

## Debating as a Team Learning Strategy in an Economics Classroom

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*In a debate students learn to test their ability to formulate an argument in a team environment. This paper provides a brief literature review summarizing debate as an active learning tool; method to foster reflection on ethics and social responsibility; and an arena to practice teamwork through the debate format. Research supports using debates to encourage students to dig deeper into class content. The in-class economics debate narrative shares how teambuilding, topic assignment, research methods, preparation and evaluation help develop research, teamwork, leadership and presentation skills. I have been constructing class debate activities in Principles of Micro and Macro Economics courses for more than fourteen years. The current structure of teams arguing in an argument point, opposition rebuttal, and point response format has evolved from practice and review over time. As a researcher in leadership and economics, this narrative discussing debate in an economics classroom adds to the literature supporting debates as an effective active learning strategy. In addition to the literature review and instructor narrative, student reflections are shared to illustrate the student's perception of benefit from participating in the debate. Academic goals to enhance critical thinking and social responsibility are developed through the student research, teamwork, leadership and presentation activities required to construct the argument, the debate.*

### Introduction

Economics is a social science where students learn the benefits of maximizing their opportunity cost and how decision making is based on maximizing self-benefit. If economic beings are only interested in self why do we need to work in teams? And why if I am working in a team is it of any benefit to me? The cost/benefit theory is reiterated over and over to students; therefore, the class activities need to demonstrate this as well. The benefit of teamwork needs to be made evident to students. Studies analyzing the role of teamwork in business education support activities that "create a sense of meaningfulness and community in the classroom"

(Robbins, 1994, p. 312). Economics finds itself tossed back and forth from the Business Department to the Social Science Department often. For purposes of this paper I will consider it both and not be deterred by placing it in only one area. Economics is a social science necessary for better understanding of how business is conducted in an economy. Economics is a required course for most students; making it more interesting and engaging yields higher thinking economic citizens when they graduate.

Critical thinking skills are enhanced when students participate in exercises expecting them to develop an argument supporting a position. Active learning techniques such as debates teach academic skills as noted in the study by Professor Pernecky of Saint Olaf College, Minnesota. "Professors try to excite students, and many attempt to develop student proficiencies in speaking, writing, and critical thinking, while enhancing understanding of the course content" (Pernecky, 1997, p. 136). Students need to understand the economic principles and how to convey economic theories to others in verbal and written formats. Companies want employees who understand a variety of hard and soft skills. Working with others (sense of community), social responsibility and personal responsibility are examples of soft skills. Debates enable students to develop team skills and recognize the benefit of refining skills employers seek in employees.

An instructor can lecture on the benefits of teams and on economic principles, however when students have a team experience they recognize the benefit and cost. "In-class debates cultivate the active engagement of students [and place] the responsibility of comprehension on the shoulders of the students" (Kennedy, 2009, p. 226). Teamwork also enhances students' ability to learn to share labor and not duplicate others work (Pernecky, 1997, p. 137). The class debates foster engaged learning and put the responsibility on the student for being actively involved in their knowledge gains. Corbin and Strauss suggest in their discussion of methodology that "problematic interactions involve thought, discussion, debate...an arena is formed that will affect the future course of action" (p. 8). The world is a set of complex interactions and students need the ability to think critically and reflectively.

Active learning strategies engage students in the learning process. Classroom debates are an example of an active team learning strategy. A common practice now in the engaged student classroom is teamwork. Relational skills are necessary to work in teams and are expected in most

professional settings. "Relational or interpersonal skills are a must in every business graduate in order to improve his/her effectiveness as a leader and manager and to be able to nurture collaborative mindsets in teams, projects, and alliances" (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 96). Although, Rodriguez (2007) emphasizes business students this could be said for any future professional. Students across the curriculum take courses on team building.

This paper includes a narrative of a classroom experience using debates as an active instructional learning tool in economics classes. Student reflections are shared anonymously, from post-debate response papers collected over ten years and two college campuses. The instructor and student's experiences are retold after a brief review of research on the effectiveness of debates in the classroom.

### **Research Support**

**Learning tool.** Active learning is supported by many scholars. Students gain knowledge by participating in their learning not just taking notes and reciting them back on a test. Kennedy (2009) of Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania conducted a study with undergraduate Education students as the participants. Kennedy's goal was to determine the value of using debate as an instructional tool from the students' experiential perspective. In the study by Kennedy (2009) "prior to the first debate, 75% of the participants stated that they would consider using debate as an instructional strategy, and after the debates, this increased to 85%" (p. 225). Kennedy's participants were studying to be teachers and were given surveys prior to and after the debates to assess their knowledge retention and whether they felt the in-class debate was a beneficial instructional strategy. In Kennedy's design, students were given the topic weeks in advance but only learned whether they would be for or against the topic one week in advance (p. 230). Participants reported that "participating contributed more than observing" (Kennedy, 2009, p. 232) to their knowledge gains in class.

