

# Debate Across the Disciplines: Structured Classroom Debates in Interdisciplinary Curricula

Brandon Merrell

University of California, San Diego

Kevin J. Calderwood

University of Washington

Todd Graham

Southern Illinois University

## Abstract

Snider and Schnurer (2002) argued that structured classroom debates (SCDs) facilitate numerous pedagogical benefits and can be easily adapted for use in a wide array of undergraduate courses. Nevertheless, university instructors incorporate SCDs into their classes less frequently than alternative active learning methods. This paper builds upon Snider and Schnurer's work in two ways. First, we identify and discuss several potential challenges that may deter instructors from adopting SCDs. Drawing from our own experience incorporating SCDs across disciplinary lines, we address issues including: (1) selecting an appropriate SCD format for use in varying class types; (2) identifying appropriate topics from the subject matter in distinct disciplines; (3) developing clear and educational evaluation criteria for both individuals and groups; (4) incorporating audience participation into either debates or post-debate feedback; and (5) tailoring SCDs to facilitate the inclusion of students who might otherwise face barriers to participation. Second, we assess the unique benefits of incorporating SCDs into interdisciplinary university courses.

*Keywords:* interdisciplinary curriculum, pedagogy, active learning, debate, public speaking

## Introduction

Alfred “Tuna” Snider dedicated his life to advancing the use of debates across national borders and academic disciplines. This paper builds upon his work in several ways. First, because this essay is both brief and publicly available, we hope it will serve as a useful introduction to the policies that Tuna advocated throughout his career. Second, whereas Snider and Schnurer’s *Many Sides* (2002) lays out a broad case for incorporating debate into diverse university courses, this article offers specific recommendations for how instructors should divide class time between debates, lectures, and other activities. In the process, we also review recent observational and experimental research on the pedagogical benefits of active learning in a variety of academic disciplines. Finally, we address emerging concerns that classroom debates may incite conflict among students, lead to biased assimilation, or inhibit classroom inclusivity.

## Active Learning and Classroom Debates

Over the past three decades, university administrators have grown increasingly interested in active learning methods such as classroom simulations and peer instruction (Archer & Miller, 2011). Departments now face significant pressure to incorporate cross-disciplinary content. The most notable example of this trend is the “writing across the curriculum” model, whereby students must write essays and prepare research papers in a wide range of classes that exist outside of traditional English departments (Bellon, 2000).

Structured classroom debates (SCDs) exist at the cross-section of the movements toward active learning and cross-disciplinary curricula.<sup>1</sup> SCDs engage students in course material; promote collaborative interaction and peer learning; and facilitate the development of valuable research, public speaking, and critical thinking skills that are widely applicable both within and beyond the university setting (Allen, M., Berkowitz, S., Hunt, S. & Louden, A, 1999; Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999; Colbert, 1987).

In *Many Sides*, Snider and Schnurer (2002) advocated the widespread adoption of classroom debates throughout the college curricula. They demonstrated that SCDs can be easily adapted for use in a wide range of disciplines, from communication, history, and

---

<sup>1</sup> SCDs differ from informal classroom debates in that SCD participants are divided into small groups and assigned topics that they research outside of class. Students are then graded on both their preparation and in-class debating performance. For examples of SCD formats, see our discussion later in this paper or, alternatively, Budesheim & Lundquist (1999), Green & Klug (1990), Oros (2007), and Snider & Schnurer (2002).

philosophy to political science, sociology, or economics. Unfortunately, despite the established pedagogical benefits of SCDs, evidence suggests that relatively few instructors include formal SCDs in their classes (Oros, 2007). For example, a recent survey of nearly 500 undergraduate syllabi found that only 4.7% of introductory political science courses incorporated SCDs (Archer & Miller, 2011). Rather than proliferate across academic disciplines, SCDs remain relegated largely to communication and rhetoric departments. In part, instructors in alternative fields may be deterred from adopting SCDs because such individuals are less likely than rhetoricians to have first-hand experience with debate and forensics.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, instructors within communication and rhetoric departments may work with colleagues who already use SCDs and who are willing to supply their friends with a model of how such debates can be implemented. On the other hand, those who are employed in other academic fields may lack access to the institutional knowledge with which to implement SCDs successfully. This paper aims to at least partially remedy that informational gap.

