ASSIGNED ADVOCACY, ARGUMENTATION, AND DEBATE IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

by
James M. Wade
and
Leslie Wade Zorwick

A student attends a History class as Andrew Jackson so that she can explain the federal policy of Indian removal and answer classmate questions. A student-defense attorney cross-examines Curley during a trial of George Milton following the murder of Lennie Small in a trial based on John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men.* Social Studies students representing Zambia, Senegal, Ghana, and Botswana appeal to classroom investors for money to support the infrastructure development in their nations. A group of Science students argue a proposal for adopting a carbon tax in the Senate Energy Committee. Students in a Spanish class debate an open campus policy at their high school in Spanish. What do these things have in common? The answer is obvious. Each involves a teacher who has used assigned advocacy and argument in a classroom.

The assumption underlying this article is that all teachers seek to develop successful classrooms. By success, they generally mean an active classroom where students energetically approach learning in an open and supportive environment. It is a classroom where students learn content material and develop understanding and skills that they will take into their future classes and lives. In a successful classroom, students feel a sense of accomplishment and ownership, while teachers feel a sense of satisfaction.

The argument made by this article is that teachers can improve classroom success by consciously developing assignments that use advocacy and argumentation. This success takes its form in positive changes in the classroom environment, student attitudes, classroom management, and actual academic performance. We argue on behalf of a notion of argumentation in the classroom that goes beyond the traditional view of forensics as an extra-curricular, interscholastic activity. This also goes far beyond the direct application of competitive debate formats into content area classes. Assigned advocacy and argument includes traditional forensic concepts of debate, but expands that to include all types of role-playing advocacy and controversy generated by a classroom teacher.

Competitive debate provides a model for engaged, cooperative learning. It creates an interactive environment where students are directly encouraged to gain command of specific information in order to participate in competition as representatives of a specific side of an argument. The impact of debate as an educational tool has been proven through decades of interscholastic competition and a diverse range of academic studies (Allen, *et. al.*, 1999; Collier, 2004). Translated into a classroom, debate offers an intentional and directed use of advocacy and controversy in order to improve learning in almost any academic setting. Moreover, debate transforms the classroom environment into an intellectually challenging and engaging world where ideas are explored through discourse and argument. In the process, students develop an ability to identify, support, and articulate their ideas. They learn how to give voice to their thoughts. Such self-awareness is incredibly empowering and makes a student more motivated to learn, while giving them new tools that can fundamentally improve their learning skills.

Every teacher knows that learning, not teaching, is the real goal of education. Students who hear information presented by a teacher may or may not understand that information. In contrast, when students are asked to explain an idea to others, they *must* be in command of that idea. Learning is a prerequisite to advocacy. Role-playing can situate students as advocates in a classroom, where the course content gives that role-playing a context and purpose. When controversy is added through opposing advocacies, learning becomes a social activity where ideas are tested and evaluated. In the process, reasoning, critical thinking, and oral communication skills develop. Since education exists to prepare students to deal with the demands of an unpredictable and dynamic future, the value of specific facts will always be limited, but the values of analysis, critical

thought, and oral competence create a foundation for adult life in a rapidly changing world.

Widespread anecdotal evidence exists supporting the use of debate and argumentation across the curriculum. In addition, over two hundred academic articles have been written since 2000 describing teacher success using debate and argumentation in a wide diversity of classrooms. Ironically, most of those writings come from college classrooms, and a great many are from other nations. Very little has been done to examine the effectiveness of argumentation in traditional content area high school classrooms in the United States.

While studies are limited, there is a great source of insight into the educational power of classroom advocacy and argument. The forensics community includes thousands of teachers who actively coach students who participate in speech and debate competition. Each of these teachers prepares students for weekend tournaments, and most judge competitions as part of their involvement in forensics. The experience of speech and debate coaches is a storehouse of data on the impact of classroom discussion and argument because many speech and debate coaches use these activities in their classrooms.

