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The complexity of in-class debates in Higher Education: student perspectives on differing designs

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Abstract

This paper investigates students' perspectives on the use of differing debate designs in Higher Education. Literature tells us that the use of debates provides students with a mastery of content and the development of skills such as critical thinking (Brown, 2015; Zare and Othman, 2013). However, the designs of these debates are diverse and they have been implemented in a variety of ways in research. This paper considers whether debate design is an influential component on students' in-class debate perspectives. This paper considers differing debate designs planned for levels four, five and six. In this research students at the University of Wolverhampton and the University of East London carried out debates that were comparable in terms of structure and provided their comments in questionnaires. The findings suggest that debate design is influential on students' in-class debate perspectives. By focusing on specific debate characteristics the paper found variables that influenced students' perspectives. These variables included the specific needs of the cohort, the purpose of the debate and the relevance to the module and its assessment. The findings show that these variables are significantly influential in whether students value the use of in-class debates. It would appear that in planning debate design it is important to consider these variables first and then consider which debate characteristics would support these variables.

Keywords

In-class debates, Students, Higher Education, Teaching, Learning

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Introduction

Northedge (2003) said that profound changes in Higher Education (HE) call for a radical shift in teaching. Students studying in HE have increasingly diverse backgrounds, qualifications and expectations of the HE experience. There are, however, challenges in fully acknowledging this diversity in teaching strategies. Goodwin (2003, p.2) states "far from empty vessels waiting to be filled with instruction, [students] bring to class theories, attitudes, skills and habits that shape the success or failure of the activities they will pursue". It is of paramount importance that teaching strategies are used that value students' diversity and what they can bring to the classroom. This form of classroom participation can be seen as an interpretative approach to teaching, which is underpinned by values of collaboration and the construction of collective knowledge involving the lecturer and students (Rowland, 1993).

Bonwell and Eison (1991, 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". The use of debates therefore provides students with ownership of their role and of the evidence, whether it is based on their own perspectives or taken from academic resources (Zare and Othman, 2013). Walker and Warhurst (2000) consider this form of participation as enabling lecturers to stand back from the taught content and provide students with the space to educate one another. In the limited studies in this area debates are seen as enhancing skills that include students' higher order and divergent thinking (Frijters *et al.,* 2006; Jackson, 2009). This paper initially considers research on debate designs in Higher Education.

The complexity in debate design

Studies on the use of in-class debates offer a variety of debate designs and choosing one can therefore be seen as a complex task. There is diversity in how formal the debate can be; in De Vitas (2000) one type of debate was discussed as being naturally produced, where video clips were used to trigger debates. In this instance there was no formalised design and students did not have to prepare for the debate. In contrast, there are many examples of debate designs where students are asked to prepare for the debate and are then assigned to 'for' or 'against' teams (Budesheim and Lundquist, 2000; Goodwin, 2003). These debates can be seen as being on a spectrum that ranges from informal to formal. The more formalised

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designs can also include assessment of the debate, including peer-assessment (Smith, 1990; Walker and Warhurst, 2000).

There are variations in how many students are assigned to each debate. In Brown (2015) and Goodwin (2003) small groups of four to five students were involved in different debates on a weekly basis. In Goodwin's (2003) research, students were assigned to for and against teams, whereas in Brown (2015) groups were given different debates and students then assigned themselves to either the for or against team. In contrast Budesheim and Lundquist (2000) and Temple (1997) assigned all students to research the debate rather than selecting a debate team. In comparison, Musselman (2004) actively assigned all students to roles in the six debates held each semester. For instance, each student participated as an antagonist (primarily responsible for defending the affirmative or negative position). Roles in this debate design also included questioners (prepared to question the antagonists), conciliators (tasked with offering compromise or alternative solutions allocated to avoid dualism) and the other students wrote one to two paragraphs on one side of the debate and emailed these arguments to the class before the debate took place.

Students can also be requested to research one or both sides of the debate. In Brown (2015) and Goodwin (2003) students were tasked with researching one side of the debate. Students were therefore asked to defend their side and present supportive arguments and evidence. However, Temple (1997) asked all students to prepare for both sides of the debate and then students were assigned to a team before the debate took place. In asking students to research both sides of the debate there is the possibility that students can strengthen their own position by having evidence and understanding of the opposing position. Budesheim and Lundquist (2000) argue that students may 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.

