

## **Using Panel Debates to Teach Critical Thinking** by Clay Rooks

When teaching critical thinking it can be challenging at times to come up with practical exercises that demonstrate the textbook discussions about argument and persuasion. One method I developed that has worked well is using student panel debates to give the class real hands-on experience in using their research, speaking, argumentative and critical thinking skills. It is a rather simple process that puts most of the onus on the students and leaves the instructor free to instruct, direct, observe, encourage, and facilitate.

### 1. Create Debate Teams

Earlier in the semester the students have been broken into teams of, ideally, four to six members. (Fewer members in a group seems to be too difficult for most teams and over six is too unwieldy.) It works best if the class has an even number of teams -- four or six.

Previously, the teams have worked on group activities involving coming up with and writing down support points for classic argument topics such as capital punishment, divorce, etc., using their textbook readings and their own knowledge and experiences, followed by coming up with points of counterargument to each of the support points. These were discussed and critiqued in open class. Now they are told they will begin being debate teams and having panel debates.

### 2. Choosing Debate Topics

When choosing debate topics, it is important to make sure that the topics are ones that have clear arguments, pro and con, and ones that are current so students can readily find information and points of argument. (I avoid old, tired issues such as abortion and capital punishment.) In class, I write "A," "B," "C" on the board and put "for" and "against" next to each one. I use A, B, C, etc. to indicate topics and do not initially tell the students what the topics are until they as teams choose "for" or "against" for one of the topics, then the topics are revealed. "A" might be "Allow a Palestinian State in Israel" or "Attack Iran's nuclear facility." "B" might be "Ban High School Exit Tests" or "Ballot Measure X." "C" might be "Censor the Internet" or "Citizenship for Illegal Aliens." For each, one team has to argue for the topic and one has to argue against it. The next week's class time is given to the debates.

Part of the critical thinking learning experience is having students face a topic or situation that is challenging and letting them find their way through it, together, especially if it is a topic they are unfamiliar with or one which they would rather not have to argue.

### 3. Panel Debate Rules/Guidelines

- A. Two teams face each other across the classroom. The other teams are the audience seated in the middle and back of the room. The instructor is the moderator.

- B. One team presents its side of the argument, for or against, uninterrupted. Everyone on the team must participate in the debate, no wallflowers. Each student is expected to speak for about 3 minutes. It is also suggested that one person on each team do an introduction and closing for their side of the argument.

When that side has finished presenting their argument, the other team then presents their side of the argument, also uninterrupted.

Students are allowed to use notes, but I encourage them know their points well enough to speak without reading from prepared material or computer printouts.

- C. After each side has had an opportunity to present their arguments, the instructor moderates a time of challenges and answers. Alternating, back and forth between teams, one member of one team questions or challenges a point or piece of data used by the other team during their presentation. One member of the other team must answer the challenge as best as the student can.

Then one member of the other team asks a question back to the first team and one member of that team must answer the question or challenge. This back and forth continues between the teams until every member of each team has asked a question and received an answer from the other team.

- D. Once the teams have finished with each other, the topic is opened to the audience. Anyone in the audience may ask a question of either team and someone on that team must answer the question. This, of course, means that the audience must follow and pay close attention to the debate in order to be able to ask appropriate questions.

#### 4. Faculty Notes: Advice on Instructing and Moderating Debates

- A. At every point of the debate process from choosing a position on a topic to doing the research to the actually debating, students will often look to the instructor to decide or tell them what to do. Part of the critical thinking process is to have them choose or decide. Avoid doing more than giving general direction and encouragement to think things through for themselves.
- B. As moderator, I usually briefly introduce the topic under debate to the class, then turn the debate right over to the team presenting first.
- C. Avoid interrupting the teams except to ask for a point of clarification or to make a point of clarification. Also avoid making any comments regarding incorrect or incomplete information to allow the other team to catch it during the question-asking time. If the information is not caught, it can be corrected before the audience starts asking questions.

- D. Generally, it is best to avoid follow up questions during the back and forth question-answer set as it can often lead away from or restart the debate; however, during the audience time, it can be more of a free-for-all as long as it stays on topic. This also a good time to interject clarification and stimulate discussion.
- E. At the end, when questions have been asked or answered a few comments on the debate and perhaps further detail on the topic can be offered by the instructor, but I avoid picking winners and losers as this is not the point of the debates.

#### 5. Benefits of Using Panel Debates to Teach Critical Thinking Skills

- A. Students learn to develop and exercise critical thinking skills, and display them through the panel debate format.
- B. The panel debates require working with a group and dealing with others who have varying levels of critical thinking skills, some strong, some weak, and differing personalities, some outgoing, some more reserved. The development of the group dynamic is also a critical learning experience.
- C. The students must do research and then integrate their information with their team mates to make a coherent, complete, compelling argument from many parts.
- D. The debate exercise is practical and hands-on, and the entire class participates.

The goal with this exercise is to develop stronger critical thinking skills, and whereas panel debate is the method used, the debates are not graded as they would be in a forensics class, for example (though they could be). In my class, students are graded only on their preparation and participation not their debate skills. This also seems to help take some of the pressure off of the students so they concentrate more on their debate than on what grade they will get.

Though students usually start out being quite nervous about doing panel debates before the class, by the time the semester is over and they have done this exercise three times, they are much more at ease, and most have noticeably developed better critical thinking, research, speaking, and debating skills. They are also more comfortable and more confident in themselves and in their ability to make a point and defend it. There is notable improvement when the final debates are presented.