**Using Debates to Engage Students in Sustainability Controversies and Conundrums**

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*As I reflect on the planning, practicing, and execution of this debate I can see wisdom in the dreaded debate assignment and how I would never have received such a full education from merely reading the articles. This debate “thing” has actually very little to do with the argument and much to do with the learning objectives of the IAS program.*

- from the reflective essay of Julie Weaver, student in 2011 Water and Sustainability course

Why Incorporate Debates in a Sustainability Course?

How we might define sustainability or respond to specific sustainability proposals is highly dependent on one’s beliefs and worldview. Recognizing this is an important learning outcome of an introductory sustainability course. If there is no *one* correct way to view a given sustainability issue, or even a disciplinary consensus, then our students must learn to critically evaluate the differing opinions and form their own. Debates are a great way to explore the ideological battleground that is sustainability and demonstrate the advantages of pluralistic thinking. Participation in a debate also forces students to invest in a position and work to support it well, which tends to be empowering and gets them past muddled relativism.

Course Context

Water and Sustainability is a 5 credit, 300 level course offered by the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences program at the University of Washington Bothell. It is a popular elective course that also serves as a core course for students in the Sustainability and Society track of the BA Environmental Studies major.

This course provides a framework for students to learn about our water future and ways we might envision sustainability in water management. It also provides a framework for exploring the underlying principles and controversies of sustainability. Given the focus on water in the environment, the course fulfills a Natural World general education requirement. Given the focus on sustainability as a cultural ideal and point of contention, we delve well past natural science perspectives on water and wrestle with matters of ethics, culture, economics, and politics. Accordingly, the course also fulfills an Individual and Society general education requirement.

With regard to pedagogical approach, Water and Sustainability is a seminar-style course where student contribution in the classroom is a primary goal and lectures are a minor component. The focus is on analyzing and synthesizing ideas and reflecting on issues. Students are encouraged to be active learners via thoughtful reading, critical writing, class discussion, debates, and a term-long collaborative group project. You can learn more about the course by downloading the syllabus here: <http://faculty.washington.edu/rturner1/Sustainability/BIS%20392_SYLLAB11.pdf>

Learning Objectives of the Course and the Debates

What follows is a list of the course learning objectives that are, in part, addressed by student participation in the debates and associated activities.

*By the end of the quarter, each student should be able to:*

* Demonstrate advancement in ethical reasoning.
* Identify the philosophies that underlie our actions and discuss how compatible they are with the ideals of sustainability
* Discuss how pursuing different sustainable development ideals can affect our future with regard to water resources, human equity, and other social factors.
* Demonstrate facility in working with partners in an *equitable* research collaboration by producing quality work on time in a professional manner.
* Articulate improvement in abilities to: tolerate ambiguity in readings and assignments; facilitate intellectual conversations; anticipate and resolve conflict in group situations; and take advantage of diverse skills and perspectives in group work
* Document improvement in abilities to: compare, synthesize, and assess multiple perspectives; and present, support, and evaluate positions and conclusions (their own and those of others).

The Debate Issues

The questions around which the 10 debates revolved in 2011 are listed below in the order we tackled them in the course. All the questions were chosen to highlight specific controversies in sustainability and were phrased in such a way that both sides of the debate could make strong arguments to support their positions.

1. *Does the Carrying Capacity Concept Apply to People?*
2. *Is the American Lifestyle Unethical?*
3. *Does Sustainability Require Global Equity?*
4. *Does Sustainability Require a Radical Change in Culture?*
5. *Should We Ditch Free Market Globalization and GDP?*
6. *Should More of the World Rely on Virtual Water?*
7. *Is the Diversion of Water and People from Rural Areas to Cities a Good Thing*?
8. *Should we Turn Our Backs on “Conventional” Agriculture and Meat?*
9. *Should We Support Water Privatization and Commodification?*
10. *Will Human Civilization Achieve Sustainability?*

Structure of the Debates and Associated Assignments in the Course

Each student in the course participates in one of the debates. Typically there are two students per side of a debate. Students on the same side must work together to build a convincing, multi-faceted argument to support their position. Opposing sides are also encouraged to work together to frame the debate and ensure that both sides are arguing about the same thing.

The debates follow a relatively formal format for the first half wherein each student, in turn, delivers a 5-6 minute meaty statement supporting their position. After all statements have been delivered, there is a free-form rebuttal session lasting approximately 15-20 minutes. After the rebuttal between the debate team members, the debate is opened up to questions and input from the audience.

There are two essays that each student must submit associated with the debate. The first one, due on the day of the debate, requires students to articulate and support their response to the question of their upcoming debate in the format of an op-ed piece to a newspaper. The second essay requires them to reflect on how preparing for the debate expanded their thinking on the general topic and specific debate question. They are also asked to provide a critique of their debate research and performance relative to the course learning objectives.

The guidance documents provided to students for these assignments are available on request.

Reflections on the Value of the Debate

The debates provide students with a great framework and venue to educate each other. The most successful debates are invariably the ones where *all four debaters* work together with the goal of providing the most coherent, engaging, and educational debate. Preparing for the debate also provide an excellent framework for in-depth learning on a topic and helps students hone their critical thinking, organization, and presentation abilities.

Typically, the best part of the debate experience is the whole class discussion that springs from it. Each debate relates directly to the readings of the day and the entire proceedings prompt all of the students to think deeper about the issues. The debates also get the students to consider the ideologies of the authors of their readings and acknowledge their own worldviews that control their reactions to sustainability controversies.

What follows are two quotes from student reflections on their debate experience. ***Every*** student reflection was remarkably positive with regard to their perceived learning gains.

*For more than a half-hour after our semi-scripted debate was over, we fielded questions from the audience and answered them with honest, supported positions that not only helped them understand the severity of the problem, but also gave them cause to reflect on their own lives and behavior. What it did … was help open their eyes to their own ignorance, just as doing the research and preparation for the debate opened mine. This, ultimately, thrilled me. It thrilled me because it meant I had helped create positive change in my fellow man. It thrilled me because it gave me an unusually fulfilling view of all the time I’d spent on research and writing for a class.*

- from the reflective essay of Greg Spyridis, student in 2011 Water and Sustainability course

*This experience has made me look forward to the next opportunity I have to debate someone. It’s unfortunate, but many people who focus on environmental science do not focus on skills that would allow them to articulate their views effectively. Because of this, they lose out to better public speakers. Understanding how to debate will make it so those with answers to our environmental crisis will be able to get their points across to the public and enact genuine positive change.*

- from the reflective essay of Jonathan Oxorn, student in 2011 Water and Sustainability course