There is a complex range of debate designs that have also been used during the debate process. A strategy to ensure full participation, according to Oros (2007), 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. Goodwin (2003) found that students did not consider listening to other debate teams to be active and engaging. In responding to students' perspectives Goodwin advised that students not directly participating in the day's debate should be given the opportunity to question the advocates. Additionally, the way students present

their positions can also vary. In Temple (1997) students were allowed flexibility in encouraging groups to give rebuttals back and forth. In contrast, another format detailed in Kennedy (2007) asked one team to present their evidence and then the opposing team had the opportunity to rebut the arguments. The original presenters then had the opportunity to respond to the rebuttal.

Temple (1997) found that participation was limited to those in debate teams. There are several debate designs, recommended in research, that address this concern by requiring all students to participate. Temple advocated the fishbowl debate, where all students are divided into two groups and take part in every debate, or a third group, tasked with researching both sides of the argument, becomes a proactive and informed audience. In the four corner debate students are asked to consider their positions on a statement and then move to the four corners of the room that represent 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. Students who select the same position are then asked to work together to defend this position. Once each group has presented their argument students have the opportunity to switch corners (Hopkins, 2003).

Boud and Falchikov (1989, 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 work". Therefore, in considering involving students to the fullest extent, some debate designs include peer-assessment. Kennedy (2007) says the debates' assessment process can be managed by students, either with or without the involvement of the lecturer. Smith (1990) advocates student participation in grading debates as a form of peer-assessment. Moreover, Walker and Warhurst (2000) believe that students can generate the criteria to assess and then make their own judgement 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. In Smith (1990) the assessment of the debate comprised peer and lecturer written feedback on a structured feedback form. The feedback included comments on which side of the for or against debate provided a stronger argument or whether it was equally weighted. Students were also given the opportunity to grade the performance of peers. In contrast, Goodwin (2003) concluded debates by majority vote and tasked students to write position papers defending their decisions.

It is apparent in current research that the focus has been on considering whether in-class debates benefit students learning. This research therefore has mostly focused benefits for students, including a mastery of content and the development of skills

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such as critical thinking (Brown, 2015; Zare and Othman, 2013). However, this paper's literature review shows the complexity of debate designs used in the limited research on in-class debates. The complexity of debate design represents issues on planning in-class debates. Current research has mostly focused on students positively reflecting on their in-class debate experiences. However, this research does not address whether debate design itself is important. This paper investigated students' perspectives on differing in-class debate designs. It considers whether debate design is an influential component on student's in-class debate perspectives.

Methodology

The study investigated students' perspectives on the use of in-class debates in two Higher Education institutions (the University of Wolverhampton and the University of East London). The study used a mixed-methods approach by analysing questionnaire data qualitatively and quantitatively. This paper focuses on the qualitative analysis. The research was carried out in the researchers' own classrooms. It was therefore important to consider researcher bias and also how students were approached and became part of the research. Data collection methods were carefully selected to ensure that students had the opportunity to keep their identities hidden from researchers by using questionnaires. Students were informed of the research before the debates took place and were asked at the end of these sessions if they would like to complete a questionnaire detailing their perspectives. Each questionnaire asked five questions about their perspective on using debates as a teaching strategy (these questions were consistent across all levels of study) and the five questions that were specific to each level's debate characteristics (differing debate structures were used at each level of study).

At each level of study (4-6) one module group of students in each institution was asked to participate. This meant that the number of students ranged across groups from 9-21 students. These debates were embedded in Childhood and Education Studies modules and based on a relevant subject matter for that particular module. The debate structures were designed specifically to consider the skills students needed to develop at each level of study, reflecting on relevant literature and research. This meant that the study could investigate differing ways that debates can be used in practice. The structure of the debates ranged from an informal approach at level 4 to a formal approach at level 6.

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Findings

The findings section is divided into levels four, five and six to provide in depth detail on the design characteristics of each debate. Citations have been provided in the findings section where debate designs had been directly influenced by current research. Students' perspectives were analysed qualitatively and specific themes have been chosen that add to existing research on the use of in-class debates in HE. The reasons for individual student's positions were complex and the amount of commentary provided by students varied, therefore students are not grouped in the analysis. Instead, students' individual quotes are used to represent the complexity and individuality of their perspectives.

