

## **Debate as a Teaching Strategy in Online Education: A Case Study**

### **Le débat en tant que méthode pédagogique d'enseignement en ligne : un examen de cas concrets**

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#### **Abstract**

This reflective case study was based on our independent use of the debate as an online instructional approach and our shared interest in teaching strategies. In an interdisciplinary manner, using narrative inquiry and action research, we melded our data sources and analyzed the findings, including our individual experiences with the technique. Our paper contributes to the field of research on faculty self-evaluations of teaching strategies, specifically debates. The topic will be of relevance to those who teach online. The findings suggest that examining faculty perceptions and views on the use of debates in text-based paced and un-paced courses at the online undergraduate and graduate levels can be a valuable undertaking. The process enabled us to benefit from our mutual reflective discussions on the use of debates to understand how each of us used the strategy. Despite our different approaches to the debate, we share many commonalities regarding debate as a teaching strategy.

#### **Résumé**

Cet examen de cas concrets était fondé sur notre utilisation indépendante du débat comme méthode pédagogique et sur notre intérêt commun pour les stratégies pédagogiques. Sur un mode interdisciplinaire et à partir de récits et de recherche-action, nous avons fusionné nos sources de données et avons analysé les résultats, y compris nos expériences individuelles avec cette technique. Notre dossier est un apport à la recherche sur l'autoévaluation des stratégies pédagogiques, notamment les débats, effectuées par le personnel enseignant. Le sujet intéressera ceux qui donnent un enseignement en ligne. Les résultats font croire qu'examiner les perceptions et les idées du personnel enseignant sur l'utilisation du débat pour des cours donnés avec ou sans manuel et offerts en ligne aux étudiants de premier et deuxième cycle peut être une entreprise très intéressante. L'opération nous a permis de tirer profit de nos réflexions mutuelles sur l'utilisation du débat pour comprendre comment chacun d'entre nous a recouru à cette stratégie. Malgré des divergences dans nos façons d'aborder le débat, de nombreux points communs nous unissent à l'égard de cet outil pédagogique.

## Introduction

Educators in online and distance education institutions are always searching for innovative and effective ways to help students learn. While some teaching strategies can be modeled after those used in traditional classrooms, others require a bit more work to be adapted to the online environment. This paper tells the story of how three academics independently attempted to adapt the use of debate as a teaching strategy for use in an online learning environment. It goes beyond the adaptation process to describe our experiences of working together while reflecting on the process. None of us had known the others were also using this teaching strategy. We have different teaching philosophies and come from different disciplines, but together we found a way to enhance one another's growth as instructors and to improve our teaching.

As three faculty members from the same distance education institution, we each teach and conduct disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in different areas — nursing, psychology, and business. Using distance education technology, each of us has conducted (and continues to conduct) research with colleagues that we have either never met in person or whom we see infrequently. Therefore, when a colleague we all knew encouraged us to discuss our respective use of the debate in our courses, we were all willing. We each agreed to try something different and discussed the possibility by phone. Based on our first phone meeting, we found that we shared many things in common, so we decided to explore our experiences to see what we could share with other online instructors. Our mutual interest in the use of the debate as a teaching strategy, our shared interest in enhancing student experiences, and our being receptive to new collaborations brought us together on this project. In this paper, our focus is on exploring our individual motivations to use the debate and the opportunity to compare and contrast our experiences.

## About Us

As three academics, we each teach in different faculties at the same university. One is an Associate Professor in nursing, where graduate courses are paced (14-weeks long) that use MOODLE (an open source) learning management platform. Another is an Assistant Professor in psychology, where the undergraduate courses also use MOODLE but students register for six months and work at their own pace during this period. The third is an Associate Professor in business where the paced eight-week graduate level courses are offered on LOTUS NOTES® groupware. We all used a form of online debate in our asynchronous, fully online courses. All three of our courses were offered fully online from a distance education institution.