Another scholar evaluating effective learning tools, Oros (2007) of Washington College in Maryland, identifies debates as an effective participative activity in interactive classrooms. Oros (2007) points out that many teachers are still trying to figure out how to engage students and debates are an effective student engagement tool.

Fewer of us do so in a structured way, however. And even fewer integrate debate systematically into our syllabi and curricula. More of us should. Structured classroom debates (SCDs), whereby teams of students debate in class an issue prepared in advance, provide an important tool for helping our students to develop their critical-thinking skills and also can help professors to encourage productive classroom participation beyond the few students who often dominate classroom discussion (Oros, 2007, p. 293).

There are a growing number of instructors willing to share development methods and support debate as a valid teaching methodology to enhance professional skills.

Tessier (2009) at State University of New York, Delhi also uses debate and response papers as active learning tools. Tessier's (2009) research analyzed the effect of classroom debate format on student learning and revelations about student tendencies. "Students in a non-major, college-level environmental issues course were required to debate whether or not the United States should drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge" (Tessier, 2009, p. 144). The research found that debates increased learning skills, encouraged civic engagement, and developed arguing skills, public speaking, critical thinking, and research skills (Tessier, 2009, p. 146). Understanding the effects of social responsibility and sustainability on the community were additional benefits from the use of a team active learning assignment.

**Ethics.** Social responsibility is becoming more important in today's business schools. Debating causes students to review the ethics of the parties involved in their topic. In economics the argument between sound policies which make ethical sense versus economic gains always manifests in the debate arguments. "Debates engage students in active learning [and] force them to go beyond [their basic knowledge of the subject] absorbing information about ethical issues" (Roy, 2012, p. 73). Business faculty find themselves teaching at least one chapter on ethics as it pertains to their specialty whether it is accounting, marketing, management or economics. This is crossing the disciplines as many areas find a need to send their students out prepared to deal with ethical dilemmas whether they are business, e-media or health majors.

**Importance of teamwork.** Robbins (1994) states “performance is primarily a function of ability, motivation, and opportunity” (p. 313). Robbins’ (1994) study on meaningfulness in the classroom suggests teams increase motivation. Two points to emphasize from the study as they relate to active learning are: teams increase the student’s sense of meaningfulness and interdependence as it relates to the assignment and teams aid in the students sense of class community (Robbins, 1994, p. 313, 314).

Employers want employees who excel in the intangibles of leadership, communication, and teamwork (Lesser, 2011, p. 49). Although, the corporate world is still searching for a method to account for these in a quantifiable way they know that they add to their competitive advantage (Lesser, 2011, p. 49). Employers want employees who can work well in a team environment and can assimilate to the group quickly.

**Format/Method of Debates.** Tessier (2009) researched how format affected student learning based on debate format type. Tessier (2009) used different formats over four semesters. In the first “Standard” format students asked each other questions and “the half of the class that was not debating served as a jury for the debate and decided which side won” (p. 144). The students did a report after the debate. The second format was the “Panel”, in this method half of the class debated based on questions the other half developed and the question developing half wrote reports after the debate (Tessier, 2009, p. 145). The third format was the “Student Questions” format where report writers gave questions in advance and teams fielded rebuttals during class (Tessier, 2009, p. 145). The fourth format was the “Pre-Set Questions” format; questions are given in advance from the instructor. The students then answered these questions in the introduction, points and summary (Tessier, 2009, p. 145). In this study formats were analyzed and students were queried about what skills they felt they developed by participating in the debates. “Students felt they developed public speaking, critical thinking and source finding [skills]...Regardless of format, classroom debates increased learning skills and encouraged civic engagement” (Tessier, 2009, p. 146). Research by Kennedy (2009), Oros (2007), Tessier (2009), Robbins (1994) and others supports the skills I am reinforcing with debates in my classroom.

The following section explains the methods I follow using debates as an active learning tool. I use debates to foster skills in research, teamwork, leadership and presentation of work. These skills develop

through teambuilding, topic assignments, topic research and debate preparation by students.

**Class method Team Building.** The class is divided into teams in the first class meeting. One can divide the class using color coded index cards or some other method that generates team identity. I use colored index cards and then the teams are identified by their color. I pass out the cards to deter students who would choose teams with friends only. This could be done in another random means in a larger class such as assignment by class list or counting off. My classes tend to average 20-25 people. The cards serve multiple purposes in the class.

