
**Categories:** active learning, critical thinking, debates, social work

**Summary**

In recent years the study of social work has increasingly focused on developing the competencies required for social workers to engage and influence social policy and prepare students for “policy intervention.” In order to accomplish these objectives, social work programs have begun to employ newer instructional methodologies, particularly those that focus on active learning and the application of key social work concepts. In this context, the authors of this article argue that debates have great potential for not only increasing student knowledge, but also helping students develop the aforementioned competencies.

Within the field of social work, policy practice, as a program objective, is undertaken in several ways. Some of the mechanisms utilized in this regard include “analytic activities, such as gathering data, conducting research, identifying and prioritizing policy options, and creating policy proposals.” It also involves a variety of activities intended to help students develop skills of persuasion and argumentation. Ultimately, all of these critical thinking activities allow students the opportunity to become advanced thinkers capable of evaluating ideas and positing their own positions. Debates, argue the authors, challenge students to strengthen their skills in all of these areas because they require students not only to understand and substantiate their own positions, but also to assess the strengths and weaknesses of opposing perspectives.

Given their perception of the benefits of debates as teaching tool in social work courses, the authors developed a curriculum in which debates formed a central element of course work. The course that they chose to implement debates in was a required course for second year Masters of Social Work students that focused on policy and practice in the area of children and families. Because of the relatively short time frame set by a quarterly schedule, the authors felt that it was necessary to introduce the idea of debates as a learning mechanism almost immediately. Students in the class were divided into four teams of eleven students, and each team was required to participate in two of four scheduled debates. Within teams, each student was required to play a primary role in one of the team’s two debates. Students were allowed to collectively select the topics for the debates. The debates utilized a classic format: pro position, rebuttal, con position, rebuttal, questioning by respective teams of each other, open discussion and questioning from audience, and closing statements by each team. According to the authors the debates were “lively and informative.” The audience was enthusiastic and asked many pertinent questions. Each debate was also followed up with a debriefing session in which the active participants discussed their experience in the debate.

Having laid out the concepts behind and formatting of the debates that they used, the authors continue the article by discussing the methodology and results of the study that they undertook to assess the impact of debates on student learning. Their study had four main hypothesis: students would report
increased knowledge about each of the debate topics; students would report greater increases in knowledge from observing debates than they would have from more traditional learning methods; students would report greater increases in knowledge from debating than they would have from more traditional means; and, students would report greater increased knowledge about topics that they debated than they did for topics that they observed. To measure these they utilized pre and posttest surveys which included questions that elicited student opinions on the educational value of debates, and analysis of students’ self-reported knowledge of key course content and concepts.

The results that the authors garnered from both the pre and posttest surveys generally validated their views that debates constituted an effective mechanism for developing student skills in social work policy courses. According to their results, the surveys indicated a statistically significant improvement in knowledge for each of the topics covered in the debates (hypothesis 1). The results that they garnered in regard to the second hypothesis, however, were more mixed: half of the students reported gaining more knowledge through observing debates, while the other half suggested that they would gain more through the use of more traditional means. In contrast, students reported significantly greater gains in knowledge of topics that they debated than they would have from traditional methods. Finally, they results clearly substantiated the authors’ fourth hypothesis, as students clearly felt that they learned significantly greater knowledge from participating in debates than they did from observing them.

The student comments collected by the authors also supported the notion that debates were a positive learning tool. A strong majority indicated a positive view of the debates and felt that they should be employed in future classes. Over half of the students noted that the debates had increased their interest in policy advocacy, and approximately seventy percent felt that the debates have helped them strengthen the skills necessary to engage in policy advocacy. Further, sixty percent of students felt that debates offered a more effective means of developing these skills than typical written assignments, and over seventy percent felt the same in comparison to other oral exercises. Only thirteen percent of students felt that debates were worse in these regards. Finally, sixty-three percent of all comments were positive. While forty-three percent of students “noted something negative,” every student who offered negative comments, which were largely focused in logistical matters, also included some positive views.

**Conclusions**

Based upon both the results of their surveys and the actual debates themselves, the authors felt that debates have considerable value as a method of active learning in social work policy courses. Ultimately, the study and student commentary substantiated all four of the authors’ hypotheses and indicated a sense of improved critical thinking skills. Despite these positive results, the authors also noted certain drawbacks to focusing on the use of debates. In particular, the authors noted the considerable logistical challenges to effective implementation of debates. Moreover, they recognized that the amount of time demanded by the use of debates put certain restraints on content coverage. In recommending the continued use of debates, the authors stressed the importance of extensive planning. This was especially true, they noted, in utilizing the post-debate debriefing sessions. They also noted the
possibility of improving the use of debates by including post-debate exercises that would allow students to consider a broader range of possible solutions to the issues presented in the debates.

**Applications**

This article offers considerable evidence to support the use of debates as an effective active learning tool. While the article focuses on policy courses within the field of social work, they could be easily adapted and employed in almost any imaginable field of study. Similarly, while this study examined a class of graduate students, there would appear, from the descriptions here, to be no reasons that debates could not be utilized in undergraduate classes as well. Perhaps most importantly, this article offers valuable insight into both the challenges that the use of debates involves and an effective format for their employment. It did, however, seem likely that use of debates could and should be used as formal assessments for course grades (at the very least as a part of in-class participation), and that follow up writing assignments or exams would provide a supplemental means of measuring the efficacy of debates as a learning tool.

**Citations of Interest**