Extensive literature abounds on online distance education, as well as on teaching strategies. Within these two streams, there is a smaller more specific tributary on the use of debates as one such teaching strategy, with little indication of its use in online education. We begin with a brief literature review on online distance education, teaching strategy, and online debates, focusing specifically on the pedagogy of using debates in higher education. This is followed by our case study methodology of narrative inquiry and three iterative processes used to analyze our data (i.e., journaling notes, debate teaching experiences, and phone meeting content). Then we present our discussion and conclusion, including recommendations for pedagogy.

## Literature Review

### ***Distance Education and Teaching Strategy***

Although some still ponder the extent to which distance education is the same or as good as traditional ways of education, distance education *is* education (Moore, 1991). Distance education eliminates barriers of time and geography, and is often described as being available “anywhere and anytime.” As Hamzaee (2005) observes, “Distance education can be as effective as traditional instruction when the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, there is student-to-student interaction, and timely teacher-to-student feedback” (p. 216). Distance education is no longer the poor cousin of face-to-face delivery modes; it is simply different, especially in terms of the social context (Banas & Emory, 1998). Instructional methods and not the media determine instructional and learning outcomes (Clark, 1983, 1994).

Key elements of an effective online educational experience were outlined in 2001 by Garrison, Anderson and Archer as consisting of a combination of teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence. This Community of Inquiry model (CoI) has been the subject of many research papers which substantiate the importance of design and interaction in online education. Recently, Swan, Matthews, Bogle, Boles and Day (2011) demonstrated that the use of the CoI framework to redesign courses helps to improve student outcomes. In developing his ideas about online assessment, Gaytan (2005) describes the need for online courses to accommodate combinations of social rapport-building, instructional designs for learning, enhanced interactivity through technology, and learner-initiated interaction. Consequently, online teaching strategies warrant more systematic and ongoing assessment to fit the learning outcomes, or competences, as well as modifications from traditional teaching. We also continue to see a shift in the research literature showing online education to be more learner-centered than instructor-centered (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2002; Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003).

Some online teaching strategies include activities to elicit students’ abilities to apply course material spontaneously to contextual situations, interact based on topic interest versus quantity of participation, engage in self-directed versus forced collaboration, create content, and draw “connections between disciplines and knowledge” (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009, p. 15).

Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2001), in their literature review of educational technology, claimed that using technology can be helpful in supporting communication and information retrieval skills. It can expedite interaction among students and between students and the instructor (Paladino, 2009). Some students who are hesitant to participate in classroom discussions or to contact their instructor are more likely to become involved online, which fosters their critical thinking abilities far more than would remain silent in a classroom (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Use of the internet and other technologies is part of a trend away from passive learning techniques toward more participatory and engaging methods (Paladino, 2009) and its flexibility allows the development of creative teaching and learning techniques (Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2001).

### ***The Pedagogy of Using Debates in Higher Education***

Researchers on pedagogy have described debates as one type of active learning tool that promotes critical thinking (Darby, 2007; Kennedy, 2007). Critical thinking has been defined in many ways but one comprehensive definition, created from a review of the literature that covers all aspects, both skills and behaviour: “Critical thinking basically involves: (i) a set of skills,

such as analyzing, arguing, synthesizing, evaluating and applying; and (ii) the use of these skills to guide behaviors” (Wang, Woo, & Zhao, 2009, p. 97). Students tend to enjoy debating, and thus they are more likely to be engaged, to remember material, and to use the skills in other aspects of their lives (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; McGraw-Hill, 2009; Tessier, 2009). Budesheim and Lundquist (1999), claim that one of the goals of education is to open students’ eyes to the fact that issues can be complex and that examining different viewpoints objectively is an important skill. They argue that, “the ability to see different sides of an issue and to evaluate each objectively is a hallmark of science” (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999, p. 109). A survey of recent graduates found that developing analytic/thinking skills was among the most useful aspects of their degree — more useful than any specific course they took (Lunneborg & Wilson, 1985). Galloway (2007) asserts, “it is unsurprising that many debaters contend that debate is one of the most educationally valuable experiences of their lives” (p. 13).

Debating triggers higher order learning, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Paladino, 2009; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Scott-Young & Samson, 2008). It can help students learn to read critically and also write critically, which is a valuable skills for graduates: “The ability to write effective arguments influences success of students in preparation for their future careers” (Scott-Young & Samson, 2008, p. 40). The process encourages empathy (Tessier, 2009) in that participants need to understand how others think (Bellon, 2000), helps to increase students’ open-mindedness (Berdine, 1987) and tolerance (Galloway, 2007), and may even decrease incidents of violence (Bellon, 2000).