The first day the cards enable students to get to know each other. Students list on the cards their name, major, year, a contact method and something interesting about themselves. Teams meet and each member must introduce someone else from the team to the class. They actually move around the classroom which stimulates some discussion from that physical activity. The team assignment creates instant relationships. "Group learning also reinforces the importance of being trustworthy and of trusting others—although 'free riding' may arise, students often find methods to limit it" (Pernecky, 1997, p. 137). The team introductions, discussion, and debate assignment requires them to work in a team environment and learn to navigate personalities.

I have had to reassign some team members due to enrollment changes and students were disappointed. They felt they had already bonded with their team mates. The exercise of team formation introduces them to public speaking in an impromptu format. It also forces them to be reflective about what makes them an individual. This act of quick inner examination starts creative thinking while starting to team build.

Most classes have 4 teams, paired by team color, debating something such as: *Would legalizing drugs decrease crime? Would increasing minimum wage increase the unemployment rate?* In large classes multiple teams are assigned. This assignment really works best in a class when students can be assigned to team sizes less than 8; 5-6 per team has worked best. Each member must present a point supporting their team position. Ideally in a team of six, Student 1 introduces the topic, Students 2, 3, 4 and 5 make the major points and Student 6 summarizes the debate. I have formatted the debate to meet my class needs which is common among college faculty.

**Topic assignment.** Each team color is assigned for or against a pre-assigned topic. Students do not pick their topic or position. Topics are decided by the instructor. Teams are randomly assigned a topic and a position of pro or con. Some Professors “distribute sign-up sheets to the students for the topics and for which side of a proposition they would like to defend” (Pernecky, 1997, p. 136). I have found that when a topic is something they view as morally, socially, or ethically wrong they do not want to argue for it. Therefore students do not have the option of choosing their teammates, topic or position in this class. Students are given their topic by the third week and debates are scheduled in the twelfth and thirteenth weeks.

**Topic research.** Students research on their own outside of class throughout the term. They debate at the end of the term two to three weeks prior to final exams. During the weeks prior to the debate, teams have limited in class time to discuss articles and economic impact. A benefit of the teams is students begin to recognize a need to meet outside of class to work on their debate and often this develops into study teams for other assignments.

One assignment students discuss in and out of class is a weekly response paper to current events. The Wall Street Journal, a Dow Jones and Company, Inc. newspaper is a required supplemental text, which they use to continually discuss and relate current events to the economic topics in the classroom. Weekly they write a response paper to an article or articles from the Wall Street Journal. Students discuss their weekly response papers and choose the best or most interesting response from their team to share with the class during the last class meeting of each week.

As the term advances students focus on their debate topic and use their Wall Street Journal article responses when possible to build their research. They also research using the library and on the web. I schedule a class period with our research librarian in the first few weeks of the term. In that class the librarian discusses how to research a topic and determine its credibility and relevance to the topic. Students then discuss credibility of research and appropriate sources. This develops their research and writing skills. I often give students an extra credit assignment to complete an annotated source page with three sources three to four weeks prior to the debate. This encourages them to do the research and prepare for the debate.

**Debate Preparation.** To prepare students a mock interview is conducted with a subject such as: *Are TV shows good or bad for the drug dealing economy?* Prompts are: Do drug shows cause amateurs to think they can make drugs and cause a flood of new dealers? If there is a flood of new dealers will this drive the price of drugs down? Can we have an over-supply of drug makers? Students experience this mini version in a three to five minute debate.

After the mock debate students have an opportunity to ask questions about the debate, such as where will we sit and what if I do a great job presenting and my team does not do any work? One concern shared by students was their lack of knowledge about how to stop their presentation or argument without being abrupt. This concern was addressed by having students say thank you to signify they are finished presenting. Public speaking and critical argument as one would learn formally in a debate class or effective speaking class are not taught per se in the class. However, students do learn aspects of these skills informally as they prepare for the final debate day.

On the day of the debate they are expected to sit with their team in front of the judges and stand when it is their turn to speak. They dress in a business casual/professional manner. They are allowed to use notecards, but are discouraged from reading a paper. At the debate they can share handouts or information with the audience as part of their presentation time. Each student presents his or her position of the debate topic for their team.

Presentation skills include organization and coordination with team members in addition to verbal and written communication. My experience has been at community and regional college campuses. The students are commuter students, non-residential, therefore they do not live on campus with each other and finding ways to work on their project together requires time management and organization to plan the work. This adds an element of complexity to the assignment. In the age of internet and social media there are many methods to communicate and someone must take the lead and organize the tasks to ensure everything is completed on time. Debate members need to be assigned, claimed or delegated roles so that the introduction, key points and summary of the topic are covered. Team mates need to know what each other's points are in case someone is absent the debate day. This is an example of another level of team work. This



coordination effort will impact the evaluation they receive on their final debate.

