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## Enhancing civic education through the use of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate across the curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

Evidence shows that the skills and dispositions that lead to thoughtful and effective participation in civic life can be developed and promoted through participation in assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate. We argue that debate and argumentation are uniquely well suited to be implemented across the curriculum, which means that students could practice engagement with civic life across their disciplinary studies. Finally, we present the results of a survey of debate coaches that found that debate coaches see improvement in their students' research and writing skills, as well as their students' ability to work collaboratively with each other. More specifically, Social Studies and History teachers reported that debate and assigned advocacy improved a large range of skills they seek to cultivate as civic educators.

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History is an argument without end; in fact, academic culture in general is a culture of argumentation, and democracies are societies in which debate is central. Yet this culture of argument is initially alien to many of today's students. Thus, debate can help students learn to participate not only in the "academic conversation," but also in the public discourse of our democratic society. Development in these areas not only makes them better students in the classroom but also makes them better-prepared citizens. (Osborne, 2005, p. 40)

From our nation's founding, one primary goal of public education has been to prepare young people to become engaged and competent citizens. While technological change and concerns over international competitiveness have highlighted the importance of mathematics and science in recent years, the current political climate of polarization and disunity illustrates the need to revitalize civic education. This paper explains how critical civic knowledge, as well as the skills and dispositions to effectively participate in civic life, can be promoted across the curriculum through the use of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate.

### Identifying critical elements of civic education

Civic education literature offers a variety of ways to understand and pursue civic literacy. These differences reflect little actual disagreement about the value of developing in

students the core knowledge of and appreciation for the democratic system, the skills needed for meaningful participation in society, and the attitudes that encourage engagement in community and political life. Meeting these goals is essential to maintain “a healthy and vibrant democracy” (Gainer, 2012, p. 14).

Knowledge of democratic institutions and traditions includes an awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Most Social Studies teachers do not see this knowledge simply as an accumulation of facts, but rather as an awareness of what citizenship means and an appreciation of what life in a modern democratic system offers to each person (Hess et al., 2010). This core of knowledge is the foundation for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the role each person can play in the life of his or her community.

To make civic knowledge meaningful, citizens must develop the civic skills needed to become contributing participants in their communities. These skills reflect the widespread pursuit of critical thinking skills, and are sought across the curriculum. They include the abilities to identify and describe, explain and analyze, compare and evaluate, as well as take and defend positions. These general academic skills have particular importance for civic learning because they shape civic identity by determining individual beliefs, communication choices, and decision-making practices. People who think critically have developed “dispositions of thought” that encourage them to analyze, evaluate, and question with an open mind (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004).

Communication skills must also be developed if civic education is to be successful. Communicative and collaborative abilities allow students to apply critical thinking in a civic context (Derry & Zalles, 2011). A person must be able to listen effectively, articulate thoughts clearly, and communicate in diverse environments while working respectfully and flexibly with others.

Civic dispositions concern those personal and public character traits and attitudes that underlie democratic citizenship. Important civic dispositions include respect for others, a sense of moral responsibility, and self-discipline, along with critical thinking and a willingness to listen to and work with others (Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.). These attributes develop through conscious actions taken by teachers to guide students to disagree with ideas, not people, in a respectful way, based on logical argument that is supported by evidence (Moore, 2012). By valuing honest and collaborative discourse, teachers model the civic ideal.

## **The debate and argumentation model of learning**

Speech and debate competitions have been part of the educational landscape in the United States for almost 100 years (Keith, 2007). Today, extracurricular, interscholastic speech, and debate competitions are an important part of American education. Debate’s impact on student learning is well-documented in academic literature. It includes improved content knowledge, grade point averages, reading skills, speaking skills, student conduct, critical thinking skills, and self-confidence (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Lundberg, 2010). These general findings have been confirmed by several studies of students participating in Urban Debate Leagues, which were established to expand debate opportunities to previously underserved students (Mezuk, 2009; Winkler, 2008). Debate demands a depth of knowledge that is seldom required in ordinary classes. Debaters need a comprehensive grasp of issues relevant to their topic in order to explain their

positions and evaluate the arguments of others. In demanding deeper understanding, debate “provides the potential for independent vigorous free thought and dialogue” (Snider & Schnurer, 2006, p. 4). The clash of ideas in debate competition energizes student effort to excel in forensic competition.

