

Group Project #1
Restructuring Online Debates for
Synchronous Collaborative Learning

By
Team #1
Robert Barton
Jesse Gentile

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Introduction

Online debates provide an opportunity to participate in a collaborative learning experience. If designed correctly, debate behaviors such as argumentation, providing evidence, and making rebuttals will involve students in collaboration. Collaboration in turn leads frequently to greater gains than individual learning.¹ In the case of the debate examined for this paper, the fulfillment of the original debate's objectives does not appear to have required the students to truly collaborate during debate, nor was the debate structured as effectively as it could be (which is natural for many products still being developed in real world settings). **This paper will illuminate three problems found in the debate assignment structure. It will present prescriptions to those problems and rationales for each of them.** Each prescription will then be followed by evidence, empirical support, and any implementation issues that would prevent it's immediate use.

Problem Ranking

The **three problems noted**, in order of most important to least, were (1) a lack of true collaboration among students, (2) redundant postings by students, and (3) a fear on the part of some students to engage in argumentation. The following reasons explain our ranking.

As EME6635 is a class about collaborative learning, it seemed self evident that the debate should be restructured to include basic features of true collaboration as listed by recognized practitioners like Johnson, Johnson and Holubec.² Stated another way, if the debate is not structured collaboratively, then it will not deliver the learning outcomes that such a debate was chosen to deliver in the first place.

Redundant postings were placed second. In our opinion, redundant arguments only posed a problem under the pretext that students were supposed to have been working collaboratively. If the assignment was intentionally meant to have students debate more as individuals (we assume it was not) redundancy would be of less concern if not even expected in an asynchronous environment. More importantly, eliminating redundancy does not automatically imply students will collaborate. If collaboration is our chief aim, and eliminating redundancy does not guarantee collaboration, then it still ranks second to resolving the initial problem of absence of collaboration.

Finally, student timidity was ranked third because there was not direct evidence for its presence in the debate. If timidity did in fact affect debate outcomes, it would have been only a problem for a minority of students.³ Redundancy seemed to be clearly prevalent in the arguments of many students

¹ R. Clark, R. Mayer, (2003) *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction*. Pfeiffer. p205

² Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1994). *Cooperative learning in the classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. pp 9-11.

³ This is an assumption on our part.

throughout the class. In other words, while timidity is a likely problem, it is unlikely that it was as widespread as redundancy.

Problem #1 – Lack of True Collaboration Among Students During Debate.

Apart from arguing on the same side of an issue as half of the class, there was nothing about the original debate that required students to work together. It was not structured so that collaborative groups had to strive as a team towards a goal which was impossible for individuals to realize on their own. There was nothing that required students to depend upon others during the debate. It lacked collaborative structure.

Prescription/rationale A - Require students to debate as groups instead of as individuals. Divide the class into teams of four or five. Students must meet with their team in a synchronous chat prior to the debate. During this chat, each team could review a pre-collected folder of articles offering pro/con arguments on the debate topic. During chat sessions teams would select the four most potent arguments that they wish to use as their team's official arguments. Requiring official team arguments eliminates redundancy and forces the group to collaborate as they develop a winning strategy. Students could also be required to carry on collaboration, via chat, by identifying opposing arguments to the team's four official arguments. Although unnecessary, this would truly familiarize students with the debate issues. (Blackboard's "whiteboard" would be an appropriate tool for simultaneous chat and group reviewing of web pages containing articles, images, and evidence.)

Evidence & Empirical Support A- The original structure of the debate reminded us of what Johnson, Johnson and Holubec call *traditional or pseudo learning groups*.⁴ Three of the basic characteristics of cooperative learning seemed to be missing: Positive Interdependence, Face to Face Promotive Interaction, and possibly even Interpersonal & Small Group Skills.⁵ Requiring students to come to a consensus on the most effective four arguments eliminates the "lone-rangers" and requires the structured collaboration that contributes to better learning.⁶

Implementation Issues A –Blackboard's "whiteboard" is appropriate for collaboration, but eventually may not prove versatile enough for students to collaborate beyond a certain point. Can they make notes on Word Documents, view PDF's or watch flash files together? Tools like Vyew.com may allow groups to collaborate beyond what Blackboard allows.