**Debate evaluation** Prior to the debate beginning; score sheets are given to the evaluators/judges to mark during the debate. The evaluators include faculty and non-debating students of the class. An explanation is given to everyone, participants and evaluators on the debate process. The debate topic is stated and each team's position is identified for the evaluators to organize their score sheets. The evaluator's are given a score sheet for each team.

The top of each sheet has a space for the team name, date, topic, and team position. I have used different rubrics to grade over time and continue to revise the rubric for evaluator ease of use. Currently I use a sheet that identifies Introduction, First Argument, Response, Rebuttal repeating for the second through final argument, with a score space for conclusion and overall quality. The score sheet is a compilation of different rubrics I have reviewed and developed over the years. A sample of the current rubric iteration used as the score sheet can be found in Appendix A. Once the debate is concluded I collect the score sheets, tally the points and announce the outcome.

The winning team receives 15 points and the runner up earns 10 points, in addition to the debate each student turns in a response paper the week following the debate. The paper (discussed below) is worth an additional 10 points which is the equivalent to 25 points and 25% of the class grade. Teams have tied in the past. The debate is completed during one class period. I moderate and time the debate participants. One 90 minute class period allows time to debrief the subject with the whole class after the arguments are completed.

Two different formats have been used for judging. In one format faculty members come to the class and score the debates with provided score sheets. Another method used when faculty are not available requires the non-debating students be the judges. Often, I have the non-debating students and the faculty judge. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Having faculty join the classroom instantly puts the students in a more formal mindset. The disadvantage of faculty judges is some students have an instant fear of people they do not know and their presentation suffers. An advantage of the peer judges is that students have been with them all term and they feel relaxed in front of them. This eases some nerves. Yet, it enables some to not take the debate as seriously. When peers act as the

judges they, the non-debating students, learn another element of presentation that of listening, focus and critical review of peer's work.

After the debate students are given the opportunity through a written response to earn individual points. The response papers include:

- team assigned debate topic
- statement of team's position on debate topic
- individual's agreement or disagreement with team's position
- individual's point made on topic
- individual's response to the other team's position during the debate

Students can also comment on the other team's argument in critical review, but not an opinionated bashing of the other side. This team and individual combination of work encourages research, teamwork and individual autonomy within the group work. This fosters leadership skills.

The economics in-class debates are used to facilitate student active learning of research, teamwork, leadership and presentation skills. The teams are assigned and students decide how they will work together, accomplish their research and most effectively present their sides position. The next section details more of the benefits to the students.

**Student Benefits Research.** Part of research is presenting what one learns. The debate provides a format different from the normal course of activities to present this information. Students must prepare themselves to present in front of an audience of their peers for three-seven minutes, depending on their role as introduction, argument point or summary. They must also prepare to respond to the other team's arguments for and against their position in the rebuttal-response phase. "Debate statements and arguments should have a strong research support" (Rao, 2010, p. 239). Students use notecards to prepare their remarks and often bring additional notes to refer to for rebuttals. Students are forced to view both sides of an argument. Library instruction as noted previously is scheduled to introduce students to scholarly methods and technology. Students have to manage their time and schedule team collaboration either face to face or virtually.

**Teamwork.** All one has to say is *teams are being assigned* and the groans are heard throughout academic corridors. Students do not like the idea of their grade being affected by the work of others. Also, in this "I"

centered society students often have poor relational skills. “Debating also opens opportunities for the development of empathy” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 227). This is a valuable component taught in emotional intelligence lectures. Sense of community starts from the day the teams are assigned. Self-learning happens automatically and students start learning how to learn. This helps “improve their critical thinking” (Tessier, 2009, p. 144). The team model enables interdependent learning and self-motivated learning.

**Leadership.** It manifests when the team responsibilities need to be assigned. Critical thinking is practiced as described by Blooms taxonomy “higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation focus on how to think” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 226). Numerous scholars support debates as an effective way for students to learn to analyze and evaluate (Roy, 2012, p. 73). Leadership is present throughout the organization, preparation and presentation phases of the debate.

**Presentation skills.** Students improve their oral presentation skills because they speak in front of the audience and judges. “Strong oral and written communication skills top the list of desired qualities employers seek in college graduates” (Roy, 2012, p. 74). In the literature reflective papers are often required and this is consistent with the economic debate’s post-debate response paper (Kennedy, 2009; Pernecky, 1997; Roy, 2012; and Tessier, 2009). The debaters often bring posters or some visual they want to share while making their argument point.

