

The use of in-class debates as a teaching strategy in increasing students' critical thinking and collaborative learning skills in higher education

Zeta Brown, Wolverhampton University, Walsall

Correspondence: Zeta Brown

Email: Zeta.Brown@wvl.ac.uk

Tel: 01902 321000

Abstract

This paper will explore the use of debates as an in-class teaching strategy that has the potential to heighten students' critical thinking and collaborative learning skills. Students undertaking a childhood studies degree had weekly debates that linked media represented topics to theoretical content from their current module. This module covered a range of theoretical and practical perspectives in relation to the child, family and society. Therefore, the topics of weekly debates included the changing nature of childhood, the diversity of family relationships, childhood obesity and the differing ways in which children are socialised. Data was collected using a card-sort and in-class structured interview questions. The study focused on accessing students' perspectives on the use of these weekly debates. The study found most students held differing, complex perspectives on either the benefit of enhancing collaborative learning or critical thinking skills. The findings suggest that fourteen of the sixteen students in this study did not prefer the use of debates in comparison to other teaching strategies. This is because some students sought more structure in the use of in-class debates to enhance their theoretical understanding. This paper concludes by considering recommendations for the module that include the possibility of using peer-assessment to ensure full student participation.

Key words: Debates, teaching, critical thinking, collaborative learning, strategies

Debates as an in-class teaching strategy

Kennedy (2007) states that students learn in diverse ways and that there is therefore a need in Higher Education to provide a variety of instructional strategies and forms of assessment. For academics such as Oros (2007) and Jackson (2009), debates can be embedded in module teaching. Oros (2007) says debates can be integrated into course design and assessment and introduced to students from the beginning of a module. For these academics, debates can be used to complement other teaching strategies and provide a variety of teaching styles to keep students actively engaged in content. As Jackson (2009, p.253) says, "debate is not intended to be an end in itself, but rather a means to desirable educational outcomes that complement other teaching techniques and student experience".

Meyers and Jones (1993, in Kennedy, 2007) consider the use of debates as a teaching strategy that encourages active learning in the classroom, where students are interactively part of the learning process. Conversely, Bonwell and Eison (1991,

in Kennedy, 2007, p.183) believe that this form of active involvement enables students to "...learn more effectively by actively analysing, discussing, and applying content in meaningful ways rather than by passively absorbing information". In comparison, Walker and Warhurst (2000) consider the use of debates as a strategy that extends beyond student involvement. Debates enable lecturers to stand back from delivering taught content and provide students with the space to educate one another. However, students in Zare and Othman's (2013) research stated that the quality of debate did depend on whether debate questions were clear and did not favour one side of the argument.

Zare and Othman (2013) believe that the use of debates has expanded to students in many differing subject areas. Freeley and Steinberg (2005, in Kennedy, 2007 p.183) define debates as "... the process of considering multiple viewpoints and arriving at a judgement..." Through debates, Gurvey, Drout and Wang, (2009, in Zare and Othman, 2013) believe students learn essential skills such as reasoning, analysing and how to present arguments. The literature tells us that the use of debates provides students with a mastery of content and the development of critical thinking skills and communication skills (Kennedy, 2007; Zare and Othman, 2013). This is because students are seen to be involved in debates "actively, broadly, deeply and personally" (Zare and Othman, 2013, p.1507). However, debates can be criticised as reinforcing a bias towards dualism. This is because most debates depend on the juxtaposition of only two viewpoints, where in reality the matter is usually more complex (Tumposky, 2004, in Kennedy, 2007). Budenheim and Lundquist (2000) argue that students will change their perspectives if they have to defend a viewpoint that is contrary to their original perspective. They suggest that students should research both sides and should not be told until the last minute which side of the debate they will be presenting.

To enhance student involvement further, the debates' assessment process can be managed by students, either with or without the involvement of the lecturer (Kennedy, 2007). Smith (1990) advocates student participation in grading debates as a form of peer-assessment. Walker and Warhurst (2000) believe that students can generate the criteria to assess and then make their own judgements based on these criteria. However, they advised that the debate itself should be the students' formative assessment, as summative peer-assessment may not be welcomed by students. Boud and Falchikov (1989, in Walker and Warhurst, 2000, p.38) state "the link to learning lies in the notion that effective learners are learners who are able realistically to assess their own capabilities, and make 'sensitive and aware judgements of their own work'". Therefore, in considering involving students to the fullest extent, they should also be involved in the debates' assessment process.

