

Using Debates to Enhance Students' Oral Business Communication Skills

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Abstract

Oral communication is often cited by employers, alumni, professional organizations, and accrediting agencies as an important skill for recent college graduates entering the workforce. The deficit of these skills among many recent graduates has placed an emphasis on educators' efforts to more effectively teach oral communication. Continuing the rich historical tradition of teaching rhetoric in higher education, teachers from a variety of disciplines have successfully implemented in-class, student-to-student debates into curricula. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of debates in enhancing students' oral communication skills. Debates have also been shown to increase critical thinking and when debate topics are carefully chosen, course content may be positively affected as well. The purpose of this report is to describe essential components of a student-to-student debate assignment suitable for implementation in a business communication course.

Keywords: Oral communication, debates, rhetoric, business communication

1. Introduction

Oral communication is at the heart of most businesses. The richness of face-to-face, oral communication constitutes a vital element of meetings, sales, public relations and countless interpersonal communications. In recent years, written electronic communication, such as email and texting, has replaced a significant portion of the oral communication once used in business. However, one of the effects of the proliferation of written electronic communication has been to place a premium on the oral communication that is still used. Even in the Information Age, effective oral communication is a requirement for successful businesses and managers often cite oral communication competency as important for new employees. Preparing students to meet the demands of modern professional oral communication remains a high priority in a business communication course. An effective technique to enhance students' oral communication skills is the use of in-class, student-to-student debates.

Presenting one side in a two-person debate before an audience requires considerable oral communication competence. Thus, it is a challenging assignment. However, students typically have a high degree of interest in the opportunity to present their own ideas on controversial issues. The combination of a challenging assignment and motivated students creates a strong potential for learning. For educators who are concerned that students lack professional oral communication skills, the debate assignment described in this report focuses on improving those skills. The purpose of this report is to describe essential components of a student-to-student debate assignment suitable for implementation in a business communication course.

In its modern form, rhetoric is briefly defined as the art of persuasive language, both written and spoken. It is a fundamental element of public speaking, oratory and debates. Although the term "rhetoric" is often commonly interpreted as insincere speech, due to numerous abuses, modern scholars have attempted to resurrect the reputation of the discipline through the development of new critical theory (King & Kuypers, 2001, pp. xi-xiv). The use of debates in education may be traced back to the Sophists in Athens (fifth century, BC), although references to public speaking may be found earlier in the works of Homer when leaders urged their soldiers to engage in battle (Toye, 2013, p.7). The Sophists included influential thinkers such as Protagoras and Gorgias who claimed high fees for teaching their pragmatic and skeptical philosophy (pp. 7- 8) despite receiving criticism for developing deceptive arguments.

Most known among Greek philosophers of rhetoric was Aristotle who wrote of the persuasion principles of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, in *Rhetoric*, which is still taught in business communication texts today (Newman, 2013, pp. 211-214). Utilization of debates in education in late medieval times is evidenced at Oxford and Cambridge in the early 1400's with the establishment of rhetoric as one of the seven liberal arts (Combs & Bourne, 1994). Rhetoric also became part of higher education in colonial America when colleges such as Harvard adopted the liberal arts curriculum developed in Britain (Cohen, 1998, p. 30). Rhetorical training in 19th century American education was regarded as essential in acquiring civic competence and emotional literacy (Hansot, 2004). Debates are commonly found in contemporary American higher education in formal, competitive debate teams and less formal use in many courses across a variety of disciplines including social science and business.

2. Oral Communication Skills in Business

Professional oral communication skills are essential for recent college graduates entering the workforce to achieve success and numerous researchers have investigated these issues. Meas, Weldy, and Icenogle (1997) surveyed 354 managers to identify competencies, characteristics and skills that are important for college students entering the workforce. Managers represented a range of industries including retail, wholesale, manufacturing, and finance. Organizational sizes varied from 25 employees to over 500 employees. Respondents were 15% lower level, 46% middle level, and 36% upper level managers. From a list of 16 competencies that included items like oral communication, written communication, basic computer, and time management, oral communication received the top ranked weighted score. The study also found that graduates in smaller companies deal with customer complaints more frequently and those in larger companies use meeting skills more.