We build upon Snider and Schnurer's (2002) analysis of SCDs in two ways. First, we address perceived obstacles that deter instructors from adopting SCDs in a wider range of courses and academic fields. Drawing from our own experience incorporating SCDs across disciplinary lines, we offer a brief discussion of how instructors can select appropriate SCD formats and topics, how to develop clear and educational evaluation criteria, how to incorporate audience participation, and how to tailor SCDs to best include students who might otherwise face participatory barriers. We hope that this analysis will encourage additional instructors to incorporate SCDs into their classes, thereby extending Professor Snider's pedagogical legacy.<sup>3</sup>

Second, whereas Snider and Schnurer (2002) demonstrated that SCDs can be used across distinct academic disciplines, we contend that SCDs can yield valuable pedagogical benefits when used in *interdisciplinary* settings. By incorporating public speaking, argumentation analysis, and critical inquiry, SCDs can introduce students from other disciplines to the field of Communication Studies. Finally, when students conduct research for their debate topics they engage with diverse sources and synthesize material from across disciplinary lines.

---

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, humans are more likely to dwell upon negative experiences than positive ones. See, for example, Baumeister et al. 2001. Thus, those with limited involvement in debate or forensics may remember their negative impressions of each activity—the debate that they lost or the speech in which they were embarrassed—rather than the educational benefits they obtained. Thus, biased recollection of their own personal experiences may deter instructors outside of communication and rhetoric from incorporating SCDs.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Kennedy (2009) finds that even brief exposure to debate can significantly increase the confidence and eagerness with which instructors adopt SCDs.

### SCD Format and Topics

Instructors commonly raise three initial questions when considering SCDs: First, can they tailor the SCD format for use in large-lecture courses, small seminars, or discussion sections? Second, is it worthwhile to allocate class time toward SCDs at the expense of lectures? Third, how should they select ideal topics for SCDs? We address each of these questions in turn.

In our experience SCDs are appropriate for a wide variety of class types. However, each application features its own benefits and costs. We have held SCDs in large-lecture courses featuring up to 100 students. In courses of that size, we hold ten in-class debates on separate topics, with each debate featuring two teams of up to five students.<sup>4</sup> Although manageable, organizing this many debates requires a substantial devotion of class time in lieu of lectures. SCDs are arguably better-suited for use in smaller seminars where fewer debates are necessary in order for every student to participate. Likewise, SCDs can be held in separate discussion sections run by teaching assistants, although in this case instructors should endeavor to ensure that the assistants will evaluate the SCDs appropriately. Moving SCDs to separate discussion sections also diminishes the degree to which SCDs displace lectures or alternative active learning exercises.

However, instructors should not be too quick to prioritize lectures in place of SCDs. Although instructors often assume that lectures are the most efficient means of disseminating information to students, experimental evidence suggests that SCDs improve student comprehension of course material when compared to lectures (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008). In addition, studies from a wide array of disciplines—including communication, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology—demonstrate that students learn more information from active learning techniques such as SCDs than from lectures (Archer & Miller 2011).

Third, instructors often ask what type of topics and questions they should use in SCDs. We offer two recommendations. First, instructors should select topics that will facilitate debates about important course themes or will allow students to incorporate course material. Second, we encourage instructors to select debate topics that address prominent issues of contention in the discipline from which the course is drawn. Instructors may even select topics on which the field has identified a “correct” answer—particularly if that answer would surprise those who are unfamiliar with the literature. Unlike competitive

---

<sup>4</sup> We recommend against placing more than five students in a single group.