In-class debates and collaborative learning

Classroom interactions between students and between students and lecturers are considered by Bartlett and Ferber (1998, in Brownson, 2013) to be more effective than traditional teaching strategies. This form of interaction is "underpinned by values of collaboration, and the construction of individual and collective knowledge between teacher and student, and student and student in a culture of educational

conversation (Rowland, 1993, in Walker and Warhurst, 2000, p.34). Kuhn (1991, in Guiller, Durndell and Ross, 2008) considers that there is a social element to critical thinking, in which ideas are discussed with peers to develop knowledge collaboratively. Similarly, Paul (1992, 1994, in Frijters *et al.*, 2006) believes that critical thinking is linked to dialogue because dialogue makes it possible to consider other people's perspectives. Williams, McGee and Worth (2001, in Kennedy, 2007) found that students in a large scale survey of 70 universities rated improved communication skills as debate's most substantial benefit. These findings show the importance of collaborative communication during the debate. According to Snyder (2003, in Brownson, 2013) the more involved students are during the debate the more they will gain from the learning process.

For Oros (2007) the delivery of debates is intrinsically linked to collaborative learning skills and critical thinking. The process of expressing thoughts and different 'for and against' perspectives in a debate structure encourages interaction amongst peers (Frijters *et al.*, 2006). Students also need to communicate the perspectives of others (Dam and Volman 2004). However, those opposed to the use of debates believe that the argumentative element of debate structure can create a confrontational environment (Tumposky, 2004, in Kennedy, 2007). In contrast, Goodwin (2003) found few students who reported any distress or anxiety associated with the competitiveness linked to the debate structure. Oros (2007) believes the delivery of evidence in debates is intrinsically linked to collaborative learning skills. Collaborative learning in this manner can enhance skills such as explaining, reasoning, stimulating thinking and asking questions (Mercer 2000, in Frijters *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, Johnson and Johnson (1994, in Zare and Othman, 2013) believe that students can also more frequently develop skills in generating new ideas and solutions and can transfer learnt content, applying it more readily to different situations.

This form of collaborative learning through dialogue can promote students' active learning and high-order thinking (Renshaw 2004, in Frijters *et al.*, 2006). For Oros (2007), presenting this evidence ensures full class participation beyond those who are seen as the usual contributors. A strategy to ensure full participation, according to Oros, is to start the debate with a group who have researched the specific subject and then open the floor for all students to evaluate the debate and the evidence presented. In contrast, Temple (1997, in Kennedy, 2007) found that participation was limited to those in the debate team. Goodwin (2003) found that students did not consider listening to other debate teams to be active and engaging. Instead, Temple (1997, in Kennedy, 2007) advocated the fishbowl debate, where all students are divided into two groups and take part in every debate, or alternatively have a third group that is the audience.

Previous research on students' perceptions on in-class debate as a teaching strategy has been mostly positive. Most students in Goodwin's (2003) research appeared to be happy to participate in debates. Students appear to value the development of skills such as communication and collaborative and critical thinking skills (Williams, McGee and Worth 2001, in Zare and Othman, 2013). However, previous research also highlights design concerns that need to be considered

(Kennedy, 2007; Zare and Othman, 2013), such as whether students feel comfortable in defending their position in debates in an argumentative environment; whether students value debates over traditional teaching methods as a teaching strategy; whether all students gain from the debate process and whether the assessment process is effective for the students and the module. Despite critical reflections on the use of debates Kennedy (2009) found that around 85% of students would consider participating in future debate opportunities.