Gray (2010) investigated oral communication skills of new accountancy graduates in New Zealand. The study examined the importance employers place on oral communication skills, the specific skills required, and the degree to which employers are finding the skills in recent graduates. Chartered accountancy firms were sent survey questionnaires of which 146 responded for a response rate of 19.2%. Most of the responses, 79%, were from smaller businesses with 5-25 employees. Results showed employers rated oral communication competency as essential or very important. Of the component oral communication skills, listening attentiveness and listening responsiveness were most highly rated. In regard to finding the competencies in recent graduates, 54.3% reported "sometimes" and 20.2% reported "seldom."

Zekeri (2004) surveyed former students from two southern universities regarding the college curriculum competencies they needed in their professional careers. The results of the 291 respondents showed that oral communication, written communication, public speaking, motivating and managing others, and effective group leadership were most essential for a successful career. Zekeri concluded that although technical skills receive primary attention in college curricula, teaching communication skills deserves consideration in curricular development. Holtzman and Kraft (2011) surveyed business school alumni and regional employers to determine skills that are important in the workplace. Managing time, speaking/oral communication, and strong interpersonal skills were the top skills identified as being important or very important in the workplace.

Professional associations and accrediting agencies also highly value oral communication in business. An Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) report addressed the issue of the necessary knowledge and skill sets of college graduates (AACU, 2008). The report states that the realities of the 21st century create new expectations for students graduating from college and entering the workforce. Of essential learning outcomes that begin in school and continue through college studies, written and oral communication were listed as primary intellectual and practical skills. The study also advised educators to achieve new "Principles of Excellence." These included teaching the art of inquiry and innovation by immersing students in analysis, problem solving, and communication. Educators are also asked to "Engage the Big Question" and teach the curriculum to far reaching issues both contemporary and enduring. From their survey, 63% of employers believe recent college graduates are ill-prepared and 73% want colleges to place more emphasis on written and oral communication.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) 2013 Business Accreditation Standards, Standard 9 lists curriculum content that is appropriate for degree programs (AACSB, 2013). For Baccalaureate, Masters, and Doctoral programs, general skill areas are identified. Learning experiences that address the skills areas are expected for institutions to acquire and maintain accreditation. Written and oral communication topped the list. Higher levels of these skills would be expected for Master's and Doctoral programs in comparison to Baccalaureate programs.

3. Using Debates in the Classroom

Many contemporary educators have drawn upon the rich tradition of debates in developing classroom assignments. They have introduced debate assignments into the curricula of a variety of business courses. Combs and Bourne (1994) conducted a five-year study on the use of debates in a senior-level marketing course. Students were given a questionnaire regarding attitudes of their own oral communication abilities and the effectiveness of the debates. The survey specifically asked students of improvement of their personal oral communication skills, their classmates' oral communication skills, overall effectiveness of the debates, and overall learning in comparison to lecture-oriented classes. The results showed that students perceived improvement in their own oral communication skills and those of their classmates. Additionally, 88.3% of the students rated debates as Good or Excellent in overall effectiveness and 77.5% reported they learned more in comparison to lecture-oriented classes. The authors acknowledged that debates might not be suitable for all college classes, particularly very large ones. Students in this study had also completed a prerequisite public speaking course.

Vo and Morris (2006) investigated the use of debates in economics courses. They report debates are a form of active learning that stimulate critical thinking and with appropriate topics, debates are helpful in understanding the course material. Debates generate a participatory environment that is intellectually stimulating and encourages student involvement. The intellectual conflict of opposing ideas creates a constructive controversy that is engaging to students and requires solutions to problems. The authors used team debates that consisted of four parts: an introductory phase; deliberation and argumentation phase; resolution phase; and a conclusion phase. Results of surveys administered to students upon completing the course indicated that most of the respondents agreed the debates added to their understanding of economics in the course (71%) and in general (76%), and helped them see the real world relevance of the course (76%). Additionally, 72% of the students agreed that the debates helped them analyze real world issues and draw conclusions. The researchers concluded that debates are capable of offering an integrative approach in teaching economics and that they could also be valuable in teaching management and marketing courses as well.