Having citizens who are “able to argue and take part in public debate seems to be an essential ingredient of a healthy democracy and an a priori powerful tool to become a democratic ‘citizen’” (Rutten & Soetaert, 2013, p. 3). Competitive forensics has evolved to become a training ground for civic activism. Alumni of forensic programs include Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton; Congressional leaders such as Richard Luger, Barbara Jordan, Phil Graham, George McGovern, and Hillary Clinton; and Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia, Steven Breyer, and Joseph Alito (Crotty, 2013; Northwest University Eagle Debate Team, n.d.).

The issue of civic competence is not simply a matter of developing community and societal leaders. Every student has the ability to affect the political system as a voter, juror, and concerned citizen. Debate “introduces young people to the habit of participation in discussions of public policy, trains their minds to consider issues from a variety of perspectives” (Lee & Algarra, 2005, p. 498), and helps them learn to develop and respond to argument. Through classroom interaction, students learn to respect the opinions of others and realize that people who disagree can have legitimate concerns that deserve consideration. As people learn to respect each other, they lay the groundwork for community activism and collaborative problem solving (Briscoe, 2009).

### **Assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate across the curriculum**

Argumentation is the process of giving reasons to support a particular idea or position. It involves making a claim and providing evidence and reasoning to support that claim. When a person makes an argument, she becomes an advocate for that position. To be successful, an advocate must identify, organize, and explain her ideas in a reasonable and persuasive way. Teachers can assign tasks that require students to explain their ideas and become advocates for a particular position. When placed into the context of a debate, where some level of reasoned disagreement is assured, advocacy becomes more active. Different positions are identified and a clash of ideas is encouraged, thereby inviting a closer examination of the arguments and reasoning presented (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011; Kuhn, Zillmer, Crowell, & Zavala, 2013). By assuring that alternative positions are represented, a teacher can create a dynamic exchange that promotes critical thinking for its participants, both as speakers and as listeners.

Implementation of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate across the curriculum has taken many forms. Aggregations of the research consistently reflect positive results (Bellon, 2000; Lundberg, 2010). One widely reported and studied conceptualization of debate across the curriculum has been put forward by David and Robert Johnson. They have developed a specific procedure for introducing argumentation into classrooms, identified at times as academic controversy, structured controversy, and constructive controversy. Their process involves a group of four students, divided into two teams of two, with each team assigned to one side of a controversial topic. After time to research and prepare positions, students present their arguments to each other and engage in a

discussion of the opposing ideas, acting as advocates for their positions. Following that, the students switch sides on the topic and become advocates of the opposing position. After the second round of argument, the process continues with an open conversation where no one is assigned a side, but the four discuss the issue to seek points of agreement and shared understanding. After reaching some consensus, the group prepares a report explaining their conclusions (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). The Johnsons argue that “the path to using intellectual conflict for instructional purposes lies primarily through academic controversy” (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1997, p. 5). At the very least, the Johnsons offer a well-considered process that represents one of many ways to bring advocacy, argumentation, and debate into the classroom.

A number of studies have confirmed the benefits of applying such a technique in the classroom (Rooney, 2000; Tichy, Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010). This system is used in the *Deliberating in a Democracy Program* and has been successful in a wide variety of settings (Avery, 2010; *Deliberating in a Democracy in the Americas*, n.d.). Independent evaluation of that program in 2009 indicated that the vast majority of student participants felt that their understanding of issues and ability to state their opinions improved. Almost all participating teachers indicated that they would continue to use the process in their classes (Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, n.d.).