Additional benefits of debates include the likelihood that “debaters come to realize that positions other than their own have value, and that reasonable minds can disagree on controversial issues” (Galloway, 2007, p. 12). It can also help students to realize that sometimes experts do not agree on topics and that topics may not have a right or wrong answer. Huryn (1986) argues:

Debate experience gives the student some perception of how knowledge must be sought not only from empirical research but also from critical analysis in an argumentation format. Students learn not only how social scientists gather and analyze data, but how research can be used to support arguments and how to deal with the conflicting results often obtained (p. 266).

These proclaimed benefits of debating led to the structure of each of the course debates being discussed in this paper, as a way to help students develop a number of competencies specified in the literature. These include course-specific learning outcomes (Tessier, 2009) cognitive abilities (Tessier, 2009), research and writing skills (Lewis & Wakefield, 1983; Scott-Young & Samson, 2008), problem solving and decision making ability (Bellon, 2000; Huryn, 1986; Jackson, 1973; Strait & Wallace, 2008), and taking responsibility for one’s own learning (Snider & Nissen, 2003). According to Roy and Macchiette (2005), “the debate process is still one of the best techniques for applying the principles of critical thinking, which is a crucial goal of educators from a wide array of disciplines” (p. 264).

### ***Debates in an Online Environment***

While structured debates have been used to advantage in the classroom (Huryn, 1986; Kennedy, 2007; Oros, 2007), adapting the technique for online teaching can pose a challenge. The learning curve needed to master the technology (Love, 2004), the lack of non-verbal cues (Tu, 2004), and

the time-consuming aspect of the process (many instructors used teaching assistants) (Jugdev, Markowski, & Mengel, 2004; Lin & Crawford, 2007; Tu, 2004) have been mentioned as barriers.

Some of these barriers can be dealt with by providing clear instructions (Jugdev et al., 2004; Tu, 2004) and pre-planning (Lin & Crawford, 2004; Love, 2004). Advantages of using technology to hold debates include more flexibility and creativity to modify the traditional, structured debates to suit pedagogical needs (Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Tu, 2004). For example, online debates can be held asynchronously, which Tu (2004) argues are “more thoughtful, more logical, and have evidence to support the arguments” (p. 56) because there is more time to think about the issues. Other benefits include improved research and writing skills (Lin & Crawford, 2007).

## **Methodology**

### ***Case Study***

Our shared incoming belief was that there was value in exploring our individual online debate strategies with each other in an interdisciplinary manner. Our objective originated from the joint perception that our independent use of the debate demonstrated both commonalities and differences that could deepen our understanding of debates as a teaching strategy and thereafter, enable us to refine our approaches to our respective debates. A case study of our teaching through online debate became the goal.

Description and analysis of a *case* has long been a method of understanding phenomena and sharing knowledge in history, medicine, and social work. Sometimes a single case has been described and at other times a group of cases. More recently, case study has become a research methodology used frequently in qualitative study in most academic fields. Yin (2009) likens case study research to puzzle solving in context. The context is very important because it allows the emergence of alternate or rival explanations. Our research question was that the introduction of debate in online courses would be positively perceived as a teaching strategy by the faculty involved.

Prior to undertaking this narrative case study, we consulted the university research ethics office and confirmed that our proposed use of reflective and self-evaluative techniques exempted us from the ethics process. We neither gathered primary data nor reported on such data in this paper. We further confirmed that the study did not require institutional approval.

Case studies by definition involve multiple types of data. Our deliberations led us to understand that our own experiences, or stories, of using debate within a course comprised our starting information. Sandelowski (1991) posits that “generally, narratives are understood as stories that include a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events: to render or to signify the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner” (p. 162). Narratives provide descriptions and explanations of an event that is meaningful to the reader. There is usually a cause and effect explanation in a narrative: “The goal of narrative explanations is to provide an intelligible, comprehensive and verisimilar narrative rendering of why something happened that is well grounded and constitutes a supportable employment of events” (p. 164). Descriptive narratives explain what had happened

at a point in time. They are linear stories with sequence and order. They can thus be analyzed individually or compared with other narratives.

