Innovative Teaching and Learning Project (ITLP)

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Debating the issue: Using university student debates to facilitate active student engagement in sport and exercise science

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Introduction

"Debate refers to the process of considering multiple viewpoints and arriving at a judgment" (Kennedy, 2007, p. 1). The team with the most persuasive argument usually wins the debate. Class debates "involve active and cooperative learning, stimulate critical thinking and student interest, facilitate discussion and can improve oral communication skills" (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999, p. 106). Debates are useful when discussing subjects that have no definitive answer, or that may be obscured by fallacies or media jargon. In addition, by assigning students the position they will argue, the teacher may eliminate student discomfort with arguing a controversial topic.

The aim of this project was to document the process of using topic-based debates in sport and exercise science higher education curriculum and to report subsequent student perceptions of the effectiveness of the debates with respect to improving and facilitating the acquisition of generic skills.

Keywords: public speaking, team work, critical thinking.

Innovation

University students enrolled in a third-year sports medicine subject (n=37) within the 3-year Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science curriculum consented to participate in the project as approved by the institutional ethics committee. Students were grouped in teams of three members and given 3 weeks to prepare their debate. Student teams reported spending an average of 5 hours preparing for the debate. The debates were held in front of all class members with each speaker allowed 5 minutes to present. The first speaker for the affirmative team started the debate, with the two teams alternating

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speakers and finishing with the third speaker from the negative team. The winning team was decided by a combination of specific weighted marking criteria assessed by the lecturer and by audience voting. Example debate topics included:

- Testing for recreational drugs in elite athletes out of season is unfair.
- Athletes should be allowed to use intravenous drips to rehydrate during games/competition.

Debating provides an innovative learning opportunity in the field of sport and exercise science where the focus of learning is often on theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The debates shift the focus of learning towards professional issues such as clinical reasoning and ethical decision-making.

Evaluation method

Following completion of the debates, the students (n=37) anonymously rated, on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), their perception of the effectiveness of participating in debates for improving/facilitating the acquisition of generic skills, as compared to other conventional assessment methods. Most students (n=34) provided further anonymous written feedback regarding the debates.

Outcomes

Students generally agreed that debates more effectively stimulated/improved a range of generic skills when compared to other assessment items (Table 1).

Table 1

Sports Medicine Student Ratings (n=37) of the Effectiveness of Debates at Improving/Facilitating the Acquisition of Generic Skills in Comparison to Other Assessment Items

Statement	Rating(/5)	Range
Stimulated me to think deeply about the topic	3.9	2–5
Developed my interpersonal skills and teamwork	3.8	3–5
Gave me confidence in my public speaking ability	3.6	2–5
Improved my ability to develop an argument	4.0	3–5
Improved my research skills	3.8	2–5
Was a more effective learning experience	3.5	2–5
The topic could be argued fairly from either side	3.7	2–5
Enjoyed the atmosphere created by arguing a controversial topic	3.9	1–5
Enjoyed the challenge of preparing for a controversial topic	3.8	2–5
Provided the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of topic	3.9	3–5
Improved clinical thinking ability	3.9	2–5

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Students identified a variety of positive and negative themes in their free-text written feedback. Positive feedback (n=33) was thematically grouped into the following key statements: the opportunity to present in teams is less daunting than individual presentations (n=5); debates facilitated team/class bonding or was a great way to bring different people together to work (n=5); debates developed public speaking skills (n=5), critical thinking skills (n=4) and research skills (n=4); the competitive nature provided an incentive to undertake in-depth research of the topic (n=4); debates allowed for a wider view of different topics (n=3); and the debate topics could be argued evenly from both sides (n=3). Negative feedback (n=10) was also thematically analysed and included the following concepts: students were not comfortable speaking publicly (n=4); debates made students nervous (n=3); it was difficult getting the team together to prepare (n=2); and speaking "off the cuff" was intimidating (n=1).

What next?

The results revealed that students perceived debating to be an effective activity for improving or facilitating the acquisition of a variety of generic skills. However, a limitation of the study was that it only reported student perceptions and did not attempt to quantify actual enhancement of generic skills. Nonetheless, based on the positive student feedback, the authors recommend in-class debating as an interactive, student- and enquiry-based activity to enhance university student engagement with the health curriculum. Strategies that teaching staff could adopt to address the negative feedback include scheduling in-class time for team preparation work and facilitating mock debates on other topics if the debate is to be used as an assessment tool.

References

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