The informal in-class debate approach: level four students' perspectives

Level four students at the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) and the University of East London (UEL) experienced the same 'informal' debate design and commented on its use. The informal debate design was a fish bowl debate influenced by Temple's (1997) research. Each class was divided into two groups and assigned either the for or against side one week before the session. The debate was carried out after the session's taught content and students were asked to extend this content in the debate with evidence from resources such as newspaper articles and academic literature as well as their own personal and/or professional perspectives. In completing the debate, the group was asked to orally discuss whether the debate's evidence favoured the for or against side or was equally weighted.

Interestingly, whilst this was not stipulated in the design of these debates, neither debate was directly associated to the cohort's summative assessment. The level four debate at UoW was carried out in the 12 week Safeguarding module during semester two. The debate was entitled, *Should smacking children be illegal?* At UEL the debate was during the second semester of a 24 week Early Child Development module and covered access to early childhood services for disadvantaged children and families. The sides were *hard to reach children?* or *hard to reach families?*

Considering differing perspectives and evidence: the use of for and against teams

The majority of level four students in both universities mentioned benefits to them in evaluating differing perspectives and evidence. However, these benefits varied and were notably personal for individual students. Some students gained additional

understanding of the modules taught content by independently researching differing perspectives and evidence. This meant that students needed to research perspectives that were not their own, one UoW student said, "people are able to research on the team and learn a lot even if they personally don't agree and dividing the group gives an equal amount of evidence for both sides". In considering differing perspectives, some students mentioned a greater awareness of their own perspective. One UEL student explained "it helped to convince me that my own personal view was not necessarily the right one". However, this did not necessarily mean that students' perspectives changed. For one UEL student, it meant an acknowledgment of complex perspectives, "it makes you realise that you are not the only one that has different opinions". An increased awareness of their own perspective appeared to occur for some of these students because they were exposed to these differing perspectives.

In contrast, two students commented on the for and against structure as hindering their ability to consider the complexity of differing perspectives. One UEL student commented on the process being biased towards two opposing perspectives. One UoW student held differing perspectives on detailing other views than her own. She said, "I have two perspectives as I do feel that it's good looking at the debate from a different perspective, but I feel it doesn't allow you to put your whole point across". For these teachers it would appear that they wanted for flexibility to offer more than two opposing perspectives.

To conclude or not to conclude? Students' contrasting perspectives

Students in both universities mentioned benefits to concluding the debate. It appeared that for some, coming together and deciding on a conclusion maintained the criticality evident in the debate process and supported greater learning. One UEL student stated that it was important to conclude in a "…transparent and reasoned way based on what people had said during the debate". For some students, concluding the debate supported them in confirming their own perspective. One UEL student explained, "summing up in this way allowed for the reasoning behind both sides - this helped me to make my decision on where I stand". One UoW student also said "… it was good to see the overall view of the class and also allows you to see that even if you don't agree with the perspective given you can make a case".

Interestingly, while both universities had lower agreement on concluding orally, only UoW students commented on why they disagreed. For these students their

discontent was mostly associated with the debate's topic and the conclusive decision. In the safeguarding debate students concluded that the evidence was equally weighted on whether smacking children should be legal or illegal. One UoW student explained "…I still don't really agree with any side of the debate. However, it's such a difficult topic I doubt I even will until the day I have children". Their comments of resistance and disagreement were associated with the equally balanced debate that they considered inconclusive. One student noted, "I feel that this debate will never really have a conclusion as people have different views on the topic".

The semi-formal in-class debate approach: level five students' perspectives

The level five students at both universities experienced the same 'semi-formal' debate design and commented on its use. The debate was carried out before the module's taught content on its topic and students were asked to research into the for and against debate one week in advance. Students were assigned to the for or against teams during the debate session, dividing into two equally sized groups (Budesheim and Lundquist, 2000). Students were asked to research differing academic resources in this debate and avoid discussing any personal perspectives. Prior to the debate students were involved in developing a peer assessment process and they were asked to orally peer-review each team's performance at the end of the session (Walker and Warhurst, 2000).

For both institutions the debate topics were focused on modules' summative assessment. The UoW debate was carried out in the first semester for a module entitled 'International Perspectives in the Early Years'. Students in their summative assessment needed to compare and contrast early years' provision in two differing countries (of their choice) with the system in England. Students were encouraged to be part of the decision making process for this debate and the class decided on *England vs Poland.* They decided on this as there had been little taught material on the Polish system and, as some of the students had children from Poland in their placements, they wanted to learn more about that country's early years' provision. At UEL the debate was carried out in the second semester of a 24 week Sociology of Childhood module and the content was on debating the role of children in society, entitled *do children have an active role in society?*

Are researching both sides of the debate a waste of students' time? Students' diverse perspectives

Students who agreed with researching both sides of the debate commented that it strengthened their argument, improving their criticality and making them more confident when arguing for either side. For students who saw benefits in this approach not knowing the side they would defend meant they researched the debate in its entirety, improving their overall understanding. One UEL student said that "by researching both sides you develop your critical thinking, persuasive techniques and how insufficient or sufficient your research was to the discussion". Some of these students also mentioned how it supported their argument during the debate, one UoW student explained that it "allowed you to prepare your replies to arguments during the debate".