Winsted (2010) described the use of debates in all levels of marketing courses. Debates were credited with actively engaging students and encouraging preparation that led to increased understanding and better retention. Employing debates as part of the courses' pedagogy helped develop critical thinking and communication skills. The author described the use of debates in the classroom as well as online formats for MBA students. Camp and Schnader (2010) used the debate format as a pedagogical tool to enhance critical thinking and communication skills of accounting students. Debate topics were centered on U.S. tax codes that were also debated in Congress. Learning objectives included enhancing abilities to develop persuasive arguments and oral presentation and writing skills. The authors cite the learning of content in the analysis of details of the tax laws as well as improving oral and written communication skills as benefits of debates. Morrell (2004) described the use of debates in undergraduate and postgraduate business ethics courses. The author employed a type of Socratic dialogue in which to frame ethical issues relevant to business students. Dialogue is cited as a form of discourse that is beneficial in the identification and testing of assumptions and tacit beliefs.

These studies show that debates are effective in a range of disciplines. Teachers of accounting, marketing, economics and business ethics have successfully utilized the debate assignment in fulfilling learning objectives. With its emphasis on oral communication, the debate assignment is ideally positioned for implementation into a business communication course.

4. Selecting a Debate Form

From the perspective presented in this study, the goal of the debate assignment is to enhance students' oral business communication skills. With that goal in mind, the choice of the particular debate form deserves careful consideration. A wide variety of debate formats have been used in academia and political debates. Although a number of researchers have advocated the formation of teams, this author prefers to have students present their debates individually. This method allows attention to be more focused on individual rhetorical issues as opposed to team management concerns. The two debaters are encouraged to study together before their debate, which improves rebuttals and allows for some bonding between the students. This particular format has been used by the author of the paper at hand for 10 years in a variety of courses including Ethics in Sports Management and Media and Society. With the high demand for oral communication competency in business, employing the debates for my Business Communication courses also proved to be effective.

The recommended basic form involves two students who take opposing views on a debate question that has a “yes” or a “no” answer, e.g. Will smartwatches become widely used? The debate is conducted in three sections: Opening Statements—main points of the argument; Rebuttal—argument against opponent’s points; and Summary—concluding statements. Figure 1 displays an outline of the debate form that is suitable for business communication students. Allow the “Yes” side to always go first to avoid confusion. The “Yes” side presents Opening Statements followed by the “No” side’s presentation of Opening Statements, and a similar alternation of sides in all the sections. This streamlined structure allows beginning students to make satisfactory presentations and reflects the current needs of time management as well. Timings of the sections are: 5-10 minutes for the Opening Statements; 3-5 minutes for the Rebuttal; and 3-5 minutes for the Summary. The instructor acts as moderator and times each sectional presentation. The instructor should avoid taking sides and resist the temptation to interject during the debate. Allow visual presentations, e.g. PowerPoint or short video clips, but do not allow the time of video showing to count in the tally of the timing for each section. Those timings are of oral presentation only.

Debate Form Sides

	Yes	No
Opening Statements Present main points of your arguments (5 to 10 minutes for each side)	A, B, C	D, E, F
Rebuttal Argue against your opponent’s main points (3 to 5 minutes for each side)	-D, -E, -F	-A, -B, -C
Summary Summarize main points, rebuttals, draw conclusion (3 to 5 minutes for each side) Class discussion will follow debate	a, b, c, -d, -e, -f	d, e, f, -a, -b, -c

Figure 1: Outline of a Streamlined Educational Debate Structure

De-emphasizing the competitive aspect of the debates creates a friendlier atmosphere that is encouraging to students who have doubts on their abilities to speak in front of a group. Here is where these debates would differ from those employed by the debate club, for example. Students are told that their grades will be determined by the quality of their presentations and research, not whether they won or lost the debate. The form also includes non-interruptible time slots in which each debater presents. This helps ensure that low-confidence students will have an opportunity to fully express their views without interruptions from the opponent or class members. The overall approach should be more in the realm of sharing ideas as opposed to determining the correct position on the various issues.

5. Rhetorical Considerations

Students in a business communication course may have little experience in oral presentations and may not have completed a public speaking course. It is quite possible that this is the first debate they have ever attempted. For these reasons, rhetorical training should be approached as an introduction. Table 1 presents some basic guidelines for introductory level debaters. Persuasion is the ultimate goal of a debate and rhetorical style is instrumental to achieving this goal.

