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Challenging undergraduate hospitality students: the use of debates as interactive teaching and assessment tools

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1. Abstract:

Research shows that undergraduate students learn what they expect to be assessed on. It is therefore important for educators to strategically use formative assessments in their teaching. A challenge for educators is naturally to engage their students in the subject matter, that is, for students to participate actively in classes and tutorials, and to be motivated to research and think critically about the topic in a manner that is broader than the unit's basic textbook and suggested readings.

This article analyses a hospitality unit taught to second year undergraduate students. The ongoing assessment item used is a set of structured debates in which all students have to participate throughout the semester. The debates are conducted every second week, either live in tutorials, or alternatively online through the unit's learning portal.

Feedback from the unit has consistently been very positive. Students have expressed satisfaction about the reason to connect their practical understanding of matters with theoretical findings. They also appreciate the opportunity to develop both their oral and written communication skills. The significance of this article is that it introduces an established assessment and teaching method from other disciplines to hospitality education and shows, in practical terms how similar assessments can be set up in other subjects. Another feature of this paper is that it incorporates multi-mode learning, and has ideas for how debates can take place not only in a physical classroom, but also in on-line delivery.

2. Introduction

Would you like your students to be motivated to learn, search outside the realm of your unit structure for information on your teaching topics, learn to think critically about the subject matter, and to be active in the class? I cannot imagine any university lecturer saying 'no' to such a question. It seems to encapsulate everything we are aiming for as educators. So, what is this, which in exaggerated terms could be called a 'holy grail' of education? Well, it might surprise you that it is something as simple as structured debates. Debates have been used in education for millennia (Huryn 1986), and some fields incorporate it as a self-evident feature of teaching (Greenstreet 1993). I have, however, to my surprise, realised that debates are not used a lot in hospitality and tourism educations, or if it is, then it is not recorded in academic publications.

I have been using debates as a teaching method ever since I became a teacher (originally in a primary school some 14 years ago). I have continued including it as an assessment task in every new position I have taken up. The reason for this is the consistent feedback I receive from students assuring me that the method is effective on several levels. Students that I meet years after they have graduated often remind me even of the specific topic they debated. They say that it was one of their most memorable learning experiences.

Debates are fun, but at the same time demanding as all participants have to state personal informed opinions in front of their peers and to argue for those opinions. Participants learn public speaking and to formulate responses in stressful, but controlled and safe environments. Students are required to do research beyond the prescribed readings in order to argue for their own position and to find reliable material to disprove their opposition. The debate topics are always formulated to contrast different contemporary practices in use in the industry. The students then learn how to substantiate one or the other practice by finding theories or cases of 'best practice' that support their position.

In order not to simply become another paper that describes a case study using debates, this paper will initially give a contextual background to debates. This will present;

- **what** fields debates have been used,
- **how** they have been used as teaching tools,
- **why** they are used in education, and
- **benefits** and **drawbacks** of using debates.

Additional to that, questions about:

- how debates are **graded**,
- **when** debates are used in a temporal sense in a unit, and
- **other practical details** about debates as teaching tools are discussed.

The paper will thereafter present an example from the field of hospitality education and will, based on that example, suggest ways debates can be incorporated in hospitality and tourism units.

3. Theoretical context for debates

Debates have been used for thousands of years as modes of teaching (Greenstreet 1993) and have after periods of lesser interest again become a topic to which many educators are turning (Vo & Morris 2006). One of the advantages of using debates in education is that it is not only a teaching tool, but it can simultaneously be used as an assessment method. This is important to acknowledge as ‘Students may or may not learn what is in the curriculum or what we teach, but they will learn what we assess them on (the “hidden curriculum”). Assessment drives learning—this concept has vital implications in thinking how we should teach our students’ (Dacre & Fox 2000, p. 666). I have, with this in mind, done a literature review on debates in education and will hereunder expand on a range of issues that will illuminate not only where and how debates are used, but also why and when. I will also discuss advantages and disadvantages with the method and finally comment on how debates are assessed in different contexts.

