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Examinations, writing and research share one thing in common: they all use writing as a medium. It is undoubtedly the formative and summative evaluation tool used most frequently within academia. As a result, oral examinations are often overlooked. One reason is that professors see it as a form of summative evaluation that may be overly volatile and as such, should be supported by something in writing. Additionally, this type of evaluation whose best known format is the oral presentation, has several annoying disadvantages: it is complex to organize for large groups; it confines the rest of the group to total passivity and as a lecture, is one of the least dynamic approaches especially when used by neophytes who are not expert communicators! However, it would be a pity to abandon oral expression when it comes to evaluating competencies at collegial level. To begin with, in the world beyond school, it is as important as writing; also, because oral and written competencies naturally enrich one another. To present ideas orally facilitates their being written down and by the same token, writing ideas down helps fine-tune our oral communication. It is thus in our best interests to vary the means of expression within the scope of evaluations, to get a more accurate portrait of the competencies of our students.

Conscious of this need to give back to oral exams their rightful role within my literature courses, I designed an evaluation activity based on debate. I was looking for a formula that would allow me to create situations that were at once complex, meaningful and yet fun for the students so as to maximize their participation (i.e. those being evaluated as well as those who are not). The debate appeared to me as the ideal formula. I put it to the test four times in groups of Littérature québécoise (Québécois literature) and Littérature et imaginaire (Literature and the imagination). The outcome: my students and I found that this activity exceeded our expectations. In addition to being a highly satisfactory form of oral evaluation, the debate has proven to be an excellent means of re-invigorating a group, increasing motivation and going even further in the acquisition of knowledge.

If debates in the classroom appeal to you, this article can provide answers to your questions. It contains a description of the activity, the unfolding of a standard debate as well as a presentation of the success factors of a debate and its advantages.

WHAT IT IS

Debate. The dictionary defines it as a noun used to describe a structured and guided discussion. The definition further insists on the fact that a debate is an argument that is admittedly well structured. Consequently, it is not a question of introducing a controversial subject in class and asking for each and everyone's opinion (that would be a discussion more than a debate).

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The first task of the professor who wishes to organize debates in class is to identify topics within the subject matter seen or to be covered that lend themselves well to controversy. For example in literature, it may be divergent points of view on a literary work, person or author; in history, contradictory interpretations of the cause and effect of an event; in psychology and philosophy, theoretical concepts that oppose each other... As expressed by Barbeau, Montini et Roy (1997):

[...] we shouldn't think that dialectics apply only to humanities. All courses where questions asked are open to argumentation or multiple answers can effectively use this framework of thinking (p. 237).

¹ Moreover, writing educators recommend that interventions, situations and contexts be diversified. See Y. Reuter, *Enseigner et apprendre à écrire*, Paris, ESF éditeur, 1996.

² This type of activity is suggested in chapter 13 entitled "De l'importance de justifier un point de vue", from the writing of Barbeau, Montini and Roy, *Tracer les chemins de la connaissance; la motivation scolaire*, Montréal, AQPC, 1997.



Moreover, the best questions are those which are open to interpretation. The ideal is thus to resort to polysemic terms in drafting the question, that is, to use terms that can have multiple meanings. In doing so, we increase the odds of having a solid and enriching debate.

Once the subjects are identified, students are chosen to represent each side of the proposition (for or against, theory A or theory B). This stage will enable the organization in the classroom of verbal sparring matches in which the students present their arguments. Whether there are 12, 24 or 38 students in the group, there is no reason why they should not all take part. All we need to do is organize several debates during the session; as opposed to having them occur during the same week, so as to avoid loss of interest. Groups of two, three or four students are formed.

For greater fairness, we can gradually increase the complexity of the subjects and also offer more supervision for students who are first to try the exercise.

If the teams have to be formed early on during the session, it is advisable to leave a margin of error and manoeuvrability. In my case, during week 2, I identify which students will participate in the debates for each of the three works in the program. Then, two weeks before the debate, I submit questions and organize the groups with students initially identified to debate a particular issue. The number of students can thus be adjusted in each team and we can compensate for the disadvantages of drop-outs that occur during the session.

The following example is a detailed sequence of a fifteen-week course in *Littérature et imaginaire* (Literature and the imagination) (601-102) in which three sessions of debates were planned.