Example SCD Format		
Speech	Time	Objective
Opening Pro Speech	5 minutes.	Pro side introduces their arguments.
Opening Con Speech	5 minutes	Con side introduces their arguments and refutes the pro team's arguments.
Questions & Answers	4 minutes	
Opening Pro Speech	6 minutes	Pro side responds to the con team's main arguments and to responses that the con team made against the pro case.
Opening Pro Speech	6 minutes	Con side responds to the pro team's arguments against the con case.
Questions & Answers	4 min.	
Opening Pro Speech	4 minutes	Pry side synthesizes the debate by comparing and contrasting the best arguments from either team.
Opening Pro Speech	4 minutes	Con side synthesizes the debate by comparing and contrasting the best arguments from either team.

debates, where resolutions must be balanced in order to establish a level playing field for both sides, *mildly* unbalanced topics are appropriate in classroom debates if the issues that are contained within those topics will facilitate education.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, although topics should be announced as early as possible in order to allow adequate time for preparation, students should prepare for both sides of their assigned topic. Budesheim and Lundquist (1999) worry that debates may promote the “biased assimilation” of information if students internalize only the set of evidence that supports their side of the topic. By requiring that students prepare to defend *both* sides of an issue, this type of biased learning can be minimized.<sup>6</sup> As such, we encourage instructors to assign students an overall topic early in the semester or quarter, but to delay assigning a side to each group until either the day of the debate or up to a week in advance.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion on the importance of competitive equity in competitive formats and the selection of topics in either competitive or classroom settings, see Graham & Merrell (2016); Merrell & Graham (2016); and Merrell, Calderwood, & Flores (2015). For a list of potential topics across a range of academic disciplines, see Snider & Schnurer (2002).

<sup>6</sup> In most undergraduate writing assignments, students compile information that reinforces either their pre-existing opinions or supports a predetermined answer; in debate, students learn to carefully evaluate how the best arguments on either side of an issue compare and contrast (Snider & Schnurer 2002).

### Evaluation Criteria and Audience Participation

Instructors who incorporate SCDs into their classes should select a grading rubric that emphasizes both preparation and in-class performance. Furthermore, grades should distinguish between overall group performance and each individual's contribution to the group. We therefore recommend that instructors assign individual grades for each student's performance *during* the debate, but that groups should receive a collective grade for their prepared research materials. To discourage free-riding, we also inform students that they will each submit a private evaluation of their fellow group members at the end of the term and that these remarks will be taken into account when assigning overall grades.

Grades for individual debate performance should be determined by four characteristics: clarity, responsiveness, analysis, and incorporation of course material. In other words, students will earn high marks when: (1) they present information clearly, (2) they directly respond to points raised by the opposing side, (3) they incorporate sound reasoning into their speeches, and (4) they reference relevant material from the class. Importantly, students should not earn additional points for "winning" the debate. Because the two sides of the debate topic may not be perfectly balanced, it would be unfair to reward students who by random chance were assigned to the stronger side of the topic. In addition, removing an incentive for winning should remind students that their goal in the debate is not to beat an opponent, but rather to demonstrate that they can construct, apply, and defend against well-supported arguments. Likewise, students should note that they are not evaluated primarily on the basis of their rhetoric but rather on the clear exposition of their logic and evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Maintaining the interest of audience members is also important. Instructors can accomplish this in two ways. First, instructors can ask students in the audience to participate in question-and-answer sessions whereby SCD participants must respond to issues raised by observers. However, we generally recommend against allowing audience members to ask questions as this creates an opportunity for grand-standing, distracts from the performance of the actual debaters, and reduces the effort that debaters devote toward preparing effective questions. Instead, we recommend that instructors require audience members to write brief response memos in which they critically evaluate the strongest and weakest aspects of the debaters they observed, as well as the relationship between the debate topic and related material from the course. Instructors can also generate audience interest by privately polling the audience on their personal stance on each topic prior to the debate

---

<sup>7</sup> We echo the advice of Oros (2007), who recommends that instructors assign individual grades either immediately following the debate or even immediately following each student's speech.

and then asking students to discuss in their memos whether they changed their opinion as a result of the debate itself. Finally, instructors may include questions about the debates or debate material on end-of-term exams.

### **Facilitating Inclusion**

Public speaking is regularly listed as Americans' number one fear (Ingraham, 2014). Thus, it is reasonable to ask whether students will feel anxious when they are asked to participate in SCDs. Indeed, Roy and Macchiette (2005) worry that introducing debates into the classroom may create conflict. Fortunately, empirical research suggests that students do not associate SCDs with negative emotions. In a survey of undergraduates who were required to participate in SCDs, Goodwin (2003, p.159) found that only 13% of respondents "mentioned competition or intimidation" and that the majority of those who discussed such issues "thought that competition was actually a good thing" because it motivated students to thoroughly prepare. Goodwin's experience mirrors our own history incorporating SCDs: although some students are initially hesitant to participate, they often remark at the end of term that they enjoyed the debates and ultimately benefitted from the experience.

