro view?

Definition: Opinion-judgement of an individual who interprets data in the context of what makes personal sense (Slife, 1998)

- What are three facts that support the con view?
- What opinions have been expressed to support the con view?
- Speculate on the best possible results that could come about from adopting the pro view.
- Speculate on the worst possible results that could come about from adopting the pro view.
- Speculate on the best possible results that could come about from adopting the con view.
- Speculate on the worst possible results that could come about from adopting the con view.

Joseph Rubinstein and Brent Slife of Purdue University suggest a Decision Matrix (Slife, 1994) format for a quick report that enables students to demonstrate that they grasp the major ideas of the issue and that at the same time is relatively easy to score. A modified form follows:

Name(s) _____
 Issue: _____

	At Best	At Worst
Position I: _____ _____ _____		
Position II: _____ _____ _____		

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References

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 Slife, B.(Ed.). (1998). Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial psychological issues. 10th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.
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