**Student Reflections.** The following are excerpts from student response papers summarizing their debate experience. Student feedback reinforces the benefits of debate as a learning tool.

As I learned, team debates can be a very effective learning tool. They create the opportunity to work as a team player, learn more about a particular subject, and to open the minds of students in the process. I felt that I learned a great deal about the subject. I also found myself coming into the debate with one idea and leaving with another. This was definitely a mind opener for me (Student A).

Writing this debate has really opened my eyes to the pollution problems we are facing. I think it is scary. If I found this many problems just with water pollution how many more problems are there out there with the other

types of pollution? I can only hope that government will stand up and make stronger rules and attempt to fix the problems we have created (Student B).

At first, I thought that I would completely disagree with this stance in the debate; however, after thinking and researching, I find that I both agree and disagree with this stance... With the above facts in mind, I was sure I would not be able to argue against strengthening standards. However, I have thought about my current political feelings, and the economy is extremely high on my list of priorities. Because of this, I also disagree with strengthening anti-pollution standards (Student C).

The question of whether trade helps or hurts the natural environment has led to a decade of dialogue between economists and environmentalists. Learning the assumptions and theories and models has allowed me to progress beyond gut reaction and better understand the strengths and weaknesses of various economic theories and models. To know whether you can apply economic theory to reality, you must know about economic institutions, laws, common practices, and organizations in society that affect the economy (Student D).

The student reflections illustrate how they perceived the activity before and after the debate. They also narrate in their voice how many students feel about arguing on a side they do not agree and how research improves their ability to make more informed decisions.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is a review of scholarly research, in-class experience from an instructor using debates and student reflections. The examples are from the experience in the economics classroom over 14 years. One could consider it biased that the research presented supports the author's position that in-class debates are a benefit to active engagement and team work. This author finds it an acceptable bias and allows that student reflections support the research findings. Furthermore, the classroom

example, student reflections and scholarly literature all support the view that in-class debates enhance student research, teamwork, leadership and presentation skills. This review and narrative add to the literature by combining the instructor's experience, student reflections and research review. The instructor's experience and student reflections are valuable to professor's evaluating the benefits of debates as a learning tool. The review provides scholarly support for debate as an active learning tool.

Future implications include a plan to conduct classroom research to analyze if economics' students have similar views to what other scholars have found; and compare the difference in student responses to knowledge gained if they know which side of the argument they will be debating in advance or if they do not learn this until one week prior. In Pernecky's (1997) paper a suggestion was made to have the non-debating students "write a short paper on a debate in which they did not participate in order to encourage the nonparticipants' attendance and attention" (p. 138). I have not made such an assignment, but plan on incorporating it into future assignments. Further research is valuable to the academic literature on team based learning and active learning strategies.

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**Personal Biography**

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**Appendix A**

Classroom Debate Rubric				
Debate Topic: _____				Pro
Team name: _____		Date: _____		Con
Member Names: _____				
				Total
Pts/Criteria	0 1 2 3 4	5 6 7	8 9 10	
<b>Introduction:</b> Introduce Self/Team, Topic, Points, Position, Clarity, Factual Support, Emotion, 5-7 Minutes	<b>Opening statement</b> was disorganized, lacked factual support and relevance.	<b>Opening statement</b> was somewhat clear, well organized, factual, and relevant.	<b>Opening statement</b> was clear, well organized, factual, and relevant.	
<b>First Argument</b>	<b>0 1 2 3 4</b>	<b>5 6 7</b>	<b>8 9 10</b>	
<b>Clarity, Relevant, Appropriate, Purpose, Emotion 3-5 min</b>	Very little support for argument with facts	Most Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	

<b>Pts/Criteria for Rebuttal Response</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
Response 2-min	Very little support for argument with facts	Most Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	
Rebuttal 2-min	Very little support for argument with facts	Most Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	Arguments are supported with some facts and examples.	
<b>Second Argument</b>	<b>0 1 2 3 4</b>	<b>5 6 7</b>	<b>8 9 10</b>	
Response	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
Rebuttal	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Third Argument</b>	<b>0 1 2 3 4</b>	<b>5 6 7</b>	<b>8 9 10</b>	
Response	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
Rebuttal	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>0 1 2 3 4</b>	<b>5 6 7</b>	<b>8 9 10</b>	
<b>Overall:</b> Reparedness, effectiveness, professional attire, Team cohesiveness, Quality of Research.	<b>0 1 2 3 4</b>	<b>5 6 7</b>	<b>8 9 10</b>	