Other variants of structured controversy include role-playing scenarios such as model UN proceedings and mock trials. Classroom argumentation has a flexible and dynamic form that can be tailored to course goals, time-constraints, and student characteristics. To set up a classroom debate, the teacher must simply create student interaction that is structured so that differing views are compared and evaluated. In laying out that structure, the teacher assigns advocacies to generate constructive controversy.

The most successful on-going effort to bring argumentation and debate into the classroom has occurred in Boston. The Boston Debate League works to bring active debate teams to schools serving predominantly at-risk students, but has moved extensively into the Boston school system with the Evidence Based Argumentation Program (EBA). Community funders have joined with the school district to bring debate into the classrooms of thousands of students. By supporting teacher designed advocacy, argumentation, and debate, the EBA seeks to develop core thinking and communication skills (Gittleman, 2013).

Cooperating with the Boston Public Schools, the Boston Debate League has offered teachers summer programs, graduate courses, and in-service professional development. The 90 teachers who attended the summer graduate classes in 2012 enthusiastically endorsed the EBA program, based on their experiences with classroom argumentation activities. Responding to an end of the year survey, 99% saw increases in student understanding of class content, 97% saw increased student engagement, and 95% felt that student reading and writing skills had improved (Stein, 2012). And independent consultant’s report on the program based on pre- and post-test data indicated that student participation in a series of argumentation activities generated a 64% improvement in “clear and coherent writing” and a 37% increase in the ability to “evaluate an argument, including the validity of the reasoning and sufficiency of the evidence” (Gittleman, 2013).

Educational literature abounds with teacher reports of classroom success and others who have done meta-analysis (Bellon, 2000; Lundberg, 2010). These individual reports are important, offering models for others to follow and build upon. But in many ways,

each teacher's classroom is unique. There is, however, one group of teachers who regularly use argumentation, advocacy, and debate type activities to promote learning. The forensics community includes thousands of teachers who actively coach student participants in speech and debate competition. These teachers prepare students for weekend tournaments and judge competitions as part of their involvement in forensics. Many of these teachers use their experience to design classroom argumentation activities. Their attitudes and opinions reflect an on-the-ground consequence of direct contact with students. It is in the lived experiences of teachers that actual classroom dynamics can best be understood (Erickson et al., 1986).

A 2009 survey of coaches who also teach core academic classes found evidence of the positive impact of in-class advocacy and argumentation (Wade & Zorwick, 2009). Ninety percent of the 160 forensics coaches reported using organized and assigned argument in their nondebate classrooms. In terms of the impact of classroom debate, 92% reported substantial growth in student engagement, 88% reported substantial skill development, 83% reported increased content learning, 90% reported positive improvements in student classroom interactions, and 90% reported more positive student–teacher interactions (Wade & Zorwick, 2009).

### **Advocacy, argumentation, and debate as tools of civic education**

A recent report from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement indicated that fewer than half of fourth, eighth, and twelfth-grade students have ever experienced a simulation in civics, “such as a mock trial, mock election, or model legislature” (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015, p. 6). By using activities that encourage disagreement and require advocacy, teachers can “facilitate civil, controversial classroom discussions ... (in order to) increase student civility, knowledge, and tolerance for dissent” (Moore, 2012, p. 145).

On the knowledge level, gains in factual learning and conceptual understanding of those facts are connected to classroom argumentation (Hunt, 2006; Mirra & Morrell, 2011). Student participation in classroom debates has raised scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013). Classroom argumentation activities also increase understanding and retention of that information (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

Classroom advocacy and debate also promote democratic citizenship by supporting the development of critical thinking and communication skills. Debate gives students a “‘voice’—a way to interact with and to feel a part of the bigger world around them” (Martens, 2007, p. 4). Students get an opportunity to practice civil discourse by sharing their own ideas and hearing the ideas of others. They consider the evidence offered and the reasoning that supports differing sides of an issue, and they begin to wrestle with the complexity of modern life in a democratic society. It is the practice of civil discourse itself that assures student learning and develops the dispositions toward active citizenship.

Assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate are most effective when practiced over time. Accumulated experiences allow students to feel comfortable in a world where ideas are shared and explained, and where disagreement is natural and not threatening. This worldview does not come from isolated activities, but rather, is developed through sustained experiences in diverse settings (Worthen & Pack, 1992). Indeed, when educators

embrace argument in their classrooms, they create a new norm of conduct that encourages student learning. The result is students who are disposed to become active members of their classrooms and their communities. Kuhn persuasively argues that “sustained engagement in argumentation creates a social climate that supports such activity, with this climate in turn supporting development of individual competence” (Kuhn et al., 2013, p. 457). Thus, teachers create an environment where students learn democratic skills and attitudes by participating in the democratic process itself. They become responsible to others for explaining their thoughts, listening carefully, and interacting appropriately (Jonassen & Kim, 2010). Kuhn explains that higher-order skills like argumentation must be applied often in order to become habits of thought and create dispositions that promote civil discourse (Kuhn et al., 2013).

### **Research questions**

In order to learn more about the extent to which debate can meet the goals of civic education, we conducted a survey to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Do teachers believe that debate is associated with positive outcomes on Common Core State Standards?

RQ2: Do Social Studies/History teachers, who are most likely to be engaged in civic education, believe that debate is associated with positive outcomes on Common Core State Standards?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 238 middle and high school teachers who coach forensic activities. Of our participants, 8% ( $n = 19$ ) were Social Studies/History teachers, 14.7% ( $n = 35$ ) were Science/Technical teachers, and 77.3% ( $n = 184$ ) were English (or other focus) teachers.

### **Procedure**

With the assistance of the National Speech and Debate Association, we distributed an online survey across the nation to middle and high school teachers who also coach forensic activities. An email about our survey was sent to the members on September 4 and 26, 2013. A final email was sent on February 24, 2014.

Our participants were asked to complete a questionnaire online in which they described and evaluated their use of advocacy, argumentation, and debate in their academic classes. The experiences that our teachers described were not tied to forensics competition, but rather reflected the use of debate-based activities to support classroom instruction.

### **Instrument**

In our questionnaire, teachers were specifically asked what kind of impact they think debate-based activities have on the development of a range of students' abilities, all of which are identified in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Participants first reported their teaching experience, their debate experience (as both a participant and coach), and the primary content area in which they teach. Based on the primary content area they taught, participants were directed to questions using the exact wording of the CCSS in that content area (i.e., Social Studies/History, Science/Technology, or English/Language Arts). All questions used language taken directly from CCSS standards and explored the ability of assigned advocacy and argumentation to support civic education (see Table 1 for specific question wording). The survey asked teachers to make a rating to assess the impact of forensic activity in the classroom, in terms of the development of a series of skills, using a 5-point Likert scale, with possible responses that ranged from significant negative effect (1) to significant positive effect (5). This means that higher numerical ratings correspond with the perception that forensics has been associated with more positive effects in the specific skill area. We computed the mean ratings for each broad area of CCSS skills using the data from all of our teacher survey respondents. Because some participants skipped questions, the number of participants is identified for the group averages.

## Results

### Research question 1

The first research question asked whether teachers believe that debate participation is associated with positive outcomes on CCSS. Because some participants skipped questions, the number of participants who responded to each set of questions is provided with its respective average below. Across all teachers, for the items identifying students' ability to identify and analyze ideas, the mean score was  $M = 4.63$  ( $SD = .44$ ,  $n = 231$ ). Items covering issues of evaluating and synthesizing information had a mean score of  $M = 4.66$  ( $SD = .40$ ,  $n = 230$ ). Items dealing with identifying evidence and developing research skills had a mean score of  $M = 4.72$  ( $SD = .46$ ,  $n = 231$ ). The mean scores for items assessing effective written communication were  $M = 4.67$  ( $SD = .41$ ,  $n = 229$ ).