Students also feel more comfortable and enthusiastic about debates when they can debate an issue that interests them. Rather than assign topics and teams at random, we allow students to rank a series of potential topics and then establish groups on the basis of their preferences. In one-on-one debates, we also sometimes allow students to select their opponent by jointly requesting a specific topic. When students debate against their friends on topics of common interest, they are often excited to prepare, eager to perform well, and also more comfortable with the concept of speaking in public than if they were paired against a relative stranger.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, although students' concerns about public speaking should be taken seriously, we view college classrooms as settings in which instructors should challenge students in ways that will facilitate educational and personal growth<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> There is some risk that the two friends will "script" their debate. However, such behavior is rare and can be easily discouraged by warnings from the instructor.

<sup>9</sup> We further note that debates that are not evaluated in a win/loss framework are less likely to incite conflict or antagonism between students of opposing sides.

### SCDs in Interdisciplinary Courses

Whereas others have called for the adoption of SCDs in a wide array of distinct academic disciplines, we further contend that SCDs can yield valuable pedagogical benefits in *interdisciplinary* courses. Our rationale is fourfold.

First, SCDs provide an opportunity for interdisciplinary courses to provide depth of education as well as breadth. When instructors design classes that blur disciplinary lines, they often include a wealth of material from each respective field and from a variety of substantive topics. Consider a cross-listed communication, political science, and psychology class on “Political Campaign Advertising.” The syllabus for such a class may include communication research articles on political rhetoric and the role of the media, psychology research papers on how individuals form and change opinions after exposure to new information, and political science research on how politicians select campaign strategies and assign advertising budgets. All these topics would merit inclusion, along with many others. In the confines of a single academic term, the instructor of such a broad course could provide only a cursory introduction to any individual topic. SCDs provide an alternative means of ensuring that each student receives a depth of education on specific issues. Students who are assigned specific debate topics are motivated to explore those topics in detail and to analyze evidence from all sides of the issue. Over the course of the term, students who debate will therefore develop deeper familiarity with a topic than they would if they merely listened to a single lecture, read a week’s worth of assigned readings, or even wrote a one-sided research paper on the topic.

Second, a goal of most interdisciplinary courses is to incorporate diverse academic perspectives so that students are not saddled by the intellectual norms of a single field. Imagine, for example, an interdisciplinary course on “Crime and Incarceration in America” that spanned economics, political science, communication, and sociology. Whereas economists and political scientists may focus on the social cost of imprisoning citizens or the rational design of judicial institutions, communication researchers and sociologists may be more inclined to analyze the social construction of the concept of incarceration and the social biases that exist within imbalanced power relationships. Intellectual norms are perhaps even more apparent in the research assumptions that scholars make within separate disciplines. Researchers in some fields are inclined toward quantitative work or formal mathematic theory, whereas others embrace qualitative approaches including case studies, interviews, and ethnography. SCDs in interdisciplinary courses create an incentive for students to investigate, analyze, and compare different forms of evidence from diverse



academic perspectives. As a result, students who participate in SCDs engage in a synthesis of learning that stretches beyond what instructors may otherwise be able to provide.

The final two benefits of adopting SCDs in interdisciplinary courses are more practical than pedagogical. First, interdisciplinary classes are an ideal proving ground for the use of SCDs. There currently exists significant institutional opportunity—and in some cases pressure—for pedagogical experimentation in interdisciplinary courses. As such, instructors who are hesitant to revise their own tried-and-tested courses to include SCDs may be inclined to debut the technique when they launch new interdisciplinary courses. Students who enroll in interdisciplinary classes may also be more willing to engage in unusual active learning techniques such as SCDs. As such, university administrators, instructors, and students may all prove a receptive audience for SCDs in interdisciplinary courses. Finally, we also encourage departments to include SCDs in interdisciplinary courses because students generally respond positively to in-class debates (Goodwin 2003). As such, an interdisciplinary class that includes SCDs may attract more students to the relevant major(s) than an equivalent class that does not feature debates.