In-class debates and critical thinking

Jackson (2009) emphasises that lecturers need to seek experiences for students that will increase their critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as the art of communication in teaching sessions. Halpern (2003, in Frijters *et al.*, 2006, p.67) believes we need to consider “cognitive skills and strategies that increase the likelihood of a desired outcome ... thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed, the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihood and making decisions”. The use of debates can enhance critical thinking skills such as “...defining the problem, assessing the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognising inconsistencies and prioritizing the relevance and salience of various points with the overall argument” (Kennedy, 2007, p.184). For Zare and Othman (2013) the use of debates enables students to develop their knowledge of social issues, consider multiple viewpoints and accept that, as individuals, there will be differing perspectives on any topic area. Importantly, students need to engage in research to develop their understanding of evidence that aligns with either the for or the against perspective in the debates.

Jackson (2009, p.151) states “...topics or questions for debates are by their nature without right or wrong answering”. The use of debates provides an opportunity for students to give alternative solutions to a specific debate topic, rather than seeking to find one correct solution (Yang and Rusli, 2012). Frijters and colleagues (2006) and Jackson (2009) believe that students use high-order thinking when considering differing perspectives in this manner, with an increased amount of divergent thinking. Furthermore, Oros (2007) and Jackson (2009) detail the skills students can develop in investigating debates outside of the lecture, before they are brought to the session. They conclude that students can actively engage in independent research and gather information from differing perspectives, analysing this information by assessing it in relation to the debate topic and preparing an effective argument to debate in session. The use of debates therefore provides students with ownership of their role, including the evidence they bring to the debate.

Furthermore, Munakata (2010, in Yang and Rusli, 2012) found that debates increased student’s motivation and interest levels in the taught content. These activities relate directly to enabling students to think critically, by reasoning, evaluating, understanding, conceptualising and reflecting on literature (Chance 1986, in Guiller, Durndell and Ross, 2008). Kennedy (2009) found that students viewed the use of debates as an innovative and informative way of teaching. In preparation students researched materials from different sources which offered a wider perspective on the taught content. In contrast, Oros (2007) found that students

criticised the use of debates on the basis that they divert attention away from taught sessions and on recommended reading for the module. Additionally, the use of debates in assessing the module was challenged and the format of the debate, especially its group dynamics and the debates timing were cause for concern. In Zare and Othman's (2013) research some students reported that they did not get the chance to apply their critical thinking skills and felt that they had not gained a deep and meaningful understanding of the debates topic.

This article looks at the literature base in the specific context of an undergraduate programme in Childhood studies. In the level five module 'Child, Family and Society' debates are embedded into the weekly taught sessions and the module's assignment. These debates include 'Children in Britain have never had it so good'; 'If the child is obese it is the fault of his/her parents' and 'Watching television and playing computer games is beneficial for children'. Students are grouped in the first week of the module and provided with one of the debate topics. These debates are scheduled to run each week of the module and the group is required to lead on its assigned debate. Once the group has completed its debate the rest of the cohort are asked to evaluate and add any further comments. These debates are carried out at the beginning of each session, prior to the topic's taught content. Students start these sessions by discussing their researched knowledge in this area and the lecturer then refers to these points throughout the session. Participation in the debates is mandatory as this work contributes to the students' formative assessment; students then choose two of the topical debates to write about in their summative assignments.

Methodology

In the interpretivist-qualitative research that forms the basis of this article there is a focus on engaging with the positions of the individuals being researched (Basil 2010). In searching for meaning, interpretivist researchers look beyond an individual's actions and engage with their participants' positions in the social world (Burton and Bartlett 2009). This approach is therefore subjective and engages with a more personable, people based form of research (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). As such the research questions were as follows:

- (1) What are students' perspectives on the use of debates in the Child, Family and Society module?
- (2) Do students consider the use of debates as beneficial in enhancing their critical thinking skills?
- (3) Do students consider the use of debates as a beneficial activity to enhance collaborative learning?

This paper investigates the perspectives of 16 level five students who were part of our 2013/2014 cohort. These students were asked to participate in this research because they actively participated in the weekly debates. The findings therefore relate to the use of debates at undergraduate level five and may not be comparable to those from students who experience the use of debates at other levels.