Where are debates used in higher education?

Debates as teaching methods are widely used in higher education (Kennedy 2007), especially in fields such as sociology (Crone 1997; Dundes 2001; Huryn 1986), psychology (Firmin, Vaughn & Dye 2007; Landrum 1991) and medicine (Moody-Corbett 1996), but is also used in the teaching of geography

(Estaville 1988), marketing (Roy & Macchiette 2005), economics (Pernecky 1997; Vo & Morris 2006), engineering (Alford & Surdu 2002), intercultural communication (Chen 1994), literacy (Goodwin 2003), international relations (Lantis 2004), and history (Green Musselman 2004). It appears, however, that little formal research has recorded the use of the method in tertiary hospitality and tourism courses - At least none found to date. This is a surprising finding as the field offer many fruitful topics that could be prepared as debates for students.

How are debates used?

Debates can be structured in a multitude of ways, depending on the class size, the time available and the objectives the method aims at achieving. Alford and Surdu (2002, p. 10) suggest that in-class debates can be between groups of students, between students and academics, or between academics in front of students. Moody-Corbett (1996) suggests that debates can take place between students but assisted by academic coaches. Crone (1997) proposes that debates can be done as individual student performances where students have been assigned different positions to defend, and sit as panels in front of the class.

Kennedy (2007), and Estaville (1988) proposes that the debates can be in a 'fish-bowl' mode, where the class is divided in half and is placed to sit around a circle facing one another arguing, in a semi-structured manner, for their viewpoints. Dundes has found that smaller groups allow students to debate more freely and she divides her class into six groups in which each group has one pair that debates, and four to six peers that acts as audience and adjudicators (Dundes 2001). A very different debate mode is suggested by Chen who taught students intercultural communication, and to use e-mail, at a stage when that was a novelty, by conducting a debate on-line (1994). It can thus be seen that debates can be conducted in an endless variety of forms, with each having their advantages and disadvantages.

Why are debates used?

Hospitality and tourism education have historically followed business and management studies in their structure (Connell & Lowe 1997). This structural

connection has implications on the way units are taught, and on the manner in which graduating students act when entering the workforce. Morgan suggests that traditional education that builds on military metaphors, such as *strategies*, lead to students that are weak problem solvers and that a more suitable metaphor would come from the field of drama studies where students are prepared to participate in the 'experience economy' as actors (2004).

The use of debates is an holistic teaching method because it requires students to develop research skills (Alford & Surdu 2002); train students' critical thinking abilities (Crone 1997; Pernecky 1997); prepare them to structure arguments in ways that substantiate their opinions (Greenstreet 1993); and teaches them to perform in front of audiences (Dundes 2001).

Students generally enjoy debates because they add an element of competition to assessments, whilst still allowing for multiple opinions to be heard and accepted (Goodwin 2003), though, she adds that students from a Confucian background can initially find it daunting to accept that two opposite positions can be correct at the same time. The emphasis lecturers put on the need for students' critical thinking is also highlighted by debates; multiple answers might be correct but by arguing for one position and disproving other positions, a deeper understanding of issues is created (Landrum 1991). Greenstreet disputes, however, the suggestion that a linear and causal relationship exist between debates and critical thinking, he suggests that it can be the other way round – that good critical thinkers are good debaters (1993).

Many researchers have also found that debates reinforce the content of the unit (see, for example, Crone 1997; Moody-Corbett 1996). Debates are also found to be socially stimulating (Dundes 2001), allow students to articulate ideas better (Lantis 2004), empower students to take responsibility for their own learning (Firmin, Vaughn & Dye 2007), and it also force the students to 'think on their feet' (Moody-Corbett 1996). Amongst the reasons why debates are so popular in the classroom is that they enhance the learning experience for students by making the content personal (Crone 1997; Lantis 2004).