### Research question 2

Our second research question asked whether Social Studies/History teachers, who are most likely to be engaged in Civics Education, believe that debate is associated with positive outcomes on CCSS. Although only 19 participants were Social Studies/History teachers, it is interesting to note the strong positive feedback that came from this group (see Table 1). The survey specifically addressed the Reading Literacy Standards in History and Social Studies, including the skill "cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of sources" (CCSS Reading Standard 1) and the skill "determine central ideas and provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among key details and ideas" (CCSS Reading Standard 2). For these two Reading Standards, all responding Social Studies teachers reported a positive or strong positive impact derived from using classroom argumentation activities. Again, all Social Studies/History teachers felt that classroom argument and advocacy enhanced student abilities to "evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with the textual evidence" (CCSS Speaking and Listening Standard 3) and "evaluate an author's

**Table 1.** Impact of classroom argumentation and debate-based activities on student ability, as perceived by Social Studies/History teachers ( $n = 19$ ).

	Not applicable (%)	Significant or marginal negative impact (%)	No meaningful impact (%)	Marginal positive impact (%)	Significant positive impact (%)
<i>Reading</i>					
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of sources (based on CCSS Reading Standard for Informational Texts 1)	0	0	0	21.1	78.9
Determine central ideas and provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationship among key details and ideas (based on CCSS Reading Standard for Informational Texts 2)	0	0	0	31.6	68.4
Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information (based on CCSS Reading Standard for Informational Texts 8)	0	0	0	36.8	63.2
<i>Writing</i>					
Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content, with precise claims and counterclaims developed fairly and thoroughly with appropriate evidence and organized clearly (based on CCSS Writing Standard 1)	0	0	0	15.8	84.2
Write informative or explanatory texts focused on discipline-specific content, with precise claims and counterclaims developed fairly and thoroughly with appropriate evidence, and organized clearly (based on CCSS Writing Standard 2)	0	0	0	31.6	68.4
Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, accessing that information, and integrating it into a text (based on CCSS Writing Standard 8)	5.3	0	0	21.1	73.7
<i>Speaking and Listening</i>					
Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence (based on CCSS Speaking and Listening Standard 3)	0	0	0	26.3	73.7

premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information” (CCSS Reading Standard 8). There was also unanimous agreement on the part of Social Studies/History teachers that classroom argumentation improved student ability to “write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSS Writing Standard 1). Ninety-eight percent of those teachers felt that participating students were more able to “gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources” (CCSS Writing Standard 2) and “draw evidence

from informational texts” (CCSS Writing Standard 8) than students who had not participated.

These results indicate that the skills sought by civic educators are developed and strengthened by using classroom advocacy, argumentation, and debate. As these intellectual and social skills develop, participatory civic dispositions are created.

## Discussion

Assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate-related activities can have a powerful, positive impact on student civic learning. By creating discussions where ideas are examined, and disagreement is encouraged, teachers model active citizenship and promote student participation in the interactive discourse that represents a thriving democratic system. Students can learn content in many ways, but understanding and applying that information requires experiences that make the content meaningful. Students who practice advocacy and participate in respectful debate use the skills of argumentation to develop a deeper understanding of the values and responsibilities of citizenship.

Through repeated participation in assigned advocacy and argumentation, students develop reasoned thought. They also come to expect reasoned argument from others in the give and take of classroom interaction. When assigned argumentation and advocacy are offered across the curriculum in a wide range of contexts and settings, student thinking opens up to the possibility that ideas and beliefs are strengthened when tested and that disagreement has positive, generative effects. Democratic norms become a natural part of school and civic life. Students develop the skills and dispositions that are needed as voters, jurors, leaders, and members of a democratic community.

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