The data collection methods chosen for this research were card-sorting and in-class structured interview questions focused on the weekly debates. In the final session of the module students ranked ordered statements according to whether they agreed or disagreed with the use of five different teaching styles in degree sessions. This card-sort technique was used to establish how debates were valued by each student in relation to traditional in-class strategies. The traditional strategies were taught sessions, student presentations, group work and independent work. The card sort provided a way of considering the use of debates in relation to other teaching strategies. The use of card sorting also increased students' subjectivity in the research as ranking cards in this manner enabled them to compare and contrast the statements based on their own perspectives, rather than try to find a 'right answer'. That being said the card sort data alone was limited in depth and detail as it focused on comparing debates to these traditional teaching methods. Students were unable, in this data collection, to explain where they ranked debates or to provide information concerning their perspectives on its use.

Consequently, following the card-sort students were asked to answer four structured interview questions that described their perspective on the use of debates in more detail. These questions ensured that the data focused specifically on the students' experiences of debates as a teaching strategy in this module (Basit 2010). This data collection provided structured in-class questions, via Power Point, to the group and students were asked to note their responses on paper. The reasoning behind this structure was the need to gain students' perspectives in a limited period of time, where they were all present in the same room. A focus group discussion was considered, but the group had dominant members who routinely took the lead in answering questions in session. If a focus group had been carried out with this particular group there was the possibility that data would focus on these dominant members' perspectives (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

One of the factors in this study was that the research was carried out in the researcher's own classroom. There was therefore a significant need to consider researcher bias and also how students in the classroom were approached and became part of the research. The study focuses solely on students' perspectives on the use of debate in this module. If the lecturer in this module had carried out face to face interviews without anonymity, her actions would have influenced students' responses. Therefore, the data collection methods were carefully selected to ensure that students' identities would remain hidden from the researcher.

The structured questions also did not directly ask these students if debates enhanced their critical thinking or collaborative learning skills. This was because students might not have related the skills they had developed specifically to critical thinking or collaborative learning and their perceptions of what these skills entailed could also have been different. Instead the structured questions were focused more generally on the advantages and disadvantages of the in-class debates as a teaching strategy, whether students would like to experience the use of debates in other modules and if there were any improvements they would want to make. In doing so, links between debates and critical thinking or collaborative learning were

not imposed on these students; instead students' comments are linked to these key skills in the research findings.

Findings and discussion

In-class debates versus traditional teaching strategies

In the card sort students were asked to rank order five teaching strategies, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, in relation to their preferred teaching strategies. Twelve out of sixteen students placed their debates statement in either the middle column (seen as the neutral column 0) or the column to the left, ranked disagree (-1) in the ranking line. This is an interesting finding which, considering all students' placement of debates in this card sort, shows that this teaching strategy is not preferred over traditional teaching methods.

Table 1 Results of the card sort activity

Strongly disagree with use (-2)	Disagree with use (-1)	Neutral column (0)	Agree with use (+1)	Strongly agree with use (+2)
Independent work	Taught session	Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Group work
Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Taught session	Group work	Independent work
Taught session	<u>Debates</u>	Student presentation	Independent work	Group work
Taught session	Group work	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Student presentation
Group work	Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Taught session
Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Taught session	Group work
Group work	Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Taught session
Student presentation	Independent work	<u>Debates</u>	Group work	Taught session
Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Group work	Taught session
Group work	<u>Debates</u>	Student presentation	Independent work	Taught session
Taught session	Student presentation	Independent work	Group work	<u>Debates</u>
<u>Debates</u>	Group work	Independent work	Student presentations	Taught session
Taught session	Independent work	Student presentations	Group work	<u>Debates</u>

Student presentations	Group work	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Taught session
Group work	Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Independent work	Taught session
Student presentation	<u>Debates</u>	Group work	Independent work	Taught session

Kennedy (2007) states that students learn in diverse ways and therefore need a variety of instructional strategies. With the exception of one participant, students in this study did not rank debates as their least preferred teaching strategy. However, for most of these students there were at least two teaching strategies they favoured. Only three students ranked debates in their top two preferred teaching strategies. Therefore, debates for these students were neither predominantly favoured over others nor disliked as the least favoured teaching strategy. As with Kennedy, these findings suggest that debates provide variety in the instructional strategies used in this module. However, in contrast to Oros (2007) and Jackson (2009) students also wanted to see traditional teaching strategies implemented. Debates are therefore useful to complement other teaching strategies and provide students with variety that will keep them engaged in module content. However, the structure of the debates needs to be considered in more detail to establish whether the ranking of debates was influenced by the way they were run in this particular module.

