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## **Examining Online Debate and Discussion**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the use of modified student debate and discussion in the online environment. The researcher/instructor found that participation in online discussions was consistently higher during weeks in which there was an assigned debate as compared to non-debate weeks. It was also observed that the depth of thought in the online discussion was stronger than the discussion in the traditional classroom. Recommendations for practice include using debate in the online classroom as a tool to encourage student participation and learning.

### **Introduction**

The number of students across the nation that take distance courses continues to increase each year. The National Center for Education Statistics reports approximately 4.3 million undergraduate students took a distance course in 2007-08 academic year. As universities serve increasing numbers of distance students, faculty continue to explore effective methods of online course delivery. One of the challenges faculty face is effectively adapting traditional methods of instruction to fit online course delivery (Bates & Watson, 2008, Dykman & Davis, 2009, Saks, 2009).

In the fall 2005 semester, an online graduate-level course in leadership was offered for the first time at Oklahoma State University. The instructor previously offered the same course in the traditional (face to face) environment and sought to modify methods used in the traditional classroom for the online environment. Over the next few years, the instructor observed that students generally performed at higher levels in the traditional classroom as compared to students in the online classroom. In an effort to improve student learning in the online classroom, the instructor collaborated with a group of online instructors at her university and began exploring different methodologies for use in the online classroom.

In 2008, based on instructor observation, it appeared that one of the teaching methodologies, debate, was achieving success as it relates to student learning. Specifically, students in the online

classroom were beginning to outperform students in the traditional classroom on a debate assignment that was used in both environments. The instructor observed that depth of thought during debates held online was stronger than debates held in the traditional classroom. This observation as it relates to online discussions is supported by Ko and Rossen (2008) who claim that online discussions often produce dialogue that is both more thoughtful and reasoned than the dialogue produced in the traditional classroom. Furthermore, as it specifically applies to debates or assignments in which students are required to take a position against their peers, the online classroom “provides a safe environment for students who ordinarily might not chime in, too timid or shy to take part in discussions with those who are louder, more aggressive, or domineering (Ko and Rossen, 2008, p. 14).”

## **Methods**

With the purpose of informing future practices in the online leadership class, the instructor/researcher sought to examine what was actually happening in the online classroom as it related to the debate assignment. The instructor/researcher utilized practical action research design. The purpose of practical action research is to improve educational practice through the examination of practice with the instructor serving as the researcher (Creswell, 2012).

This study examined student participation and performance in online debate assignments. Specifically, the study examined student participation in online debate assignments during the fall semester of 2008 and 2009, as well as, the quality of assigned work produced by online students as compared to students in the traditional classroom during the fall 2009 semester. Data was collected using archival documents stored in the university’s online learning system, Desire2Learn. The questions that framed the study were:

- What was the level of participation in online discussion during weeks in which students were debating assigned topics in comparison to non-debate weeks?
- What grades did the online students earn on debate assignments as compared to traditional students?

## **Subjects**

The study utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) and included 57 university students enrolled in a graduate-level leadership course at Oklahoma State University. The students were enrolled in four sections of a graduate-level leadership theory course taught by the same faculty member during the fall 2008 and 2009 semesters. During each semester, an online section and a traditional section of the course was taught. Thirty-one students enrolled in the online sections, 20 in the fall 2008 semester and 11 in the fall 2009 semester; and twenty-six students enrolled in the traditional (face-to-face) sections, 13 in the fall 2008 semester and 13 in the fall 2009 semester.

## **Procedure**

The overall class was structured the same for both online and traditional students. All sections were taught in a sixteen week framework during the regular fall semester and all sections used the same textbook. In all sections of the course, students were assigned to debate teams and debate topics. Two or three debates were held each semester depending upon the number of students enrolled in each class. During each debate students were assigned either as a debate leader with a specific position or as a participant. Prior to the fall 2009 semester, adjustments were made to the written work required by the debate assignment in both the online and

traditional class sections allowing the instructor to compare grades for traditional and online students. The revised assignment required all debate leaders to prepare written argument papers prior to leading the debates. During the fall 2008 and 2009 semesters, students were responsible for posing questions to the debate leaders during the debate and during the fall 2009 semester, all participants were also responsible for evaluating the debates in the form of a reaction paper. Abbreviated instructions to the students are provided below.

*Debate Leaders:* During the debate in which you are assigned as a debate leader your assignment is to 1) co-lead the debate and 2) write a well-informed four to five page argument paper plus references based on your research related to the topic. A minimum of six references should be used to prepare your paper. Please use APA style in formatting your reference page. The majority of your references should be scholarly in nature (please use at least a few journal articles). There are two to three students assigned as debate leaders per position, however, argument papers should be written individually. For online students: You may collaborate on the online discussion with the other debate leaders assigned to your position. For traditional students: You will need to collaborate with other debate leaders assigned to your position to prepare for the classroom debate.