Week	Content
1-4	Study of 19 th century literature, realism and tales of Guy De Maupassant
2	Division of participants into three large groups (A, B, C)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of four teams of 3 or 4 students within group A Disclosure to the entire classroom of the two debate subjects dealing with the tales of De Maupassant: "Can we state that in the tales of De Maupassant, men are more victimized than women? Is it right to believe that in the tales of De Maupassant, greed causes more harm than the desire to 'look good'?" Assigning a different position to defend for each team of group A
5	Evaluations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Debates (group A). Duration: 60 minutes Evaluations of the teams by the class and discussion. Duration: 40 minutes b) Drafting, in class, of the partial essay 1 (dealing with the tales of De Maupassant)
6-10	Study of early 20 th century literature, surrealism and <i>L'écume des jours</i> by Boris Vian
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of four teams (3 or 4 students) within group B Disclosure to the entire classroom of the two debate subjects dealing with <i>L'écume des jours</i> by Boris Vian: "Is it accurate to say that levity wins over seriousness in the novel by Vian? In the novel by Vian, can we be led to think that does love is more harmful than society?" Assigning of a different position to defend for each team of group B
11	Evaluations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Debates (group B). Duration: 60 minutes Evaluations of the teams by the class and discussion. Duration: 40 minutes b) Drafting in class of the partial essay 2 (dealing with <i>L'écume des jours</i> by Boris Vian)
12-14	Study of mid-20 th century literature, existentialism and <i>Huis Clos</i> by Jean-Paul Sartre
13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of three teams (3 or 4 students) within group C Disclosure to the entire classroom of the subject of the debate on <i>Huis Clos</i> by Jean-Paul Sartre: "Of the three characters encountered in <i>Huis Clos</i>, which one emerges as the most victorious?" Assigning of a different position to defend for each team of group C
15-16	Evaluations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Debates (group C). Duration: 45 minutes Evaluations of the teams by the class, discussion. Duration: 55 minutes b) Examination on literary knowledge
16*	Drafting of the final essay in the classroom (dealing with <i>Huis Clos</i> by Jean-Paul Sartre)

* At Collège de Rosemont, it is possible to reserve a period for evaluations during week 16 of the session.



In the examples of subjects presented, there is a deliberate vagueness in the subjects; there are a number of meanings to the words “victim”, “win”, “is more harmful”, and “emerges as the most victorious”. These various interpretation possibilities allow the students to present a number of different in-depth arguments.

UNFOLDING OF THE ACTIVITY

The way in which the verbal sparring match is structured influences its chances for success. Some perceive the debate as a confrontation of sorts, in fits and starts, where the winner is the one who is the quickest or speaks the loudest. This type of discussion does not allow for in-depth arguments; and the risk of going off track is great. Let’s keep in mind that a debate is a “structured and guided discussion”. It is the responsibility of the professor to establish a rigid framework to ensure cohesion in the exchanges. A well-defined structure gives the exercise a more official status and supports a certain restraint on the level of language as well as on the content of exchanges.

Initially, it is necessary to time the duration of team interventions. This constraint supports precision and clarity of arguments since teams are forced to better structure and synthesize their thoughts. Each team is also allocated a precise amount of time for intervention, during which no one in the classroom or from the opposing group is allowed to speak. Without this defined period of team interventions, the debate risks falling into complete superficiality, since solid arguments can rarely be presented satisfactorily within a matter of several dozen seconds. Below is an example of the thirty-minute periods allocated for debates within my literature courses:

Rounds	
First 10-minute round	a) Presentation of the argument of team A (5 minutes) b) Presentation of the argument of team B (5 minutes)
Second 10-minute round	a) Rebuttal and new arguments – team A (5 minutes) b) Rebuttal and new arguments – team B (5 minutes)
Third 10-minute round	a) Debate (teams A, B and audience)

In a sequence of this nature, only designated team members can speak during the first two rounds. Team members may communicate with each other in writing only. The third round is more animated since this is when the greatest numbers of spontaneous exchanges take place. Anyone can intervene, even audience members. This succeeds in arousing the interest of other students for the activity and helps prevent the polarization of the debate. It is impressive how the classroom ensures a certain regulation of exchanges. Students intervene to question the incoherence of certain remarks, to defend an idea which was neglected or ask for clarification. All the benefits of teamwork are manifested here.

A moderator is needed to ensure that the verbal sparring match unfolds in orderly fashion. The moderator must time the interventions, grant or deny the right to speak during the three rounds and remind students (particularly the two opposing teams) that they must address him only and not their opponents.

The way in which the debate is structured greatly influences its chances for success. In general, the moderator, as his role implies, is there to temper the exchanges and ensure that the debate respects both rules and individuals. Obviously, the professor seems well suited for this role. However, why not assign it to a student? There are always plenty of volunteers and their dedication to the role is quite remarkable. Additionally, this option allows the group to indulge in deep and rich reflections that are on-going and autonomous (with the professor disappearing from the landscape for the duration of the debate). Such a situation encourages students who have yet to do so to speak up in class, since it is perhaps less intimidating for them to address a peer than the professor.

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ASSURE THE PROPER UNFOLDING OF THE ACTIVITY

Like any teaching activity that deviates from the routine of lectures and practical assignments, debates can be both stimulating and disappointing. The risk of a fiasco is very real: a team can present insignificant arguments and students not on the debating teams can be absent (in mind, body or spirit). However there are ways of decreasing these risks.

To begin with, a percentage of the final grade should be allotted to the debate, that is, to make it, at least partially, a summative evaluation. This makes it possible to require that students do a certain amount of preliminary work for which they are graded. This preparation ensures the presentation of solid arguments, since the more time you accord to



the debate, the more meticulous a preparation is needed to avoid idle periods, redundancy and going off on tangents.