⁴ Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1994). *Cooperative learning in the classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. p9.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ R. Clark, R. Mayer, (2003) *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction*. Pfeiffer. pp207-209

Prescription/rationale B – Build positive interdependence into online debates. Provide some goal for students to achieve in the debate that they cannot achieve alone. Have a judge or moderator who will decide on the winning debate team. This provides teams with something to work towards. Winning might depend upon (a) arguments that weren't countered by opposition (b) quality of counter arguments set against opposition arguments (c) variety of arguments (d) quality of collaboration (e) most convincing team. (Combined with recommendation C below, winning would be impossible without team interdependence).

Evidence & Empirical Support B- The original debate structure had no *final* goal apart from engaging in debate and posting four comments. Nothing about these structures required other students help if they were to be accomplished. Students sank or swam alone.⁷ This is the opposite of collaborative lessons.

Prescription one above already provides a form of positive interdependence, but is soft on the “positive” side. Structuring the assignment so that one team can “win” the debate or earn a reward introduces a motivational factor beyond simply completing the assignment goals. Johnson, Johnson and Holubec identify this as *Outside Enemy Interdependence*.⁸ They go on to say,

Structuring positive interdependence is the most important aspect of using cooperative learning groups in your classes. It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of strong positive interdependence among group members. It's the glue that holds groups together and the source of members' mutual commitment to each other's well-being and success. Without it, cooperation does not exist.⁹

While prescription one does require interdependence, requiring a group to pick four strong debate arguments will obviously not go the distance to bringing about what is quoted here. As a result, we felt more motivation was needed to bring out the “positive” in “positive interdependence.”

Implementation Issue B – This will require some well thought out judging by the end of the debate and may put extra burdens on the instructor or T.A.

Prescription/rationale C – Structure online debates so that individuals are accountable for carrying their own load. For example, team members could be permitted to advance only one specific argument into the debate on behalf of their team. No other member would be allowed to argue that point. Each team member would then bear the load of championing one of the four arguments previously chosen through collaboration. The result; no member may hitchhike.

⁷ Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1994). *Cooperative learning in the classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. p9.

⁸ Ibid. 54

⁹ Ibid. 55

For the full force of the team to be felt during debate, each member must equally participate as an individual.

To further the individual accountability, it could be required that when the opposition counters one of the teams four arguments, only the student that posted it may defend it. (She may however collaborate in chat sessions with her team to come up with counter arguments. Once the team collaborates, the original student must return to the asynchronous forum and defend her argument.)¹⁰ While any team member may attack the arguments set forward by the opposing team only one student will defend each argument against the classmates that attack it.

Evidence & Empirical Support C – The structure of the original debate made it possible for some students to hitch-hike off of others. Students were able to add a few disingenuous lines or a quibble that was of little substantial value. Students were also able to copy arguments used by others and post them elsewhere in the debate. The above structure is an example of *role interdependence*¹¹ that requires each student to step out as an individual and contribute to the teams overall success. If they shirk their role, it may become obvious to the entire class, and their team will suffer.

Implementation Issues C – Students may have difficulty meeting in synchronous chats often enough to deliberate on how to help individual team members defend their arguments. Groups may want to pick a regular chat session time for each night of the week. Unfortunately, if opposing arguments are posted later in the week, the group will not have enough time to come together to help the member that must respond to the posting. While this leaves certain students to respond on their own, it does not weaken the individual accountability factor.

Problem #2 – Redundant Postings Prevent Meaningful Learning

The goal of the debate is to provide an opportunity for a group to collaborate and provide meaningful dialogue in support of an argument. Redundant postings add no value to the content of the debate. They reflect issues of being ill prepared and ill informed in regards to contributing to the team's position.¹² The

¹⁰ Johnson, Johnson and Holubec remind us that individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual student is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual so they can ascertain who needs more assistance, support and encouragement in completing the assignment. p9

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Whether deliberate or accidental, ARG1 of the debate provides evidence of a student posting "rebuttals" to ARG1 which had nothing to do with the *grounds* supporting the *claim* in ARG1. Simply because a posting supports the opposing side of the debate does not mean that it constitutes a "disproof" or valid rejection of the *claim* it was posted against. The post has to *reject* (defeat/disprove) the *ground* that the oppositions *claim* was based upon. This phenomena may account for some of the redundancy, as students use and re-use arguments in wild haphazard fashion. In other words, they don't know how to argue

prescription and rationale below will improve the goals of the debate.

