

For the Final Exam -- Let's Debate!

By
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As participants in forensics, there are many tasks we are called on to complete. The largest task for most of us is promoting the activity; not only bringing new people into the activity, but also spreading the word to the larger community about our too often forgotten activity. Hopefully many utilize some of the techniques we are using in Canton, Ohio (home of the other “NFL”). We contact our school and local papers with the hope that our student’s smiling faces will greet us with our morning coffee. We give information to the school yearbook staff with the hope that our teams accomplishments won’t be forgotten in the seasons to follow. We give announcements about our teams to our alumni and parent newsletters with the hope that families which know us will want to know what is happening with the home team. We return back to school after each long weekend and, in an exhausted haze, write descriptions of how the team did with the hope that the other students and faculty in the school won’t be sleeping through the morning announcements and will be impressed with where the team traveled and its successes. Some of us even get an extra boost of energy from time to time and print a newsletter to disseminate information about our team to supporters and former competitors. We all utilize many venues to promote the activity. Last season, however, we found a new way to accomplish this goal. Although we are all busy, this unique idea is definitely worth the time. Coordinating with a local college to teach a class about high school debate is a great way to promote the activity, fine tune student skills, and bring new blood into the activity.

Like many high schools around the country our school has a post-secondary

program in which some of our students participate. As is typically the case, one of our students stood out in her college class and the professor found discussions of debate intriguing and more than applicable to college classes and life beyond. That meeting of professor and student led to a dynamic, collaborative, educating team. Last spring we were asked to guest lecture in an Argumentation Class, under the Communication Department at Kent State University – Stark Campus in Canton, Ohio. We met the professor in a trendy coffee shop and brainstormed ideas on how to bring high school debate to college students, who were all taking the Argumentation elective, with majors ranging from education, communication, business, accounting, and even art. What we came up with was an eight week seminar that extended beyond the classroom. The class was only 75 minutes long and was held on Monday and Wednesday, conveniently after our high school day ended. We began our seminar by taking our more experienced debaters to perform demonstrations of their debate categories for the class. First was a demonstration of public forum, then Lincoln/Douglas and finally policy. Each debate category performed a shortened version of their first two speeches and two cross-examination periods. Our students obviously gave a very watered down presentation, speaking at conversation pace and avoiding all debate jargon. That first day our team was met by not only the class but also the Dean and various faculty members of the university! After our presentation we allocated time for discussion and the audience had plenty to ask and accolades to deliver. Our debaters did a fantastic job impressing— sparking interest in the

upcoming class but more importantly making debate clear to a novice audience (sadly not a single audience member had ever seen a competitive high school debate). The introductory debates reminded us of the incredible skill members of speech and debate possess— especially when college students admit a group of high school kids could do something they never dreamed they could learn to do.

By the following class, our instruction was underway. We spent 5 weeks of the class giving lectures on debate theories, structure, and effective flowing. Given our timeframe to teach the class was only 5 weeks, it was intense learning. While this structure would never allow us to teach all there is to know about debate, we covered a lot of ground in our given timeframe. Each class was followed by out-of-class assignments to solidify learning. We gave them topic papers to read, questions to answer, articles to cut and tag for evidence, evidence to read and label with the correct debate theory, papers to write on philosophies and debate theories, and daily quizzes on the material covered. During the semester the Kent students were required to judge at three local debate tournaments and write reviews of each round. After several weeks of teaching debate we left the class hopeful we had impressed them with an activity of which they previously knew nothing. Within a few weeks; we learned our goal had been achieved. The professor contacted us to return with our debaters. The Kent students had opted to have their final exam be a debate round with the high school debaters. This time we spent two weeks in the class, pairing a high school debater with each college student. The college students

Coordinating with a Local College

chose a resolution to debate, collected evidence and wrote arguments for and against their topic area with the guidance of the high school debaters. The final exam was held with reporters from our local newspapers and extra seasoned debate judges. The college students paired up with a high school partner, were assigned the affirmative or negative side of a resolution, and had a shortened policy debate round with veteran judges evaluating the debate for their final exam grade. After the debates were completed everyone rejoined one another one final time for a discussion of the debates and to share reactions to the class.

The reaction to our project was overwhelmingly positive. It was clear that these college students had no idea the work level our debaters put in to compete each weekend. They were blown away by our competition schedule and were at the edge of their seats to hear how our travels went each week. No one among the Kent students could say enough to express how impressed they were with our kids or list the benefits of competitive debate. Just as impressive was the amount the Kent students learned in just a few short weeks. Many indicated that they had never taken a class of this nature or worked so hard but

with that they realized they had never learned something so applicable to their careers or life in general. However, it wasn't just the college students who gained from the experience; our high school debaters gained just as much. Most of their high school careers our students are on the learning end instead of the teaching side. The debaters realized how difficult it is to teach someone how to speak persuasively or how to distinguish a well articulated argument in the 3rd paragraph of a 15 page article. They also learned how to debate and persuade a person less familiar with debate more effectively than they ever could if they drew the lay judge at a tournament. Our students learned by teaching and embraced adaptation more than ever before. They also developed a deep sense of confidence; they stood as expert each time they worked with the college students and professor who were older and hopefully a little wiser than them.

Perhaps more importantly, our students felt appreciated. They saw sixteen people who had no true reason to be so interested in them (after all the Kent kids could drop the class at anytime). Our high school debaters felt important; they felt as if they were doing their part to spread the word to the larger community what high

school speech and debate has to offer. As proud as we were of our project, in the end it was the debaters who glowed with pride as members of the class gave us their contact information so they could judge in the future. They felt as though they had drawn new people into our activity and they had. Could those Kent kids judge the final round of the Tournament of Champions? Probably not, but at least they knew what the tournament was, applauded those that attended, and would have loved to watch every moment of it. They were certainly judges who could handle local and state competition levels. Most importantly however was not that they were judges but that they had joined a community they never would have previously; they had bonded with our students and us as patrons of debate.

(Kristie Cramer is a diamond coach and is the Director of Debate at Case Western Reserve University as well as Canton Central Catholic and Perry High Schools in Ohio.

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