What are the drawbacks of using debates?

It has to be acknowledged that there are cautionary voices also suggesting some drawbacks, despite the advantages the method is suggested to bring. Dundes (2001), for example, points out that debates that take place in large classes involve mostly only a small number of students, as the majority of the class will remain passive. Crone points to the time consumption debates demand and this fact makes it difficult to facilitate debating opportunities for all students (Crone 1997).

It has also been suggested that different groups of students are more or less positive to debates as a method due to the forced confrontation it involves (Firmin, Vaughn & Dye 2007). The differences in learning styles between different ethnic groups or different sexes has also been raised as a reason why a debate does not suit every situation (Green Musselman 2004). Kennedy lists in her literature review that debates are by definition dualist and they might thus reinforce existing beliefs rather than allowing students to critically interpret alternative viewpoints (Kennedy 2007).

Goodwin conducted a student survey, in order to test suggested negative impacts of debates. Statements such as; disagreement is unpleasant, competitions are intimidating, and that debates are unfamiliar to students were tested (2003). All of the negative impacts were to her surprise disproven in her study. The majority of participants felt that the positives gained by debates as a learning method greatly outweighed any negatives (Goodwin 2003). It should, however, be noted that her study was of a rather small scale and should therefore not be seen as totally refuting concerns raised about the method.

How are debates assessed?

Returning to the suggestion that students learn what is assessed (Lantis 2004), it is also important to investigate the assessment modes used in a learning unit. Kennedy has in her literature review of debates outlined in detail pros and cons of some assessment methods (2007). However, she has left out some methods which show how academics in different fields and institutions assess the debates they conduct.

Alford and Surdu are unique in this context because they simply use debates as teaching tools without assessing the practice (2002). If it is accepted that assessments drive learning then it should be discussed whether

or not this is a sensible exercise. It is naturally true that formative assessments can be used as a teaching strategy without being part of the final grade for the unit, but the point in Alford and Surdu's example is that the debates are never to be assessed. Dacre and Fox do suggest that 'Students only learn what they have to', but they continue by advising that 'teachers should extrapolate from this and provide adequate assessment of important topics and concepts' (Dacre & Fox 2000, p. 663). This could be seen as advice which could support Alford and Surdu's practice, but only if debates are used for teaching and the concepts that have been debated are instead assessed in a different mode.

Many academics assess debates based on participation (for example, Crone 1997), this can be both the actual debaters, as well as the audience to the debates (Green Musselman 2004). Others argue for the sources of information to be assessed (Dundes 2001; Estaville 1988), or for peers to assess the performance (Dundes 2001). Firmin et al (2007) suggest that grades should reflect the amount of time and effort put in, but acknowledges that it might be hard to determine such matters objectively. Another favoured means of assessing debates is through different matrices where different components of the debate performance are assigned different values (see, for example, Landrum 1991; Pernecky 1997; Vo & Morris 2006). Huryn (1986) assigns 20% of the marks to the group's performance, 30% to individual performance, and 50% to student notes. This allows shy students, who are not confident in public speaking situations, to still score half of their marks based on the value of their research effort.

Other practical issues related to debates in the literature

'What to debate' emerges from the literature covering the use of debates, as an important issue for consideration. Alford and Surdu suggest that any topic that increases students' knowledge is suitable to debate, but clarifies this statement by saying: 'A successful debate topic has numerous clear and compelling arguments available for both sides to present. There must also be sufficient information available through research to support both opposing viewpoint' (Alford & Surdu 2002, p. 10). Estaville (1988) adds that a debate topic needs to be both topical and controversial in order for students to be able to find evidence to support their position. Educators should not shy away

from controversial matters; students will come in contact with these matters in the industry. Controversy will engage them and act thus as a driver to motivate students to participate in the debate (Vo & Morris 2006).