Students' positive reflections on the use of in-class debates

When asked if they would like to see debates used again in other modules, fourteen out of sixteen students stated that they would like to use them again. This statistical data is slightly greater than in Kennedy's (2009) research in which around 85% of students state that they would consider participating in future debate opportunities. In this study 87.5% of students would like to see the use of debates in future modules. Statistically, the students in this research valued the inclusion of debates within this particular module.

Students in this research reflected positively on the use of debates in two key ways. Their positive perspectives focused on freedom of expression during the debate or the detailed analysis that can be researched in for and against debates. Interestingly, only one student's response mentioned both of these benefits. The other fifteen students focused either on the use of debates as benefiting their freedom of expression in the classroom or as enabling a detailed analysis of the topic area. Their comments can be seen as relating to reflections on the experiences of collaborative learning or the benefits of the development of critical thinking skills during the research process. These findings will therefore be discussed separately in relation to the development of collaborative learning and critical thinking skills.

The use of in-class debates and collaborative learning

Bonwell and Eison (1991, in Kennedy, 2007) considered the use of debates in providing students with an opportunity to be actively involved in their classroom learning. In studies focused on the use of debates in Higher Education there is a

strong emphasis on debates as a participatory strategy (Frijters *et al.*, 2006; Oros, 2007). For ten of the students, their positive reflections detailed the benefits they found in this form of participation and focused primarily on how it enabled them to express their perspectives with peers. Their points are detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Responses related to collaborative learning

Comments focused on students own communication and freedom of expression in collaborative learning
"The use of debates is good because you get to express your ideas"
"I like to do debates because it gives me the opportunity to develop my speaking skills and to learn about both sides to an argument"
"Debates allow you to express your ideas and put your point across"
"The use of debates are good as you can express your own views on the topic"
Comments focused on group communication in collaborative learning
"I enjoy the debates in this session. I find discussion far better than reading off slides. I learn better with debates and discussions because everyone is included and has an opinion"
"Freedom of speech and being able to listen to other groups findings regarding other topics, and use this to decide on my chosen topic for my summative"
"Able to engage with our own research with rest of group"
"I like the use of debates as you can get your point across and explain why and hear other people's opinions"
"They allow the group to get involved in discussion"
"Hearing different perspectives and opinions. Debating about something even if you don't necessarily agree with what you are discussing"

Rowland (1993, in Walker and Warhurst, 2000, p.34) considers the classroom interactions that are evident in debates to be "underpinned by values of collaboration [and] the construction of individual and collective knowledge between teacher and student, and student and student in a culture of educational conversation". For Frijters and colleagues (2006) the process of expressing thought and different for and against perspectives in a debate structure encourages interaction amongst peers. Therefore, it seems from existing research that collaboration in debates is intrinsically linked to communication in the classroom. The findings in this study are interesting and extend the previous research as there were distinctive differences in the ways in which students discussed this benefit of using debates in-class. Six of the ten students commented on the benefits of collaborative communication with their peers to develop their thinking. They commented on the benefits of the group's communication. However, four of the ten students discussed the benefits on their own communication and freedom of expression during this form of collaborative

learning. They did not discuss the communication of the group, but instead focused on their own communication within the group.

There are alternative findings in the existing research base that consider this collaborative communication to be detrimental to students' learning due to the perceived confrontational and argumentative environment of debates (Goodwin, 2003; Tumposky, 2004, in Kennedy, 2007; Williams, MgGee and Worth, 2001, in Kennedy, 2007). Three students in this study commented on the difficulties they encountered in participating in debates. However, in contrast to previous studies their difficulties focused on their dislike of communicating in groups or contributing to group communication. Two of these students stated their dislike of talking in front of the group; one commented "I dislike having to talk in front of a group but it is a skill I need to develop"; the third student said "...having the confidence to contribute can be difficult". None of these comments focussed on the debate environment as being confrontational or argumentative, but instead they were focussed on the individual's perspective on communicating in the group.