Study of Aristotle's principles of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* makes a good starting point. Establish credibility early in the debate, perhaps with an opening such as, "With the considerable amount of research I've done on this topic, the results strongly indicate..." Use of emotional appeals may be appropriate for some topics and audiences but excesses are better avoided. Logical arguments that utilize strong evidence and reasoned judgments are most appropriate in an educational setting. The *logos* approach more closely resembles the discourse in business as well. An appropriate use of humor can be effective in persuasive arguments. However, the possibility and avoidance of offensiveness is a prime consideration when using humor. Ethics is an important component and students should not misstate facts, provide misleading information, or engage in language that is unprofessional, such as indecent, sexual, or sexist remarks.

Characteristics of a Good Debate

1. Research both sides of the issues and know them well.
2. Have enough material to fill time slots.
3. Clearly identify at least three main points of your argument.
4. Know the main points of your opponent's argument and address them in your rebuttal.
5. Rehearse and time your presentation before the actual debate.
6. Respect your opponent.
7. Use professional language, e.g. avoid indecency, sexual or sexist remarks.
8. Don't read too much.
9. Project your voice enough to be heard clearly by the entire class.
10. Use body language effectively.

Table 1: Basic Guidelines for Introductory Level Debaters

Some group voice training exercises may help students develop a strong voice capable of projecting to the back of the room. Breathing exercises help students learn how to breathe deeply from the diaphragm. Saying and holding each of the long and short vowel sounds strengthen their voices and improve projection. This exercise also aids clear diction. These exercises are fun and students get to stand up and take some deep breaths. Presentations should contain an objective tone with an emphasis on respecting one's opponent. Students may use notes for quick reference (e.g. some statistics that support a particular point) but should not read presentations. Discussion of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, hyperbole, and hypophora is helpful. Students are also taught some basic principles of body language such as posture, hand gestures, and eye movement.

6. Guiding Student Research

Research of the topics is essential and students submit the identification of three main points in their argument and citations of reference sources that support those points. Standard reference sources such as academic journals and books generally provide the most reliable information. Highly biased sources serve to weaken the argument rather than support it. The quality of the research that students perform will determine the extent to which the debates add to the content of the course. Encourage students to develop a considerable amount of material, usually more than what they think they need, in order to fill the minimum time requirements for each section. The opponent's side must be researched as well for use during the rebuttal. The inclusion of the identification of main points as questions on class examinations (e.g. Describe two main points on the "yes" side of the debate, Will smartwatches become widely used?) requires everyone in the class to know both sides of each debate. Discourage extensive use of notes in the debate itself, rather a list of bullet points helps focus the student on the oral communication aspects.

7. Topic Selection and Scheduling

Appropriate topics cover a wide range of issues. Table 2 provides a list of sample debate questions suitable for a business communication course. Forecasting trends is an area where experts disagree and this controversy provides fruitful topics for debates. Debate questions like, Will smartwatches become widely used?, require student debaters to conduct extensive research into relevant areas such as technological development, marketing initiatives, user safety, and financial standings. Students preparing for management careers acquire experience in evaluating streams of information necessary in navigating the complexities of today's business climate.

The relative roles of government and business are additional areas where good debates are found. Utilizing a debate question like, Is illegal downloading a threat to the music industry?, allows students to investigate legal issues and evaluate them from a market perspective. Employment issues provide another area of debate topics. With a debate question like, Should employees at the same company be allowed to date each other?, complex human resource issues are examined. Other debate questions like, Has email and texting enhanced communication?, allow students to investigate more theoretical issues pertaining to business communication.

Debate Topics

Will Sirius/XM satellite radio succeed?
 Will Facebook have long-term success?
 Is illegal downloading a threat to the music industry?
 Should video games be regulated?
 Should employees at the same company be allowed to date each other?
 Should colleges with televised sport revenue pay their athletes?
 Has email and texting enhanced communication?
 Will 3D television become successful?
 Will smartwatches become widely used?
 Will Apple succeed without Steve Jobs?
 Does Facebook provide adequate protection of users' personal data?
 Will Google Glass succeed?
 Will autonomous automobiles become successful?
 Are men more likely to receive promotions over women counterparts?