Estaville (1988) prescribes that between three and five debates should be done over the span of a unit, the minimum number to allow students to develop their debating skills, and the maximum in order not to overload them. Many papers discuss the timing for the inclusion of a debate. Crone (1997) schedules it at the end of the week in a unit where he meets his students several times each week and claims that it enhances the learning environment as it makes the students active at a time where they otherwise would be more subdued. Pernecky (1997) and Dundes (2001) both argue that debates should be placed towards the end of the unit in order for the students to appreciate the content and to be acquainted with the major arguments in the topic.

An alternative debate timing was used by Chen who divided the different parts of the debate into separate papers, and each section had to be e-mailed to the opposition at different times of the semester (Chen 1994). Alford and Surdu (2002) also suggest that debates should be spread over the full duration of the teaching semester, and they advise that easier topics should be placed early in the unit to give students practise whilst more complex topics are scheduled to take place at a later stage.

4. Approach / practical example

The unit that I am currently lecturing and assessing, where the debate method is employed, is Managing Rooms Division Operations – MNG00135 (MRDO). MRDO is a second year unit for students studying a Bachelor of Business, Hotel and Resort Management degree at Southern Cross University, NSW. It is a key unit for the degree as it incorporates both practical operational themes from the area and also management implications – and is the only unit directly related to accommodation services that the students study throughout their degree.

MRDO is delivered internally in *Coffs Harbour*, at *The Hotel School, Sydney* and at *MDIS, Singapore*, the unit is, additionally to these internal contingents, also offered externally – approximately 150-200 students in total per teaching session. Local lecturers deliver the unit on-site and follow the

study guide and assessment tasks I have developed. An ‘assessment kit’ is sent to all locations before the beginning of each semester with documents that set the scene for the unit. It includes, assessment tasks, marking criteria, examples of assessments from earlier years and feedback sheets.

In order to give students a logical link between tasks of an operational nature on the one hand, and management of those same tasks on the other hand, critical thinking skills need to be developed. The textbook used in the unit, *Accommodation Services* (O'Shannessy, Haby & Richmond 2001) is a very practical book that leads readers through the daily operations of the rooms division of accommodation enterprises. The Book of Readings for the unit is, in contrast, filled with conceptual papers related to managerial issues. There are times where the practice of the textbook – or of work life – and the theories presented, stand in opposition to one another, for example where the textbook claims that housekeeping is a skilled profession, but popular media sources see it as a non-skilled profession. Other debate topics have been, whether a hotel should have its own laundry or outsource the function; whether ‘tips’ earned belong to the concierge who earns them or to the hotel that employs the concierge, and whether room bookings should be paid at the time of reservation, or at the time of using the service. These are issues that are written into the assessable items so that students are forced to critically think about the reason for these contrasts.

The debates take place every second week throughout the semester, starting from Week two of the semester and ending in Week 10 – a total of five debates. Internal students debate two topics live in class, and the remaining three in an online discussion board, as part of the unit’s webportal. Live debate teams (three students in each team) are allocated after Week one tutorials, and each team are given one affirmative and one negative position to debate during the semester. Teams are assigned in order to have a mix of students from different educational and ethnic backgrounds. External students debate all five topics on-line. The class is divided into two teams for the on-line debate depending on their surnames. Students whose surnames start with the letters A-K are in the affirmative team, surnames starting with the letters L-Z belong to the negative team (the letter of the surname division in some semesters is adjusted if a large contingent of students happens to have a surname in the beginning or in the end of the alphabet).

Both the live and the on-line debate topics are short and clearly structured. Live debates follow the regular debate format with the first speakers of both teams outlining their team lines; second speakers expanding on their first speaker and rebutting some of the opposition's argument; the final speakers conclude the debate by summing up their team line and rebutting the final arguments of the opposition. A link to a debating website is provided online for students who are not familiar with debates, or need a reminder (Australian Capital Territory Debating Union 2009). A five minutes maximum timeline is given for each debater.