Narrative research is also viewed as postmodern and reformist (Polkinghorne, 2007). Polkinghorne exhausts the validity arguments in his paper and concludes, “What makes for a valid knowledge claim is dependent upon the kind of claim that is being made . . . [as the claim is about] how people understand a situation, others and themselves . . . [and] is sufficient justification to be taken seriously” (p. 6). The data for analysis are the stories themselves, their meaning to the storyteller and the reconstruction of that meaning by the researcher(s). The content of the story can relate to any subject or discipline. Narrative analysis is thus not discipline specific: “The study of narratives has linked the sciences with history, literature and everyday life to reflect the increasing reflexivity that characterizes contemporary inquiry and furthers the postmodern deconstruction of the already tenuous boundaries among disciplines and realms of meaning” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162).

### *Searching for Meaning Through Triangulation*

The three-step process in which we engaged was repeated sequentially and was based on the following steps:

1. Conference call;
2. Writing individual reflective narrative and uploading it to a university website, which was available only to the three of us as the participants to share, connect, and communicate the narratives with each other,
3. Reading and reflecting on each other’s individual narratives to compare and contrast our experiences, reflections on the experiences, and self-evaluations of our experiences based on steps 1-2.

Our first data set consisted of the narrative stories we had written and shared about *how* we used debates in our courses (step 2). In this step, we wrote from our individual pedagogical perspectives. We independently wrote our perceptions (step 3), of what was similar and what was different amongst them. Then we repeated the process and returned to step 1 (conference call).

In our second round, we began by discussing our narratives over the phone. Then in step 2, we wrote individual narratives that extended our thinking and writing from round 1. We followed this with step 3. We decided at this point to continue separately for one more round, thus producing a third set of independent data prior to our actual analysis. We each took the three sets of similarities-and-differences narratives and combined them into one overall narrative each. We called these three documents “mash ups” because we introduced new data from another source, the teleconferences. “‘Mash ups’ [are] application hybrids that combine content or data from different sites in unique and sometimes groundbreaking ways” (Orange & Cohen, 2009, p. 20).

After the three rounds, we had explored our experiences with the debates, discussed the literature, and both reflected and written about the debate experiences, as well as our collaborative efforts to help each other gain insights on comparing and contrasting our experiences with this teaching strategy. We drew upon the “mash ups” for this paper. Many researchers support the notion that “good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate,

that is, to use multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings” (Mathison, 1988, p. 13). As this was a narrative case study, new methods of analysis are appropriate for inclusion during analysis as the data directs. Data from multiple sources, in this case our individual and then “new” narratives all converged in the analysis. Indeed, narrative data from three diverse perspectives is in itself triangulation (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000).

## Case Study Analysis

### *The Debates*

Earlier in this paper, we indicated that educational research and evaluation has advanced beyond critiquing the merits of distance education. We also indicated that the American Distance Education Consortium and American Association of Higher Education both deem quality standards from traditional modes of instruction to apply to distance education (Gaytan, 2005). Along these lines and in our study, we did not focus on *how* our online courses differed from traditional modes of delivery, nor were we concerned about that. Similarly, none of us focused on learning outcomes that were unique to distance education. As this is a retrospective narrative study, formal evaluation of the debate process was neither planned in advance nor within the scope of this study. Students do however evaluate each course that they take and in nursing, additional research has been conducted using the students’ debate self-evaluation as data, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. What we focused on instead, were the similarities of perceptions we all held towards the teaching strategy when used in our courses, which were vastly different in discipline and content, student level and delivery but similar in production, i.e., totally online, with either MOODLE or LOTUS NOTES as learning management software.

Based on the aforementioned three-step process, as we personally valued collaborations, we used the process of engaging in reflection and self-evaluation regarding our experiences as an interdisciplinary team of three women. We found the process involved sharing at a deeper level and role modeling for each other. The more we talked, the more we developed trust with each other, got to know each other, and found out what we had in common and what was different about us. The three-step process also reflected how multidisciplinary teams can work together. The experiential differences in our three approaches to the debate enabled us to compare and contrast our reflective and self-evaluative insights. If we had been too similar, we would have had nothing to learn from each other.