Prescription/rationale A – To prevent a loss of meaningful learning, consider providing some preparatory clarification on the purposes of a debate, the rationale behind it, and how arguments are conducted. Consider providing examples of previous debates, in regards to process and quality. Doing so will remove any misunderstanding of what is expected, in terms of contributing to the debate. Prior to the debate, conduct an online quiz to measure understanding of the assignment.

Evidence & Empirical Support A- OnlineLearn (2007) states there are certain pre-debate activities that should occur before conducting the debate. These activities include assigning relevant readings, identifying additional resources, develop debate topic guidelines, develop activity timelines, and develop an evaluation method to share with the students.¹³ Many students are new to this type of activity and providing a strong foundation will prevent the types of postings that appear to “piggy-back” one another, or do not support the argument.

Implementation Issues A – The only issue would be time. The class schedule is constructed to perform certain activities at particular intervals. Adding a week before the debate could deduct time from a more important activity later in the course.

Prescription/rationale B – To reduce the possibility of redundant postings, specify detailed instructions on the types of postings to be presented. These postings should be original or add amplifying information in support of a previous post without repeating the information. Doing so will ensure a continuous dialogue, allowing for a deeper understanding of the subject matter. If the postings are not per instructions, deduct a percentage from the team effort and or the individual.

Evidence & Empirical Support B - Tools that can prevent redundant postings are synchronous chat and virtual classroom with whiteboard. Chats allow real time collaboration by thinking through a problem and arriving at a solution. The virtual classroom allows for use of graphics, tables, developing flow charts, etc., in support of reaching a team decision.

Implementation Issue – There are no anticipated implementation issues. Students can meet in a group chat or in the virtual classroom with whiteboard, at

properly.(see *argument structure* diagram in Toulmin, S., Rieke, R., & Janik, A. (1984). *An introduction to reasoning*. NY: Macmillan Publishing co.)

¹³ OnlineLearn (2007). *Designing online debates*. Retrieved May 23, 2007 from <http://onlinelearn.edschool.virginia.edu/debate/predebate.html>.

a specified time, to practice their collaborative skills. The session would be recorded to allow the instructor to verify such an activity is yielding the anticipated results.

Prescription/rationale C – To ensure student understanding of collaborative learning, explain the rationale behind this instructional tool, and the responsibilities associated with it. Stress the fact that collaboration centers on team building, joint outcomes, critical thinking, division of tasks, and accountability. To ensure all team members contribute fairly, increase the value of the peer evaluation to approximately 50% of the grade.

Evidence & Empirical Support C – Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec (1994) describe cooperative learning as “the instructional use of small groups through which students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning.” Participating in a debate allows a group to realize three types of collaborative outcomes; effort to achieve, positive relationship, and psychological health. ¹⁴

Implementation Issues C – There are no implementation issues. Providing this information to students in anticipation of a debate will only enhance the quality of the discussion.

Participating in a debate should be an enriching activity, both educationally and psychologically. Redundant postings prevent this desired result from presenting itself. In order to accomplish a debate’s intended learning outcome(s), certain prerequisites must be met. The first is that students must know the purpose of a debate and the reason(s) for using such an activity. To ensure this understanding, a quiz or one page paper should be administered or required. Second, examples of the postings to be required for this activity, along with instructions, should be provided. Many redundant postings are the result of not taking the time to review previous postings and researching articles, references, internet, etc., for material to add freshness to the arguments, in the form of evidence, explanations, or rebuttals. Lastly, provide instruction on the purpose and benefits of collaborative learning through groups. This information should be provided at the beginning of class, prior to any assignments involving this type of learning. Topics to consider are selecting materials and objectives, assigning students to groups, assigning roles, structuring positive interdependence, and monitoring student behavior. Debates can illuminate an otherwise boring subject, but only if carried out as it was designed. Taking the time to inform the class the reasons for its use, and the method to implementing it, will dramatically improve the opportunity of attaining the desired learning outcome(s).

¹⁴ D. Johnson, R.T, Johnson, & E. J. Holubec, (1994). *Cooperative learning in the classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. p4.

Problem #3 – Some Students are Afraid to Engage in Argumentation

If the purpose of debate is to promote deeper student engagement with content and foster critical thinking, then timidity is an enemy of both. Timidity will shut down both engagement and critical thinking before they have a chance to produce the learning gains associated with active posters to a debate forum. (Note M. Wang's findings that graduate students who posted more outperformed those who were less active in posting.)¹⁵

Prescription/rationale A – Allow students to participate in a synchronous chat prior to debating on it's merits.