Table 2: Sample Debate Questions for a Business Communication Course

The scheduling of the debates requires a considerable commitment by the instructor. A class of 30 students would allow for one debate per week in a 15-week semester. A preliminary list of debates is distributed to students on the first day of class. They select the debates and sides they are interested in and indicate degree of interest. The distributed list also has several blanks in which students are encouraged to submit proposed debate questions that are not on the list. Discuss the submissions with the class and allow them in the schedule if they are appropriate and have a student willing to take each side. Collect the forms on the second class meeting and try to match those students who have indicated the highest interest on opposing sides. Warn students that they may not get first choices due to tight scheduling limitations. On the third class meeting, distribute a draft schedule. If any students have reservations about their side and debate, try to accommodate them by finding alternative questions until all students have an assignment with which they are reasonably comfortable. Distribute the final schedule at the fourth class. Students participating in the first debate are disadvantaged due to less preparation time and allowances are made for that, e.g. a more relaxed acceptable minimum time for a particular section. For an odd number of students in the class, allow the one student without a partner to make a modified individual presentation or offer the slot to another student for extra credit. The instructor should avoid filling the empty slot.

8. Moderating the Class Discussion

At the conclusion of the debate, the instructor opens the topic for class discussion. As moderator, the instructor asks for questions and comments directed to either or both of the debaters or comments in general. Allow the students to carry the discussion if they are willing. If no comments are forthcoming, ask follow-up questions such as, "Are college students likely to adopt smartwatches?" At the end of the discussion, the instructor presents several main points for each side. Argue strongly for each side. The instructor may need to have class policies in place that require professional language to always be used in class. Initiating a round of applause at the end of the debate and the discussion is generally well received.

9. Evaluating Debate Performance

Before the debate begins, an evaluation form is distributed to the class. Students indicate their opinion for which side, the "Yes" or the "No," they primarily support before the debate begins. The "Neutral" category is an option as well. Students are asked to briefly explain why they support the particular position they take, including Neutral. Don't discourage students from taking a Neutral position, particularly if they don't think they have enough information to make an informed judgment.

If the competing sides have equally compelling points, a Neutral position might also be justified. The evaluation form additionally asks if the respondent's opinion was changed as a result of the debate. If Yes, they are asked to briefly explain. Written responses, the Yes, No, and Neutral opinions, are tallied and the resulting poll is presented to the next class. These results may generate further discussion.

For the instructor's evaluation of the debaters, the grade should be based on the quality of the presentation and not who won the debate. The goal of the exercise is to enhance oral communication skills as opposed to mastering competitive debating technique. A common grading penalty is for failure to fill the minimum time requirements of the various sections. Sometimes a debater does not offer a solid rebuttal by addressing weaknesses in the opponent's argument but merely recites new points. Important relevant points might be neglected by students who do not perform the necessary research. Too much reading, the use of language that is unprofessional, or not following debate rules, like interrupting the opponent, also lower the grade. The debate research form, a listing of main points and reference citations, is submitted to the instructor at the end of the debate. Incomplete citation lists or citations not listed in correct APA style negatively affect the student's grade.

10. Summary and Conclusion

The study has examined the use of student-to-student, in-class debates to enhance oral communication skills. An overview of the history of rhetoric as an educational tool was outlined. The oral communication research reviewed indicated that employers, alumni, professional organizations, and accrediting agencies highly value oral communication skills. Survey results revealed that employers regard recent graduates' oral communication skills negatively. Research on using debates in a variety of business courses suggested that debates offer students an opportunity to improve oral communication skills. Features of a debate assignment suitable for use in a business communication course including form, rhetorical style, topic selection, research, and evaluation were described.

The art of persuasion represents a highly developed oral communication competency. Teaching rhetoric has a rich history that includes classical Greek philosophers as well as some of today's most highly regarded educational institutions. Continuing this tradition in a business communication course offers students an opportunity to enhance oral communication skills in a participatory manner. Results of research studies suggest that the use of debates in the classroom also enhances critical thinking skills. The written evaluation required in the debate form described in this paper provides practice in this important aspect of communication. When debate topics include current business issues, students receive lessons in content and presentation. The follow-up discussion of the debates involves the entire class and all the students have an opportunity to enhance their oral communication skills. Additionally, debates create a participatory environment where the students actively teach themselves instead of listening to copious lecturing. The debate assignment described in this report offers students an opportunity to enhance oral communication skills making this pedagogical technique well suited for a business communication course.

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