One point each is given for a) having a clear team line, b) a distinct point of view based on research, c) a logical argument and d) a rebuttal also based on research. On-line debates have the same marking criteria whilst not following the three team member structure – but rather a whole of class debate. The word limit for on-line debates is 300 words, 150 for their own point of view and 150 for a rebuttal of one opposing input, including references for both. The five debates are worth a total of 20% of the student's final score, the 20% is made up of the four possible points students can score from each of the five debates during the semester.

Students have consistently rated MRDO very highly in their end-of-semester evaluations. The structure of the unit and its assessments; the workload involved in the unit, and the connection between the unit and the work life have consistently been above four (out of five) in the students' grading. Comments from feedback sheets have noted: "*The debates set out fortnightly give us small amounts of work often instead of huge weightings on one or two assignments that lead to stress*" (Student 31243, 2008), or "*I think the debates are a great idea, because they encourage you to think outside the square you are taught in class, with the use of extra research clearly aided by Johan. You actually learn something with them because they are ongoing*" (Student 5564, 2006). Based on the feedback a change was made in the schedule of debates. Originally they were in Weeks 2, 4, 6, 10 and 12 – with a literature review due in week 8, but after many students commented unfavourably on this in 2005 and 2006 it was changed so that the literature review is done after all debates.

Finally, a very important point of learning and teaching that this method develops is the conduct of a review of the basic literature. Pernecky (1997)

suggests similarly, that debates should not be seen as stand-alone features in the teaching and assessing of the unit, but should rather be built into the structure of assessment by later leading to an annotated bibliography or an essay. Students are asked to conduct a literature review on one of the topics related to the debates. The literature review is worth 40% of students' score with the final 40% coming from an end-of-semester exam. A structured literature review will help students conduct research in other units.

One student commented: "*The debates were simple and less stressful than other lengthy assessments. The literature review was also good as it gave you a chance to really analyse, link together and compare the ideas/findings in the literature as opposed to just finding quotes and simple ideas*" (Student 4205, 2006). As the unit assessor, I am finding new resources from the students' debates and can use them when updating my study guides, and even as a basis for academic articles.

Emails students have sent me with feedback have stated: "*I was very nervous about the debates that we were to participate in and really didn't want to do them, but when I think back on it I it has been a good learning experience of public speaking for me, especially so because the class was small*" (Student M, 2005), and "*This is the first semester that I have had to submit debates and I have to say I thoroughly enjoy them. I use [sic] to participate in debates in high school (back in the day [sic]!) so it's nice getting back into them again*" (Student E, 2005). Initially I conducted only one live debate per student in lecture time but based on feedback changed this to tutorial time instead, so that students would feel more comfortable in smaller groups. Thus students would have more than one time for debate.

The MRDO unit is offered in the second semester of the second year of their studies and most students are therefore already accustomed to my teaching style. One unit feedback stated: "*the debates were good, forced (in a good way) you to read and research. Improved debate skills, enhanced learning. the review and exam as well is fine. anymore would be too much. the unit does require quite a bit of work. Johan is a hard marker and it is good- pushes (you in a good way) to be a better student, lifts the standard*" (Student 2410, 2006).

5. Discussion

The significance of using debates in MRDO can be found on several levels. On a *national* and even *international* level this unit stands as an example of an innovative teaching method that has not been found to be recorded before in hospitality or tourism education programmes. At an *institutional* level MRDO can favourably be compared to any other unit in terms of student satisfaction (scoring on average 4.21 / 5 on all questions from the last four years of student feedback). On a *faculty* level the debates in MRDO opens up experiential learning that prepares students to work in the 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore 1998) rather than following traditional managerial pedagogies preparing students for autocratic product economies.