In an effort to gain data on the use of advocacy and argument in secondary classrooms, we surveyed forensics coaches to gain some insight into the perceived impacts of those activities. With the support of the National Forensic League, the National Debate Coaches Association, Emory University, and Urban Debate Leagues in Milwaukee, Boston, and Atlanta, a survey invitation was sent to hundreds of coaches. Respondents were asked to participate in an online survey, and we received 139 completed surveys. (Teachers who read this and wish to participate are invited to do so by going to http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=zVUY2cxEnNk4j_2fx3H0rOzQ_3d_3d. The accumulation of data is on-going for future research and publication.)

This survey reflects a strong belief in argumentation as a teaching tool. Ninety percent of respondents use assigned argument in non-debate classrooms. And, the majority of our survey respondents have used a content-based format to generate formal arguments (40%), assigned advocacy (40%), and role-playing activities (43%) in *more than four* of the classes they teach.

The reasons for the heavy inclusion of argumentation as a teaching tool become obvious when the perceived benefits of this inclusion are examined (see Table 1 for all results). The majority of respondents saw moderate or significant improvement in engagement and participation (92.3%), increased skill development (88.6%), growth in content knowledge (84.2%), and academic performance (66.2%) following the inclusion of argumentation and debate into their class.

In addition to greater learning and engagement, respondents also noted substantial changes in classroom environment. Our respondents saw moderate or significant improvement in student-teacher interaction (76.1%), students' interaction with other students (82.3%), and commitment to learning (80.3%). Finally, over half of our respondents (52.9%) perceived a moderate or significant increase in their ability to manage their classrooms. These data suggest particular value for beginning teachers who are new to classroom management challenges.

These results provide a strong justification for the expanded use of assigned advocacy and argument across the curriculum. We believe that our results speak to the powerful impact of classroom advocacy and argument. While some previous research has documented the improvement in grades following debate performance (Fine, 1999; Winkler, 2008), a great deal of psychological research has identified the importance of *perceptions* of improvement and success. Researchers have found that when teachers expected success on the part of their students, they tended to see success; in this case, perceptions of success tended to breed future success (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966). We believe that asking about teacher perception offers a useful addition to research considering the benefits of argumentation and advocacy in the classroom. Advocacy, argumentation, and debate in the classroom offer wonderful opportunities to teach students new skills, improve classroom environments, and increase student achievement.

(**Jim Wade** is a retired high school teacher and NFL Diamond Coach, presently teaching at Georgia State University. He is also Director of the Coaches' Workshop at the Emory National Debate Institute.)

(**Leslie Wade Zorwick** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Hendrix College. She has been involved in debate as a participant, coach, or camp instructor for the last 15 years.)

REFERENCES

Allen, M., Berkowitz, S., Hunt, S. & Louden, A. (1999). A meta-analysis of the impact of forensics and communication education on critical thinking. *Communication Education*, 48, 18-30.

Collier, L. (2004, June). *Argument for Success: A Study of Academic Debate in the Urban High Schools of Chicago, Kansas City, New York, St. Louis and Seattle.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Fine, M. F. (1999). *My friends say, 'Debater girl! Why are you always debating with me?': A study of the New York Urban Debate League.* New York, NY: The Open Society Institute.

Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1966). Teachers' Expectancies: Determinants of pupils' IQ gains. *Psychological Reports*, 19, 115-118.

Winkler, Carol. (2008) *Extending the Benefits of Debate: Outcomes of the Computer Assisted Debate Project.* Proceedings of the Alta Conference, ed. Scott Jacobs (Annandale, VA: NCA).

Table 1. Reported change in student performance

After including classroom argumentation/debate into a class, how much positive change have you seen in your students':

	Significant	Moderate	Small	No Change
Level of Engagement/Participation	61.3%	31%	7%	0%
Level of Skill Development	56%	32.6%	9.2%	1.4%
Level of Content Knowledge	55.4%	28.8%	15.1%	0%
Positive interaction with other students	44.7%	37.6%	9.2%	7.8%
Positive interaction with teachers	41.3%	34.8%	14.5%	7.2%
Commitment to learning	37.3%	43%	14.8%	4.2%
Academic Performance	25.2%	41%	22.3%	6.5%
Change in teacher's ability to effectively manage student behavior	23.6%	29.3%	17.9%	22.9%