### **Conclusion**

This paper briefly addressed several perceived challenges that can deter instructors from incorporating SCDs into the courses they teach. Our argument is not that SCDs should entirely replace traditional lectures or other active learning approaches. Indeed, lectures are a useful and necessary means of disseminating basic knowledge of core subject material. However, evidence suggests that SCDs are more effective at deepening students' comprehension of course content and enthusiasm for the subject matter. We therefore hope that universities will recognize the value of SCDs as a method that can facilitate education while also enhancing critical thinking and oral communication skills.

We further hope that instructors will embrace debate as a method of analysis and instruction that can be applied to content in interdisciplinary or cross-listed courses. By encouraging students to build arguments that are founded in logic and supported by evidence, well-designed SCDs can highlight field-specific assumptions and findings that students may not fully appreciate when such issues are described in lectures (Bellon, 2000). As Snider and Schnurer (2002) demonstrated, SCDs are a flexible and efficient means of creating an active learning environment in college classrooms. Instructors should not eschew the technique and its attendant educational benefits out of fear that the format cannot be tailored to their subject matter, syllabus, course, or students.

### References

- [1] Allen, M., Berkowitz, S., Hunt, S., & Louden, A. (1999). A meta-analysis of the impact of forensics and communication education on critical thinking. *Communication Education, 48*, 18-30.
- [2] Archer, C. C., & Miller, M. K. (2011). Prioritizing active learning: An exploration of gateway courses in political science. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 44*, 429-434.
- [3] Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 323-370.
- [4] Bellon, J. (2000). A research-based justification for debate across the curriculum. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 36*, 161-175.
- [5] Budesheim, T. L., & Lundquist, A. R. (1999). Consider the opposite: Opening minds through in-class debates on course-related controversies. *Teaching of Psychology, 26*, 106-110.
- [6] Colbert, K. (1987). The effects of CEDA and NDT debate training on critical thinking ability. *Journal of the American Forensic Association, 23*, 194-201.
- [7] Goodwin, J. (2003). Students' perspectives on debate exercises in content area classes. *Communication Education, 52*, 157-163.
- [8] Graham, T., & Merrell, B. (2016). Back to its roots: Accuracy as the litmus test for topicality. *Parliamentary Debate, 13.2*, 21-68.
- [9] Green, C. S., & Klug, H. G. (1990). Teaching critical thinking and writing through debates: An experimental evaluation. *Teaching Sociology, 18*, 462-71.
- [10] Ingraham, C. (2014, October 30). America's top fears: Public speaking, heights and bugs. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/10/30/clowns-are-twice-as-scary-to-democrats-as-they-are-to-republicans/>
- [11] Kennedy, R. R. (2009). The power of in-class debates. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 10*, 225-236. doi: 10.1177/1469787409343186
- [12] Marks, M. P. (2008). Fostering scholarly discussion and critical thinking in the political science classroom. *Journal of Political Science Education, 4*, 205-224.
- [13] Merrell, B., Calderwood, K. J., & Flores, R. (2015). The intersection of competitions and classrooms in forensics pedagogy. *Communication Studies, 66(4)*, 433-447.

- [14] Merrell, B. & Graham, T. (2016). Contrasting structures, conditional strategies: designing format-specific theories for competitive debate. *Parliamentary Debate*, 13(1), 1-37.
- [15] Omelicheva, M., & Avedyeva, O. (2008). Teaching with lecture or debate? Testing the effectiveness of traditional versus active learning methods of instruction. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 41, 603-07.
- [16] Oros, A. L. (2007). Let's debate: Active learning encourages student participation and critical thinking. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 3, 293-311.
- [17] Roy, A., & Macchiette, B. (2005). Debating the issues: A tool for augmenting critical thinking skills of marketing students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 27, 264-276. doi: 10.1177/0273475305280533
- [18] Snider, A. C., & Schnurer, M. (2002). *Many sides: Debate across the curriculum*. New York, NY: The International Debate Education Association.