*Participants:* When not assigned as the debate leader, you are responsible for posing questions to the debate leaders during the debate. You will also write a two to three page reaction paper for each debate in which you are not assigned as a debate leader. The focus of the paper should be your reaction to the argument papers and to the student-led debate. Please include a reaction to each side of the issue, as well as, a final winner of the debate with supporting evidence. Reaction papers will be read by only the instructor.

## **Findings and Results**

The online debate assignments have produced two results of particular interest to the instructor/researcher. First, excluding week one of the course in which the students are responsible for introducing themselves to one another, participation in online discussions was consistently higher during weeks in which there was an assigned debate. For example in fall 2008, online students (n=20) posted a total of 1658 messages throughout the semester to the discussion board. During week one of the online course, the students posted 173 messages, the highest number of messages for any single week. However, the number of messages posted during the three debates held during the fall 2008 semester ranked second, third and fourth in level of online participation. During debates one, two and three, students posted 145, 150, and 159 messages respectively. Outside of week one and the debate weeks, weekly postings ranged from 81 to 139 messages with a mean of 111 posts. Similar results were found during the fall 2009 semester. Online students (n=11) posted a total of 866 messages to the online discussion. During week one of the fall 2009 semester, students posted 116 messages, again the highest number of messages for any single week.

Due to lower enrollment, only two debates were held during the fall 2009 semester, but once again participation in online discussion ranked second during debate weeks only to week one, the introduction week. During debates one and two, students posted 122 and 84 messages respectively. Outside of week one and debate weeks, postings ranged from 60 to 81 messages with a mean of 68 posts.

Beyond consistently increased participation in debate weeks as compared to non-debate weeks, the second point of interest to the instructor/researcher was related to quality of work. On the argument papers, students in the online classroom earned a mean score of 88.6 on a 100 point

scale and students in the traditional classroom earned a mean score of 87.66 on a 100 point scale. Although students in both environments earned similar grades on argument papers prepared prior to the debate, the quality of work produced by the online students was stronger for the actual debate. Specifically, the instructor observed that the depth of thought in the online discussion was stronger than the discussion in the traditional classroom and that grades were higher for the debate portion of the assignment in the online environment as compared to students in the traditional classroom.

However, although students in both environments earned similar grades on argument papers prepared prior to the debate, and the online students outperformed the face to face students during the debate, grades on the reaction papers were lower for the online students. Students in the online environment earned a mean score of 78.9 on a 100 point scale and students in the traditional environment earned a mean score of 96.3 on a 100 point scale.

### **Discussion**

The instructor is encouraged by the high level of participation during debate weeks, as well as the performance of online students during the actual debate. Not only are high levels of participation intuitively appealing, research has found a significant positive relationship between participation in online discussion boards and overall student performance (Pratt-Phillips, 2011). However, although the debate assignment in general has proven to be a successful learning tool, encouraging both high levels of participation and critical thinking, based upon the examination of reaction paper grades, additional modifications are needed to encourage stronger performance by online students in the written portion of the debate assignment. Scott (2009) reported similar findings when examining the use of debate in the college classroom. The use of debate in the college classroom resulted in enhanced critical thinking, but student performance on related writing assignments was described as weak (Scott, 2009).

Recognizing that the results of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population, educators implementing debate assignments in the online classroom and/or seeking to enhance learning may wish to consider the following recommendations based on the instructor's experiences using debate in the online classroom, current literature on debate as an effective classroom tool, as well as this examination of student participation and performance during online debates.

The online classroom does not operate at the same speed as the traditional classroom (Dykman and Davis, 2008). Allow the online debate to transpire over the course of three to five days. Part of the strength of the online debate is that students have the opportunity to continue to research the topic as they prepare to respond to questions or post questions to those leading the debate. Additionally, when the debate is not confined by typical classroom time constraints then students are afforded the opportunity to "analyze material in a leisurely and thoughtful way (Ko and Rossen, 2008, p. 14)" greatly adding to the overall quality of the learning experience.

In designing the debate assignment, require all students to play a specific role in each debate. Specifically, if a student is not the debate leader (responsible for preparing an argument paper and debating their position online), then require the student to pose questions of the debate leaders and write a reaction paper after the debate has concluded. This will encourage participation from all students during each debate which is positively correlated to student

performance (Pratt-Phillips, 2011). The facilitation of interaction among students in the graduate-level online classroom has been rated by faculty as the most valuable feature of online discussion boards (Santilli & Beck, 2005).

And finally, although it may be tempting to assign the project as a team project, partnering students for the debate and asking them to research a position together is not necessary. The learning objectives may be met through individual work, thus avoiding the challenges that are inherent in team assignments.

### **Summary**

In closing, the debate assignment has proven to be an excellent learning tool in the online classroom promoting high levels of participation in online discussion as well as higher order thinking. For this instructor and author, debate in the online classroom, although not perfect, works.

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