Courage in debate is naturally fostered by experience with whatever one is debating about.¹⁶ If, for example, the debate issue is the use of synchronized chats, students cannot be expected to show any depth of confidence if they have never engaged in synchronous chats before. Therefore, we recommend students have a chance to gain a reasonable level of familiarity with whatever they will be debating about. In this case, that would best accomplished by allowing students to participate in some form of synchronous chat before hand.

Evidence & Empirical Support A- This prescription represents more of an argument from common experience. Simoson and Zvacek support our prescription by warning that "Sometimes an instructor has high expectations of prior students' knowledge that can lead to difficulty in the learning setting. It is sometimes inappropriate to assume that all students have equal prior learning."¹⁷

Implementation Issues A – Insufficient time may be the only implementation issue since chats are easy to set up and host. If the debated issue is something that students cannot easily experience, then Prescription/rationale A may face a major implementation hurdle.

Prescription/rationale B – Introduce anonymity into the debate. Some timidity in debate may come from social issues the student has with conflict itself. Students may be afraid of having to work with those they've criticized, or of being challenged in return by someone they just criticized. Students who have to see their online classmates in person, as is the case with many students at FSU, could easily fall into the above category.

One solution to this problem may be to find a software application that will allow students to engage in debates with numbers ID's rather than known

¹⁵ G. Johnson, *Synchronous and Asynchronous Text-Based CMC in Educational Contexts: A Review of Recent Research*. TechTrends. Vol 50, Num 4. p48.

¹⁶ Someone who has experienced the hardships of communism personally, the author's wife for example, is far more apt to feel confident debating about this issue with others. Personal experiences are hard to argue against.

¹⁷ M. Simonson, S. Zvacek, *Teaching and Learning at a Distance*. (2006) Pearson. p162.

names. (Ex. Student1, Student 2, etc...) Opposing team members will not know each other's numbers. The anonymity would eradicate all fear of possible confrontation and embarrassment.

Evidence & Empirical Support B- This type of solution was not encountered in any of the assigned readings or discussions thus far. Technically it has no empirical support for whether or not it will work to eliminate student timidity.

Implementation Issue – does Blackboard or the CMS being used allow for this? Is using other software a hassle? Will this unnecessarily complicate the debate?

Prescription/rationale C – Ensure the debate is held toward the middle or end of the class (i.e. week 7), especially with students new to online collaborative learning. Students take time to warm up, acclimate, and adjust to collaboration. Plenty of research in both face to face and distance classes suggest that stressful learning environments can choke off academic achievement. Palloff and Pratt (1999) advocate that “without establishing a community of learners in a distance setting, the potential for success is limited.”¹⁸

Evidence & Empirical Support C – “Conrad and Donaldson (2004) suggest that specific planning by instructors is needed to encourage learners to interact, collaborate, and form a community.”¹⁹ Simonson and Zvacek echo this by suggesting that it may be of benefit to scaffold the collaborative learning experiences for students, starting with less involved collaborative interactions at first and moving later into full-blown group projects.²⁰

Implementation Issues C – Again, as with A, time is the only implementation issue here. Even if the course were a summer course, hosting the debate around week 5 would be helpful. It would give the timid students time to build confidence, familiarity and even trusting relationships with those they will have to debate with.

Conclusion

Online debates are an excellent instructional tool to examine a topic. But in order for it to reach its full potential, the opposing sides must be able to work collaboratively in their groups, to not only present an argument, but to present amplifying evidence, explanations, and rebuttals in such a way that true learning occurs. Working collaboratively is difficult for some students, usually because they are lacking the necessary skills. This lack of skills will result in postings that are redundant and portray the team as ill prepared and ill informed. Collaborative

¹⁸ Quoted in M. Simonson, S. Zvacek, *Teaching and Learning at a Distance*. (2006) Pearson. P 159.

¹⁹ (See also “Phases of Engagement” tables) *Assessing Learners Online*, Oosterhof, Conrad, Ely 2008, pp. 204-207

²⁰ Simonson, p 161.

learning requires team members to establish rules of conduct, employ decision-making skills, and interdependence in the pursuit of the learning goal. For a new class, efforts should be made to ensure all members know what is required of them, especially those that are timid and afraid to engage in argumentation. This timidity affects the entire class, as it detracts from the entire learning experience. Before a debate is conducted, it is imperative that the class is prepared through readings and practice, followed by the required assessments. Only then will a debate attain its desired learning outcomes.

References

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