The use of in-class debates and critical thinking

Freeley and Steinberg (2005, in Kennedy, 2007 p.183) define debates as "... the process of considering multiple viewpoints and arriving at a judgement..." Studies including research carried out by Kennedy (2007) and Zare and Othman (2013) suggest that students are able to master topic content by analysing differing perspectives. For seven students in this study the use of debates encouraged a detailed investigation into the topic. Their comments are detailed in the Table 3 below.

Table 3 Responses related to critical thinking

Comments focused on enhancing understanding due to its for and against structure
"Debates allow individual research about an area, focusing on one side of the debate"
"Gives an insight into the debates for and against which is good because you are able to hear both sides"
"I like to do debates because it gives me the opportunity to develop my speaking skills and to learn about both sides to an argument"
"I like the debates in the sessions as it helps me to get both sides of an argument and can help towards my assignments"
Comments focused on considering differing perspectives
"The use of debates can be useful for gathering other people's opinions and also argue points in which each person believes"
"Debates allow students to hear multiple opinions on one subject and can then develop their own opinions based on evidence given"
"They give you a range of different views and perspectives that others have and also widens your thinking of the subject"

Kennedy (2009) found that students viewed the use of debates as an innovative and informative way of teaching. Research suggests that debates provide students with enhanced critical thinking skills, including the development of research skills through finding credible resources outside of the classroom, identifying and challenging assumptions and presenting an overall argument during the debate (Kennedy, 2007; Oros, 2007). This type of activity is considered by Jackson (2009) as providing students with an opportunity to use high-order thinking when considering differing perspectives in this manner. The responses of each of the participants who mentioned debates as an opportunity to engage in this detailed analysis suggest a link to the development of critical thinking skills (Jackson, 2009). It is therefore surprising that only seven out of sixteen students discussed benefits in the use of debates that related to this skill.

Four students in this study specifically noted how the debates' for and against format enhanced their own understanding of the module's content. One student commented "I like the debates in the sessions it helps me to get both sides of an argument and can help my assignment". Whilst such responses are assumed to indicate benefits to critical thinking skills, these students identified the value of debates in content clarification but their comments did not necessarily suggest any engagement in higher order thinking. This is comparable to Oros (2007) and Jackson's (2009) research concluding that students who actively engage in debate through their own research and analysis of findings can enhance their knowledge and understanding of module content.

Only three students commented on how debates moved beyond content clarification and further enhanced their critical thinking skills. These students commented on considering the multiple and differing perspectives of the debate's topic rather than on focusing on the two sides of a debate. In comparison to Yang and Rusli's (2012) research these students considered debates as an opportunity to give alternative perspectives. However, their comments also reflect Zare and Othman's (2013, p.1507) findings that involvement in debates influences students "actively, broadly, deeply and personally".

For two of the students, comments reflected on the benefits of relating this evidence to their own personal perspective. One stated "They give a range of different views and perspectives that others have and also widen your thinking of the subject". Additionally, another student explained "Debates allow students to hear multiple opinions on one subject and can then develop their own opinions based on evidence given". Two additional students also commented, in response to a different question, on the benefit of being able to express their own perspective. One said "I dislike when we have to use literature for debates and not put our own opinion in at all". Another said "Debates are good when people can point out their concern in a statement made". In another extension of previous research these students stated that they also needed space in debates to consider the evidence in relation to their own perspectives in order to engage fully in higher order thinking.

In contrast to previous research, three students in this study commented on the difficulties they encountered when researching or delivering for and against perspectives. Two commented on their confusion in relation to the debates' for and against structure. One said "you sometimes get mixed up in what for is and what against is". For the third, the confusion of these differing perspectives occurred during the debate. This student commented "they get complicated as more people start to offer their opinions and knowledge around the debate".

Critical reflections on the structure of in-class debates

Alongside students' critical reflections on the use of collaborative learning and researching different perspectives, students also reflected on areas of improvement. These comments called for either increased participation by all students in the debate process or increased relevance in the module's assessment. Their points are detailed in the Table 4 below.