Those who disagreed with researching both sides felt that it would have been better to be allocated to and research one perspective. One UEL student responded, "I prefer to research one side and become an expert and then listen carefully to the other arguments to see if they can convince me". For these students there was a connotation that researching both sides was a waste of their time. Comments mostly described students' discontent with only being able to use one side of their research. There were two students (one from each university) who mentioned that they had decided to research only one side. However, this approach did not work for the UEL student "…I only did one and this was not enough as I was then put into the side I had not researched".

Accessibility of resources and relevance to the summative assessment: influential factors on students' perspectives

The significant differences in university perspectives became more apparent when analysing students' perspectives on the use of academic resources. UEL students commented on an improvement in their research skills and confidence when citing sources as evidence. An example included, "I thoroughly enjoyed researching literature/resources and am starting to feel more comfortable citing them as evidence". There were however some UEL students who would also have liked to add their personal perspectives. One suggested, "whilst the academic literature is important and peer-reviewed it does not necessarily represent or resonate with the people on the street who we are discussing in this debate". One student discussed difficulty in generally accessing academic resources, "I find it difficult to find the academic resources, I'd rather talk about my own opinions".

In contrast, UoW students found it difficult to access resources specifically for the debate. It appeared from these findings that whilst the group decided on the sides of

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the debate collaboratively, they then found it difficult to access relevant resources. One student responded, "academic resources are lacking in this area". There was an apparent emphasis by UoW students on the relevance of the debate and its content to the module's summative assessment. Students who stated that the use of academic resources was beneficial mostly explained that they could then use these citations in assignments that were not solely related to the debate's module. For instance, one student said, "it helps to know academic resources that are reliable for our assignments".   However, there were some students who mentioned their dissatisfaction in debating the Polish system when they were not going to consider this country in their summative assessment. One student claimed, "Poland was not a country I wanted to look at".

The formal in-class debate approach: level six students' perspectives

The level six students at both universities experienced the same 'formal' debate design and commented on its use. The debate was carried out before the module's taught content and students were assigned to one of three groups before the session. Students were assigned either to the for or the against debate, or to an impartial audience group where they needed to have investigated both sides of the debate to be ready to pose questions to the for and against sides (Temple, 1997). Students were advised that evidence for this debate should be from academic resources and referenced orally during the debate. The debate was directed by the chair (the lecturer) ensuring that all participants were involved in the debate process and the structure of the room was changed so that the groups sat facing one another. The assessment of the debate comprised both peer and lecturer written feedback on a structured feedback form.   Students were asked to provide suggestions for the assessment prior to the debate's session.   The feedback included comments on whether the evidence was stronger in the for or against debate or was equally weighted and students were given an opportunity to grade the performance of the three student groups' performance (Smith, 1990).

In both universities the debate formed part of the module's taught content and, for some, could have linked to their summative assessment. The UoW debate took place in the second semester in the 12 week Rights, Responsibilities and Advocacy module. The debate was entitled: *In today's society are the child/young person's best interests or the child/young person's right to have a say most important?* At UEL the debate was carried out towards the end of the second semester of a 24 week Globalisation and Childhood module and the content was on debating the role of children who work globally, *should child labour be banned?*

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The for, against and impartial groups: the advantages of this three-way communication

Students who commented on this debate structure found that it increased the breadth of perspectives and it improved their criticality. One UEL student said it "gave far greater perspective, allowed for everyone to learn about all sides of the debate". Comparatively, one UoW student stated that without the impartial group "…it would not have been an all-round debate and information may have only come from one area". Increasing the breadth in perspectives was seen as supporting a balanced debate. Two UEL students commented on this and said "it gave the debate more structure, balance and validity" and "it balanced what could have been a very unbalanced debate".