We differed in a number of ways, yet we noticed a number of commonalities. Although we all used debates as an assignment in our online courses, each of us came to this teaching strategy from different starting point. All three of us taught our respective courses online. The psychology course was an un-paced (individualized study), fourth-year undergraduate, six-month course in psychology of families and parenting. Both the nursing and business courses were paced graduate level courses. One was a 14-week nursing course on trends and issues, the other, a two-month MBA course on project management.

We also had different motivations for initiating the use of debates: to introduce some alternatives to case studies in the business course, to introduce diversity as a way to change the ways in which nursing students learn, and in psychology, for students to defend their positions using empirical data rather than opinion. We shared a desire to try online teaching strategies that were new to us. Collectively, we perceived that this could enhance student engagement and leaning. In

the process of developing our respective debate formats, we found that we shared an interest in the value of debate as a teaching strategy and the value of undertaking collaborative research.

All three of us used debates in our courses to foster learning with a unique teaching strategy. It was unique in that few of our colleagues had used online debates and we had not found many instances described in the literature. Our business faculty member's inspiration stemmed from her own experiences. As a student, she had participated in debates and enjoyed the challenges of considering issues from different perspectives. She recalled the engagement merits of the debates, especially when some of her peers got into their debate roles in animated and passionate ways to defend their views. She was also seeking an alternative strategy to group case studies. Case studies primarily focused on corporate scenarios and provided in-depth organizational context through company information on the issues and corporate data to enable students to analyze specific problems and develop managerial recommendations. However, debate topics enabled students to develop constructive arguments to support opposing views and defend these views. She indicated that she enjoyed developing debate topics because she could relate them to specific course objectives and because it was sometimes a challenge to find good quality cases in project management. Another reason that she liked using the debate was that she tried to picture herself as a student taking a stand *for* or *against* the debate topic sides. In doing so, she thought that the students would enjoy debating the topics.

In nursing, our faculty member was looking for diversity in her course as she had already planned to assign an essay. She was concerned that when her students graduated and worked in the field, they might not question current practices, so it was important to educate them to be critical thinkers. In facilitating debates, she emphasized the value of presenting all perspectives on an issue while removing emotion and passion, and reminded students that the topics/issues were meant to be educational and not to be interpreted personally.

Our psychologist also included debates in her course as a way to encourage critical thinking. Her philosophy was that education should raise students' awareness that most issues are not straightforward and that students should learn to form opinions about their position that they can explain or defend with factual evidence. She was not as concerned about which side of an issue a student took, as long as the student could support his/her reasons with evidence from the literature. This rationale for using debates is one that all three of us shared in our approaches.

Each of us created a list of debate topics for our students. Whereas two faculty members gave students a choice on which topic they could debate, one selected the debate topic for her courses due to time constraints. We each structured our debates quite differently. In the psychology course, students debate both sides on their own. This was driven by the nature of an independent study course format and rolling admissions. In the nursing and business courses, students were assigned to a side, in pairs in nursing and in groups of eight to ten in business. In nursing the use of debates was extended as an instructional mode by using student self-evaluation to foster personal insights and reflective learning.

The nursing students learned about the fallacies of logic and other aspects of debating. The learning outcomes were twofold: learning all perspectives of major nursing issues and learning to frame an argument. The 16-18 students per section also indicated their first three choices via course email, from a list of 25 possible topics, and had the option to suggest their own topic(s). The debates occurred from week 5 to week 12 of the 14-week course and each debate spanned



seven days. Students were assigned to debate topics and presentation dates, but their preferences were generally accommodated. For each debate topic, the faculty member for the course then randomly split student pairs to the pro or con side. Everyone had access to both sides' submissions in each debate, which were posted as individual threads within a forum in MOODLE. Two days later, the two debating students each posted their rebuttal in the same forum. The entire class then was permitted to discuss the topic. Three days later, the two debaters each posted a summary of their positions. All of the debate and discussion was asynchronously typed on an online forum. Finally, the debaters wrote self-evaluations that included what they had learned by debating online and what they would do differently if they were to debate online another time, and emailed these reflective summaries to the instructor. In this course, the debate comprised 35% of the students' course grade, plus an additional 10% for participating in others' debates. An individual mark was given.