Table 4 Critical reflections

Call for increased participation
"people not putting in the same effort"
"not all groups are willing to put effort into their debate which is frustrating"
"...some people don't do the research"
"I would be happy for debates to be used if people take the time to participate"
Call for debates to be linked to the modules assessment
Link to the assessment-
"do a load of research for the debate that we don't want to write about in our assignment"
"It would depend on the context of the module and if they would be useful and relevant to the assignments"
Link to resources for the summative assessment-
"Debates can sometimes be a waste of time as the aspects mentioned cannot be referenced in work"
"sometimes it is hard to use the quotes or resources when groups don't reference correctly"

Oros (2007) says presenting in debates ensures full class participation beyond those seen as the usual contributors. Oros advocates a debate structure that is comparable to that in the Child, Family and Society module in which the assigned debate team starts the debate and then the floor is opened to full class participation. In the current study, in contrast to these findings, four students commented on the need for all students to participate fully in the debate process. One said "...not all groups are willing to put effort into their debate which is frustrating". Another said "I would be happy for debates to be used if people take the time to participate". For these students there appeared to be a disparity in participation that negatively hindered their learning experiences. These findings are in contrast to research

carried out by Temple (1997, in Kennedy, 2007) and Goodwin (2003) who found that problems arose in engaging the rest of the class in the designated group's debate. For the students in the current study, the problem was ensuring that each debate group participated effectively in the debate process.

Furthermore, another four students commented on the need for debates to be linked more to the module's assessment, or provide more resources for the summative assessment. One student referred to "a load of research for the debate that we don't want to write about in our assignment". Another stated "debates can sometimes be a waste of time as the aspects mentioned cannot be referenced in work". At present, debates in this module are used as a weekly formative activity, however, Kennedy (2007) advocated using student assessment as the end process of in-class debates in order to enhance student involvement. Studies such as Smith (1990) and Walker and Warhurst (2000) have led to recommendations that students participate in the development of an assessment criteria and then peer-assess these debates. This, according to Walker and Warhurst, would be preferable as a formative assessment because summative peer-assessment may not be welcomed by students. According to these studies, developing a peer-reviewed assessment process could encourage students to place greater importance on the debate process and increase student participation.

Conclusion

Academics such as Oros (2007) and Jackson (2009) advocate that debates should be embedded in module teaching to enhance students' critical thinking and collaborative learning skills. It would appear from these findings that fourteen of the sixteen students in this study did not prefer the use of debates to the use of other teaching strategies. However, as Jackson (2009) states debates should complement other teaching techniques but not replace them. The data in the current study represented the complexity of students' teaching preferences, pointing to the essential need for variety. In total 87.5% of students stated that they would like to see the use of debates in another module.

The study found that students' perspectives on the use of in-class debates had two distinct, yet complex, perspectives. Fifteen out of sixteen students in this study commented on the use of in-class debates as increasing either their collaborative learning or their critical thinking skills. In total ten students discussed the benefits of this form of collaborative learning. For six of the students the benefits focused on class communication to develop their thinking while the other four students focused on benefits to their own communication. In total, seven students also highlighted the benefits of researching differing perspectives on the debate topic. Four of them found clarity in content as a consequence of using the for and against format. The other three benefited from researching multiple perspectives.

Students in this study provided essential feedback on the structure of the module debates. These findings produce six recommendations for the future development of in-class debates in this module.

- Where debates are used they should have a clear 'for and against' structure and initial support should be available to students who are uncertain about what that entails.
- Additional support should be available for those students who initially lack confidence in the use of the debate format to assist them in delivery and communication.
- Debates should be managed in such a way as to ensure that students have the opportunity and are encouraged to present evidence from relevant literature on the debate topic and also to express their own perspectives and personal viewpoints on the subject.
- Consideration should be given to designing peer-assessment in such a way as to encourage full participation at all stages, thereby maximising the effectiveness of the learning experience.
- Consideration should be given to the status of the debates in the context of module assessment with a view to their becoming a mandatory feature of the module in preparation for the module's summative assessment.
- The relationship between debates and the resources supporting summative assessment should be reviewed, including the possibility of using hand outs from each debate group covering their debate's content and references.

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