Teaching through Debate

"The essence of free speech is that we allow people with whom we disagree to speak." Robert Sharpe of the Worldwide Writers' Association, PEN International.

Develop a short, 15 question "opinionnaire" that is an easily gradable quiz on an issue that you want students to examine in class. Create a Likert scale quiz that has 15 questions. Students get 4 points for a Strongly Agree, 3 Points for an Agree, 2 points for Undecided, 1 point for Disagree, and 0 points for a Strongly Disagree. This will result in a range of student scores from 0 to 60 points.

Have students take and self-grade the opinionnaire. Divide the students by score into thirds. There will be a high score group, a medium score group, and low score group.

Give the three groups some time to discuss the issue at hand (possibly in remote breakout rooms) and develop arguments for or against the issue under discussion. Each group selects a spokesperson.

Bring the students back together (if you separated them into rooms previously) and have the three spokespersons sit in the middle. The spokespersons have a conversation/debate about the issue presenting their best arguments to support their positions.

After the spokespersons are done talking ask the middle score group to vote via a secret ballot on which side they will join if forced to join either the high score or low score group. Display the results of the middle score group voting.

Ask volunteers from the middle score group if they want to explain what elements they found persuasive in the arguments of the high score group or the low score group. Have a class-wide discussion of the issue and what was learned via this exercise.

Adapted from *A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training, Volume III* by J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones, University Associates Press, 1971. This version is abbreviated from a longer exercise in the Pfeiffer book.

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