In business, the debate was organized into three parts and started in the fourth week of the two-month course. Debate learning outcomes focused on the development and use of critical thinking and constructive arguments to support and defend positions, exploration of personal biases in opinions, development of skills in arguing different viewpoints, and practice in substantiating positions with evidence. Working in groups of eight or nine, students had two weeks in which to prepare their 1,000-word formal position statement (worth 10% of their course grade) and post it for the entire class to read. Then the students had a week in which to post a 1,000-word formal rebuttal statement (worth 10% of their course grade). Thereafter, all students engaged in larger group discussion on the topic. Students received detailed instructions on the process and were assigned to a side. They were asked to provide three to five clear, logical, supportable, and convincing arguments that support their side and to do the same in the rebuttal, where they were to address weaknesses in the points presented by their opponents. Following the rebuttals, students engaged in a general discussion where they could introduce new issues. Near the end of the week, the faculty member conducted an informal poll to see which side students supported now and whether the debate strengthened or changed their position. In this course, the debate comprised 20% of the students' course grade, and it was a group mark.

A peer evaluation technique was also used whereby the students evaluated each team member's participation by assigning them a score between 1-10 where 10 was excellent, 9 was very satisfactory, 7-8 was satisfactory, and 6 or lower was poor. These results were visible only to the instructor who then had the discretion to adjust a student's group assignment mark up or down. If a specific student's mark was adjusted, the change resulted in a difference of a few percentage points.

The psychology course on families and parenting lasts six months, but students register on a rolling basis, so they enter the course at different times of the year and very few are at the same point in the course at the same time. As the logistics did not allow a group debate, an assignment in which each student debated him/herself was created. The course was structured so that each assignment builds on the others so that the students are prepared to write the debate paper near the end of the course. Students were encouraged to spend four to five weeks on their papers. First, students completed an assignment in information retrieval to learn how and where to find peer-reviewed (i.e., objective) articles to prepare them for conducting a debate. This was followed by an assignment to create an annotated bibliography on one of the controversial topics provided. Finally, students were asked to write an essay in which they presented two sides of that

topic based on the literature. The conclusion of the debate essay would discuss which aspect of the topic had the stronger argument, or what research would be needed in order to draw a firmer conclusion about the issue. Learning outcomes focused on improving student awareness of the complexities of issues surrounding families and the study of families, practice in broadening one's thinking and in considering several possibilities before reaching a conclusion, developing the ability to explore and debate different sides of issues by evaluating the research literature, and enhancing critical-thinking skills. In the course, the debate comprised 40% of the students' course grade, and it was an individual mark.

### ***General Student Feedback***

General student feedback on the use of debates in two of the faculties has been positive. The psychology course has just begun so student feedback is not yet available. In the MBA program, students briefly discussed their debate experience after the debate in an asynchronous online forum. They mentioned feeling more engaged in the course and indicated that they appreciated not having two case study assignments in this course as this was such a common practice. A few indicated that the debate enabled them to "take a side" that they would not normally have supported unless they had been asked to take that side. They mentioned that the debate enabled them to see the issue from two very different perspectives.

Nursing students commented in their self-evaluations about their preliminary concerns related to taking on a novel challenge (the debate), that they were gaining new perspectives, and some indicated that they had not participated in a debate before. Their feedback also reflected their increased confidence levels at the end of the debate and in their self-assurance in undertaking real-life activities. As part of the self-evaluation students described the significant changes in their perceptions of issues and their ability to take a stand and formulate arguments, particularly when required to oppose their own previously held belief. One student said, "Debating provoked emotions of healthy conflict [and] opened my eyes to seeing the art of defense and the importance of embracing many views, opinions and experiences."