Many of these statements used terms such as 'question', 'analyse', 'clarify' and 'consider' differing perspectives. For students in these findings the use of for, against and impartial groups provided an environment where the debate's content was considered and analysed during the process of the debate. For instance, one UoW student explained, "It gave a variety of perspectives - causing us to consider different aspects". Importantly, for some of these students, these differing perspectives provided an opportunity for students to reflect on other groups' evidence when defending and evidencing their side of the debate. For instance, one UoW student said "…you are able to listen to other viewpoints, question and analyse what's being said to then debate further". It appears that the impartial group also supported the debate process by maintaining the debate. As one UoW student suggested the "impartial group kept discussion going".

Should students peer-assess the performance of debate teams? Students' diverse perspectives on this form of assessment

The majority of students thought that the lecturer and peer feedback helped to understand what areas could be improved and it also furthered their learning about the topic. One UEL student stated "[it] helped me to understand which group – which side of the debate- had adopted a better approach to debating". However, some students either did not enjoy assessing their peers or did not consider that it was beneficial to do so. The differences of opinion regarding peer-assessment appeared to be directly associated with whether students valued the perspectives of their peers as a form of performance feedback. Students who found benefits in lecturer and peer-assessment had reflected on the feedback to improve their understanding and performance. For instance, one UoW student said, "it gave us an

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idea of our strengths and showed that we do actually know more than we possibly realised, or gave ourselves credit for". Another UoW student said, "[it] made me more confident in my abilities – I definitely know more than I give myself credit for!". None of these students differentiated between the feedback of their lecturers and that from their peers.

However, students who did not agree with the assessment specifically disapproved of peer-assessment, either as part of the process or because it meant accepting their peers' feedback. Two UEL students stated, "I prefer to have feedback from the lecturer not my peers" and "some of my peers were biased, this made their feedback biased". Two UoW students also said, "hated peer reviewing" and "…I personally pay to have feedback from a lecturer".

Discussion and concluding statements

Current research on the use of in-class debates as a teaching strategy has offered differing ways of carrying out debates. The majority of studies use differing debate designs and therefore the designs are seen mostly in isolation from one another (Brown, 2015; Walker and Warhurst, 2000). This has meant that, whilst differing debate designs have been discussed, there have been limited comparisons made or comparisons have been made in theory without being researched collaboratively (Kennedy, 2007). Moreover, the focus of many of these studies has been on the benefits (specifically for students) of using in-class debates generally as a teaching strategy (Oros, 2007; Zare and Othman, 2013). By focusing on differing debate characteristics this study has found complexity and criticality in student's individual perspectives. Across levels of study students held varying perspectives on the use of debate characteristics that led some students to critically question aspects of the debate. At level four, students critically queried whether for and against teams were too structured and whether debates could be concluded? At level five, students questioned whether researching both sides of a debate was beneficial and whether debates should be focused on summative assessment? Finally, at level six students considered whether peer-assessment should be seen as a beneficial form of assessment?

The complexity of perspectives led to analysing whether there were any consistent variables that influenced student's positive and negative perspectives on the use of in-class debates. Considering the needs of the cohort appeared to be an influential variable for students in this study. For instance, there was complexity in perspectives on whether researching both sides of the debate was a waste of time at

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level five and whether peer-assessment was supportive at level six. In considering student's feedback on these debate designs it may have been advantageous to have considered the needs of the specific cohort as part of planning of the debate. Kennedy (2007) says the debates' assessment process can be managed by students, either with or without the involvement of the lecturer.   To consider their specific needs further it could be purported that full participation would move beyond the debate process and its assessment (Smith, 1990).   Instead, students could become co-designers of the debate.

Throughout the findings students commented positively and negatively about the purpose of the debate and the relevance of the debate to the modules taught content, including its assessment. When the debate design was effective, students mentioned benefits in participating in the debate.   The benefits included an increased understanding of differing perspectives, a consideration or change in students' personal perspectives, students reflecting on their own performance and developing confidence in citing and evidencing relevant resources. However, when debate design was less effective for students, there were comments on inability to reach a conclusion, lack of relevance to the module's assessment and difficulties experienced in accessing relevant academic resources. The findings of this paper suggest that the debate design does influence student's perspectives on in-class debates. However, the findings suggest further complexity than lecturers merely considering which debate designs they would like to use. The findings identify variables that need to be considered before the selection of debate characteristics. For these students the needs of the specific cohort, the purpose of the debate and the relevance of the debate to the module and its assessment should influence choosing debate characteristics. These variables need to be considered in order for students to have positive perspectives on the use of in-class debates.

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