

This house would limit patents on medical drugs to five years. (Chemistry / Economics: helpfully specific, though requiring knowledge about patent laws and how they work. At the same time, it deals with big questions about freedom from vs freedom to. See Chapter 9, The Big Issues, for further discussion of this dichotomy.)

This house would ban nuclear energy. (Physics: helpfully specific and concrete, but also requiring a lot of specific knowledge.)

This house would ban zoos. (Biology: also helpfully specific, but will work much better if students are encouraged to research specifics on animal welfare rather than rely on naive anthropomorphic arguments about how cute bears are and you wouldn't like it if someone could look into your bedroom 24 /7.)

This house would allow people to vote for as many candidates as they like in General Elections. (Maths: very specific, but with a basis in subject knowledge. Apparently there is a mathematical reason why this system might be fairer, but I'm not good enough at Maths to understand it. I'd like to hear the debate to find out.)

How to run the lesson

The obvious problem is that a maximum of eight people can be involved in a debate (see Chapter 2, How Debating Works), and most classes have more than eight students.

There are various ways round this:

- Divide the class into groups and have them all prepare a debate, and then pick, either at random or by differentiation, one or two groups to give 'show debates'. The rest of the class can still join in by making points from the floor. This keeps the class focused, and can be a good way to use the debate as a teaching tool; you can refer to the points raised in your plenary.
- (If you have a lot of time, e.g. at the end of term) as above, only stagger the debates over several lessons. You can add a little spice to this by making it competitive, awarding a prize to the best debaters at the end.

What
does a
good
motion
for a
lesson
look
like?

- Run several debates simultaneously, enforcing time limits centrally. This obviously makes for a very noisy classroom (it helps if it is also a big classroom) but it does have the advantage that everyone gets a go, and it also makes it easier for students who find public performance difficult.
- You can run a variation on the simultaneous debate format by setting up more or less spontaneous mini-debates in pairs ('We've been discussing whether Shakespeare makes Shylock sympathetic or not. Discuss this in pairs: first person says why he's sympathetic for three minutes; second person says why he isn't'.) These can be dropped into a lesson at short notice with very little preparation.

For all except the last example, you need to set up the desks so that students on different sides are facing each other.

Why use debate in the classroom?

It teaches:

- Research skills
- Team work
- How to speak confidently in public
- How to use evidence well
- How to build arguments
- How to analyse arguments
- An empathetic understanding of different points of view
- How democracy works

It also helps you to meet your statutory requirement to promote the British values of democracy and mutual respect for those of different faiths and beliefs, and is an excellent way of furthering spiritual, moral, social and cultural education.

So, the value of using debating in the classroom is, er beyond debate.

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