In business, student feedback was gathered through the discussion databases and through a formal course evaluation. In general, students indicated that they liked the variety the debate format introduced into the course structure. They found it to be a good complement to the casework, and some noted that they enjoyed the theoretical exercise in what was usually a practically based program. Some indicated that they had not participated in a debate before. Further, they indicated that they found it novel to argue a side that they would not normally support as this helped them learn about the merits of an opposing view and think critically about both sides. The business faculty member's perception was that the debate seemed to increase student sensitivity for certain management topics and their related details that she was not able to address through case studies.

## **Discussion**

### ***Reflective Evaluation of the Debate Process as a Teaching Strategy***

"Although the use of opposing positions for discussion is as old as Socrates, the technique has not been a typical educational strategy in some course subjects" (McGraw-Hill, 2009, p. 1). By

consulting our course development departments, all three of us noted that the debate was not a prevalent technique in the courses within our faculties.

Our reflection on the similarities and differences regarding the course debates revealed some interesting findings. There were a number of commonalities among us. We independently reviewed the literature about the use of debate in our courses and independently concluded that the debate as a teaching tool would be a challenging yet meaningful assignment for our students

Each of us has been involved in writing and teaching online courses for close to 10 years. We shared pedagogical approaches in that we all wanted the students to look at different perspectives on issues, develop critical thinking abilities, and draw from the academic literature to support their arguments, that is, use course material as well as library database articles. Whether we did so intuitively or intentionally, we found that we shared common learning outcomes from these debates, which reflected outcomes in the literature on debates in higher education.

We also found there to be marked differences among ourselves regarding the debates. We approached our respective debates very differently and were influenced by our experiences as students and educators, and by our reviews of the literature. We had different experiential backgrounds that influenced us in our use of the debate as a technique. We taught in different faculties, in different disciplines, and in different structural configurations. Our class sizes also differed. We assigned different weightings to the debate in our courses.

The debate topics in nursing and psychology had personal and emotional components, whereas the business topics on the nature of program management did not. Another difference among the courses was the demographics. As provided by the university institutional studies department, the undergraduate students, averaging in age at 30.9 (female) and 33.1 (males), while older than the average undergraduate student at the institution, were still much younger than the MBA students (where the average age at program entry is 40 for both sexes). Most (85.6%) of the psychology students were female, which is also higher than the institutional undergraduate average, but typical for psychology courses (Pion et al., 1996). In contrast, the MBA courses were made up of 34% females and the nursing classes 89% female. These differences among courses may have affected students' involvement and evaluations of their debate experiences.

Our final narratives which follow reflect some unique differences that we felt were appropriate to share as personal insights.

### ***Personal Insights from Final Mash Ups***

We positioned our personal insights from our final mash ups in this section because these narratives pertained to our concluding thoughts. Our nursing faculty's reflections in her final mash up stated,

Even though we come from different disciplines, we are kindred spirits and all believed that debate in online courses is a good thing. Although we each had a reason for introducing debate into our courses, we were not consciously mindful about the process that the students were experiencing. We see from personal experience that there are many ways to structure online debate to fit different student presence and learning management systems.

Both of the others agree with this.

The MBA courses ask students to develop a code of conduct at the start of each course to help them discuss and document how they plan to work together online as well as the roles and responsibilities involved. Reflecting on the generic nature of the code of conduct guidelines, our business faculty member said, “I realized that if I am teaching a course and plan to use the debate, I should always ensure that I ask the students to review and revise their code of conduct before the debate assignment as the debate may involve some different roles and responsibilities as compared to a case study assignment.” Student course feedback and group discussion following the debate indicated that students enjoyed the debate, and some did say that the debate resulted in a change in their position on the issue. As well, she indicated that the use of the debate in her courses contributed to her plan to consider a pre-debate poll in the future, as well as one after the debate, to better assess where students stood before and after the assignment. This would help address the question as to whether participating in the debate served to change students’ minds about the topic. As discussed below, the literature is mixed as to whether debaters tend to remain entrenched in their views regardless of the arguments they hear, whether they become so involved in arguing a particular side that they convince themselves, or whether they are more likely to change their minds based on the side that presented the most cogent arguments. The circumstances under which each occurred would be beneficial to future debates.

