

How to use debating in lessons

In this chapter, we're going to learn how debating can be used in the curriculum.

This chapter is mostly directed at teachers, as it tells them how they can use debating in their lessons. However, students can read it too. They can use the persuasive techniques they have learnt in debating to convince their teachers they should have more debates in lessons. Make it clear to your teachers that they don't have to be a 'debating teacher' to do this.

In one sense, all teachers do debating. It's a fundamental part of what happens in every classroom. Every time a teacher asks a question which could have more than one answer you are beginning to debate. There is a perception that debate is the domain of humanities subjects: is Shylock a victim or a villain? (English); was Elizabeth 1 a good or a bad queen? (History); is euthanasia ever justified? (Philosophy). But there is a place for it in all subjects. Should patent law apply to medical drugs? (Chemistry); should zoos be banned? (Biology); is nuclear power the answer to our energy needs? (Physics); should the government make decisions based on statistical evidence? (Maths). Thinking through different options, weighing up pros and cons, is what we get our students to do all the time. What debating does is give a formal structure to this process, forcing students to collect evidence, analyse that evidence, structure arguments, and respond to challenges to those arguments; all skills which, it's easy to see, are eminently transferable to any subject.

So: how do you set one up in your classroom?

Choosing the motion

Looking back at the topics we started with, what does a good motion for a lesson look like?

This house believes that Shakespeare presents Shylock as a sympathetic character. (English: challenging, because broad.)

This house would not prosecute Shylock for his attempted assault on Antonio. (English: easier, because more specific.)

This house believes Elizabeth 1 was a good queen. (History; challenging because so broad.)

This house would not have outlawed the Catholic Mass in Elizabethan England. (History: easier, because more specific, though also needing more specific knowledge.)

This house would legalise assisted dying. (Philosophy: a good combination of theoretical - is euthanasia moral? - and practical - under what circumstances should it be legal?)

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