Spontaneity and improvisation, although belonging to the nature of a debate, must be kept to a minimum. The more the students develop their arguments, foresee those of the opposing team and anticipate their rebuttals, the more the debate will be interesting and enriching for both the teams and the audience. They will thus be able to appropriate the subject and, from the get-go, gain the confidence they need to speak when the time comes.

Another advantage related to preliminary preparation consists in being able to evaluate individually the work of each member of the team without requiring that they speak during the debate. Certain timid students can find it very difficult to intervene during the more competitive moments of a debate. Knowing that they only need to be present and prepared to fulfill the evaluation requirements helps lessen the degree of anxiety they may experience.

The best way to stimulate and to motivate students, both participants and observers, is to use the debate as a preparatory exercise for a subsequent summative evaluation.

For example, the debate can be an opportunity to review or synthesize learning prior to an exam. In literature, it allows me to prepare the students for the essay that they will have to write on the literary work studied (as seen in the previous example). I tell them that the subjects selected for the essay will take into account the arguments presented by the teams. In other words, I reformulate a subject that includes some of the best ideas put forth by the teams. Students can then take notes during the debates and refer to them on the day of the evaluation.

Even though the subjects proposed for the test are not identical to those of the debates, the clash of ideas generated by the activity proves to be very useful for a great number of students who will thus avoid blanking out during the test. Such conditions make debates very popular. Since I began organizing my evaluations in this manner, absenteeism during debates has decreased while note-taking has become frenetic! The same cannot be said of the endless periods devoted to oral presentations. As for the students taking part in the debates, the subsequent writing no longer frightens them, their preparatory work for the debate having enabled them to develop a deep understanding of the work and its theme. When they note the positive impact that the debate has had on their confidence and writing skills, some students do not hesitate to repeat the exercise for themselves as regards the proposed topics for debates on other sections of the program.

Another way of stimulating the interest of students who attend the debates is to ask them to evaluate the arguments of the teams. According to the time available, the evaluation itself can become an educational activity. For instance, we can form groups with the students and ask them to assign a grade to each team and then to justify it in writing.

TEAM

Position defended:

Abstract of the argumen:

EVALUATION

- *Ideas presented were clear, relevant and coherent* (+ +/- -)

Justification: _____

- *Explanations were relevant and not repetitive* (+ +/- -)

Justification: _____

- *Quotations selected by the teams were good illustrations of the ideas* (+ +/- -)

Justification: _____

- *The team responded well to the questions and objections presented to them* (+ +/- -)

Justification: _____



The previous is an example of an evaluation grid that can be completed by the students. To make it possible for this work to be a new opportunity to exchange ideas, it is advisable to create small groups of students and ask them for a consensus before completing the document. If we want them to justify the evaluation, we can ask each small group to evaluate one or two teams; if not, they can evaluate all the teams.

We must be prepared, however, to take this evaluation into account (even if minimally) in the assigning of a grade on the debates. Allowing students in the class to have control over the evaluation of their peers spurs their interest in the debate and motivates them to intervene in the last round. This privilege is also more logical insofar as students are the principal recipients of the communication, those who benefit from work realized by participating teams. It is thus expected that they should have their say on the quality of the presentation presented to them. In this way, we can rely on their integrity and seriousness of purpose.

ADVANTAGES OF THE DEBATE

Unlike the oral presentation, the debate constitutes a dynamic exercise which does not leave the audience passive. It is also a richer and more condensed activity: what other oral presentation could be so easily presented by six or eight people within thirty minutes? Debates bring a level of satisfaction that is not often found in an academic context, the satisfaction of immediate feedback. Indeed, it is not a matter, as is the case for a written work or an oral presentation, to present only a given content that has been pre-determined. The very context of a debate makes it possible to correct, rectify and clarify the message being communicated according to the reaction of those receiving it. Subjected to judgements other than those of professors (which can sometimes be even harsher!), the communication must be even more transparent. A well-prepared team will have no difficulty participating in a debate; poorly prepared, the feeling of being overpowered by the arguments of the opposing team will identify the gaps better than the assigning of a poor grade. Such an experience illustrates in a much more striking way the impact of adequate preparation on evaluations.

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The playful and competitive character of the debate appeals particularly to boys who generally excel in debates. It is probably this same characteristic that makes debates the most appreciated teaching activity by students at the end of the session. As participants, their pride is proportional to the quality of the opposition demonstrated by the opposite team. As spectators, the excitement of the exchanges arouses their interest and the possibility of participating stimulates them. In my courses, many students consider debates to be the learning activities that helped them the most in developing their writing skills. It remains difficult to quantify the real impact of debates on the development of their intellectual competencies.

One thing is certain: during my use of debates in class, I propose essay topics that are more complex than in previous years. And I do not see any notable variation in

the rate of failure. I am convinced that debates allow me to go the extra mile in the study of literary works within the program and that the entire classroom benefits from them. ●

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