A further development of this idea is to introduce live debates for external students through the use of the on-line teaching site Elluminate. This will be challenging as it is dependent on technology, which is not always reliable. My belief is that it will further enhance students' learning experience in MRDO. *'I am an external student for this class and I think that if debates could be conducted on Eluminate Live instead of the discussion board it would make it more interesting and interactive'* (Student 55364, 2009). Sigala points out that e-learning is becoming more common in tourism and hospitality programs but that many units still hold on to a structure planned for live delivery, rather than accommodating it for a virtual context (2002). The existing debate on the discussion board is currently now bringing together internal and external student contingents. It is utilising the opportunities opened by the Internet. *'As an external student it was great to be able to participate in the debates with the whole class. What a great learning tool!'* (Student 55401, 2009).

Another development will be the invitation of industry professionals to some tutorials to act as adjudicators for the debates; this would allow students to get feedback from people living the reality debated. This is supported by research that suggests that the external involvement motivates students to deliver even better debates (Moody-Corbett 1996). Negative features of debates found in the literature review (Goodwin 2003; Kennedy 2007) to a large extent, have not been experienced in this unit. Though students have commented in the unit feedback that public speaking was a hurdle that they feared to the extent that it even clouded their appreciation of the other debaters input. *'I did not like the in class debates as instead of learning and*

absorbing the information. i [sic] was worrying about the public speaking and also organising other students in my debate team so i [sic] could finish off my debate' (Student 50636, 2009).

Others have, however, stated that this was an issue that they were nervous about initially but later became accustomed to: *'When starting the debate I found it quite daunting to speak in front of everyone or even voice my opinion on the discussion board where everyone could see. Through the weeks I have built confidence and now feel good about my thoughts and how [sic] everyone perceives them'* (Student 54691, 2009). Yet another even suggests that all debates should be live: *'Every debate should be done in front of a class to help public speaking and somehow made possible for external students to partake in this to make it fair throughout the course'* (Student 57435, 2009).

From these quotes it can be concluded that debates are fulfilling the functions the literature sets out, and by including them in the hospitality and tourism curriculum students are challenged not only theoretically to expand their knowledge (Crone 1997), but also practically to think on their feet (Moody-Corbett 1996), to better articulate their ideas (Lantis 2004), and get practice in oral presentations (Dundes 2001). The continuously positive feedback students give, highlights what other researchers have found; the learning experience is enhanced (Crone 1997), and students are motivated to take responsibility for their own learning (Firmin, Vaughn & Dye 2007).

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented a literature review of debates as teaching tools. It outlined fields in which debates are used, and noted that tourism and hospitality was not listed amongst these. It has shown how debates are used elsewhere and why educators use them. It highlighted some potential drawbacks with debates, and outlined how the debates are graded. The fact that assessments drive student learning was a continuous theme which substantiates why it is important for debates to be acknowledged as a useful teaching method in hospitality and tourism education.

The latter part of the article has presented an example of debates in practice in a rooms' division unit at an Australian university. The example is significant as it breaks new ground in the field of hospitality and tourism

education. But beyond the field of hospitality and tourism it is also significant as it is the first recorded case where debates are used in multi-delivery mode, both for internal and external students. The innovative way of combining different student contingents has been welcomed by the students and should be seen as an example of what can be done in the call for new teaching methods in the field.

I will finish off with a quote from a student who encapsulates the theme of this article well, and who simultaneously highlights a problem that is encroaching on many good established practices, namely universities' urge to deliver shorter semesters so that more teaching sessions can be delivered every year, despite students' and educators' opposition to such moves:

The assesment [sic] tasks were terrific. They were so well aligned [sic] with the course materials, and were so well designed to assess us on what we were learning. The debates were a particularly helpful learning tool. Having the debates every 2 weeks meant staying committed to the learning material, as well as doing some wider research as I went. The only piece of negatieve [sic] (if you can call it that) feedback is that it would have been helpful to have the final assessment due a week or so sooner. With the shortened semester it was very difficult to know where to focus my attention with several final assessments due in at the same time. A sooner due date would have put pressure on a bit earlier and in a way would have encouraged better time management. (I know that isn't really the lecturers problem, but it is feedback) (Student 55401, 2009).

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