Interestingly, our psychologist found herself questioning whether the debates were fostering improved critical thinking skills as she intended, or bolstering preconceived ideas the students had before they read the literature. Her fears were heightened after reading an article by Budesheim and Lundquist (1999), in which the authors provided evidence that “biased assimilation” results in people believing the information that supports their view and trivializing the information that does not support it (p. 106). They found that when students were assigned to the side of the debate that they already supported, their belief in this side was strengthened. This is in contrast to students who were assigned the side of the debate that they did not support, who actually became more neutral in their confidence of which side had the most evidence. This made her wonder if she was actually doing the exact opposite of what she intended! Since the task involved students debating themselves, they had to rely on their own abilities to present both sides in a balanced manner. It was difficult to tell whether students were biased in their selection of sources. Part of the conclusion of the debate paper involved stating which side of the issue they felt had the most support. Thus the line between objective reporting and presenting an opinion were somewhat blurred. Although a few researchers have studied whether students change their viewpoints through the debate process (e.g., D’Eon, Proctor, & Reeder, 2007; Lin & Crawford, 2007), more research is needed in this area.

Budesheim and Lundquist (1999) suggested that preventing biased assimilation may be possible by having students prepare both sides of the argument before being told which side they would be supporting. A reflection page, in which students discuss the thought process they went through while working on the paper and whether the exercise changed their views in any way, might be useful. Providing students with information about biased assimilation before they start their work might also be beneficial. Asking students to declare their opinions before beginning work on the debate may help prevent a “sympathy effect” (McGraw-Hill, 2009, p. 6-7).

In sum, we think that the use of narratives and the iterative mash ups contributed to our analyses because the methodological approach enabled us to span our different world views and

approaches to research, as well as think about the debate as an instructional technique in an interdisciplinary way, rather than by discipline alone. We are aware of the increasing literature on interdisciplinary research and are able to see some of our experiences in this project reflected in that literature, particularly the need for differences to push groups to new knowledge (Surowiecki, 2004) but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we focused on our personal perceptions and beliefs related to our witnessing and experiencing the use of debates in our online courses. Our original research question was that: *the introduction of debate in an online course would be positively perceived as a teaching strategy by the faculty involved.* We gained insights into the merits of using the debate as a teaching strategy as well as some ways in which we might approach them differently in the future. We also benefited from our mutual discussions on the use of debates to understand how each of us used the strategy. We found the debate strategy to be a useful way in which to help us enrich our courses. What did we learn? We learned that overall, despite our different approaches to the debate and despite our different backgrounds and disciplines, we share many commonalities regarding the debate as a teaching strategy. Our case study supports this research question through our three step process of reflection on our experiences with online debate and our self-evaluation of the experience as an interdisciplinary team of three academics.

Our case study findings involve analytical generalizability. In terms of some areas for future research, we offer the following questions for the academic community's consideration as they deliberate using debates in online courses:

- What motivates faculty to consider using the debate as a teaching strategy in online courses?
- How do the experiences of faculty members teaching in paced courses compare and contrast with the experiences of faculty members teaching in un-paced courses?
- What are the benefits and challenges of the debate strategy involving students debating both sides of the same topic?
- What are the similarities and differences between faculty member experiences in using the debate as a teaching strategy when those who teach at the undergraduate level are compared to those who teach at the graduate level?
- What other processes do inter and intra disciplinary teams of faculty use to interpret their experiences with debates as teaching strategies?
- How do personal values and beliefs influence faculty choices in selecting debate topics (as some topics may be aligned with their personal values and beliefs and others may not)?
- How can online debates be structured and facilitated to foster increased objectivity to avoid “biased assimilation” on the part of faculty members involved?

Based on our personal and shared experiences, we encourage academics interested in using the debate as an instructional approach to take that step. Online debates are innovative and enjoyable for students and professors. With some planning, debates can be quite straightforward to set up and are worth the effort. Debates are scalable — they can be used, regardless of the mode of delivery (i.e., in face-to-face, online, or blended courses). They can be used in paced or un-paced

online courses. Debates can be used effectively at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of education. However, further research is needed on this teaching strategy, not only in terms of faculty perceptions and experiences, but also in terms of student perceptions and experiences.

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