

# THE IMPACT OF DEBATES AS A TEACHING STRATEGY IN THE CLASSROOM TO MEDICAL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Teaching strategies and methodologies have evolved over time and according to the needs of learners and the changing teaching-learning environment. Debates, particularly academic debates are considered as one of the many active learning strategies to motivate students. The preparation, presentation, defence, class participation and peer-interaction during a well organised debate can provide ample language practice for the student. Thus, it is an interesting area to be explored for its effectiveness as a teaching strategy. The objectives of this paper are to identify students' perception on using debates in the classrooms and to identify the impact of implementing debates as a teaching strategy for medical undergraduates. A survey on the topic was conducted among medical undergraduates in a private medical college in Ipoh. The results show that taking part in debates enhances students' level of confidence through their active involvement in the process of conducting and participating in a debate.

**Keywords:** Debate; teaching/learning strategies

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Academic debates have long been used as an interesting and practical teaching/learning strategy particularly at the tertiary levels of education. The use of academic debates as a teaching-learning strategy in the classroom is expected to encourage proactive thinking, improve communication skills and facilitate immediate feedback from students. Debates are planned classroom activities in which one particular claim or idea is discussed, and then students plan together to present their opinions on the motion. The primary aim of these debates is not only to win the contest but to develop students' ability to think independently through a set of claims or arguments, in order to deepen their understanding and enhance their ability to grasp an issue being debated.

According to Jensen et al. (2009), many educational strategies can be implemented to increase dialogue between the teacher and the students. Activities like debates will also enrich classroom environment, enhance meta-cognition and promote critical thinking. However, it is rather unclear if this method can be implemented in medical education. This study aims to identify medical students' perceptions and preference on using the debate as a learning strategy and the impact of debates on the participants' language improvement and overall learning experience.

## **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Debates date back to 2080 B.C where the first form of debate was used approximately 4000 years ago by the Egyptians. Likewise, the use of debates as a teaching strategy dates back to 411 B.C in Athens (Huryn, 1986; Combs & Bourne, 1994; Snider & Schnurer, 2002; Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). Although debates have been around for many centuries, most universities in the current era conduct debates in a competitive concept (Bellon, 2000). Hence, the ability of debates to enhance their language proficiency and knowledge is vague.

Universiti Kuala Lumpur Royal College of Medicine (UniKL RCMP) usually conducts debates as an English Language activity for undergraduates. However, not all students are involved in these debates. Besides, only students who are proficient in English volunteer to join these debates thus depriving the other undergraduates from taking part. However, since 2014, all Year 1 MBBS students were required to participate in a debate during their first module. This will enable equal opportunity for all students to be exposed to debates. Yet, it was unclear if the debate was an effective learning method for the students. The researchers noticed that usually, the mention of debates or debate activities tends to cause some fear and discomfort among students. This situation led the researchers to conduct this study mainly to ascertain if debates help medical undergraduates to learn better.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

- i. To explore medical undergraduate's perception on the use of classroom debates as a teaching tool.
- ii. To identify the impact of debates on students' knowledge, level of confidence and critical thinking skills.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. Are classroom debates accepted as an effective teaching tool by UniKL RCMP medical students?
2. Do debates have an impact on medical students' knowledge of a subject, level of confidence and critical thinking skills?

## **1.4 Scope of the Study**

This study involved Year 1 MBBS students at UniKL RCMP. The students were required to participate in debates during the first module of the undergraduate degree.

## **1.5 Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, only one debate session was conducted for samples' first module of study. The researchers understand that a single session of study might not be sufficient to evaluate the efficiency of the debate as a teaching tool. Secondly, the research focused only on Year 1 medical students thus limiting the scope to only one particular group of students.

## 1.6 Significance of the study

The ability to negotiate effectively with people is an important skill regardless of the situation i.e. whether it is at the workplace, at the market, at the school or in casual everyday interactions. With the increasing use of technology, the skill to debate and negotiate seems to be decreasing. Just as writing assignments have been incorporated across the curriculum to test students understanding, debates have also been successfully used in a variety of disciplines including health, dentistry, and nursing. Nevertheless, it is unclear how well this method has been accepted as a teaching method particularly in the Malaysian context.

The researchers believe that encouraging medical students to participate in debates will foster better learning as students take on a more active role during the debate and the instructor's interference is much reduced. This study will also provide an insight on the impact of debates on medical students perception based on three main criteria - knowledge, level of confidence and critical thinking skills. Lastly, this study may help to throw some light on how debates may be utilized to enhance learning among students not only in the medical field but also in other disciplines.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Methods of teaching and learning have evolved rapidly over time and it is always a challenge to upgrade existing methods and innovate new methods and techniques to keep up with the changing educational climate and to make the classroom both interesting and motivating for the learners. Methods that involve students in high level intellectual activities such as discussions, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and assessment, making judgements and arriving at conclusions help to enhance students' mental capacities to think out of the box and to explore possibilities for the present and the future. In such a scenario, the use of debate as a teaching method/technique has been in vogue for a long time and been found to have inspired students to take an active role in developing and exploring their own thought processes so as to be able to formulate rational, creative and logical ideas about various issues relevant to them as well as the community around them.

Basically, the use of debate as a teaching technique can make the classroom more student-oriented where students can take responsibility for their own learning. Debates foster students' active learning by giving them responsibility to understand course content, an approach that completely transforms their perspective from passive to active (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Cattani (2003:67) defines debates as "a competition (a challenge) between two antagonists in which the two contenders seek the approval of a third party (judge, auditorium), unlike what occurs in a simple discussion. Therefore, the academic debate has the potential to motivate learners to take an active role in the learning activity with the objective of presenting facts in a logical and systematic manner.

Debate has been defined as an educational strategy that fosters clinical reasoning and thinking skills as well as heightened awareness of attitude, values and beliefs (Garett & Hood, 1996; Darby, 2007; Dundes, 2001). Critical thinking skills used in a debate include defining the problem, assessing the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognizing inconsistencies and prioritizing the relevance and salience of various points within the overall argument (Kennedy, 2007) The development of such high level mental processes can help to develop critical thinking abilities of students wherein they are able to analyse, evaluate and make informed decisions as well as to propose logical solutions to issues at hand without being encumbered by their own cultural and social prejudices and preconceived notions.

This methodology too can bring many benefits to students, including an increase in their motivation to learn and consequently to master course content along with an improvement in their research skills,

empathy, oral expression, and communication skills (Schroeder & Ebert, 1983). It has been proven that debate foments creativity because participants must think about not only what will be said but also how it will be said (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Therefore, getting students involved in the process of the debate also will help them to improve their language skills and strengthen their ability to use language in a more effective and appealing manner.

Debates differ from lectures and discussions in that there are pre-arranged definitive sides to the issue: “for/affirmative” or “against/negative” (Darby, 2007). So there is always a possibility that some students might have to take a position that they themselves may not support. For instance, someone who is morally against mercy killing for whatever reason, may find himself supporting Euthanasia - the action of ending someone’s life through a clinical procedure carried out by a medical personnel. Such situations will psychologically prepare the student to also look at the opposing point of view; the pros and cons of an issue and understand the reasons put forward to support the opposite view. This would hopefully make the learners more balanced in their views and more open minded in their approach towards any topic or issue that they may have to deal with in the future.

However, debate as a teaching strategy has its detractors too. Tumposky (2004) asserts that debates reinforces a bias towards dualism - the tendency to look at an issue from two opposing viewpoints only. The structure of a debate with its Affirmative and the Negative sides, predisposes the discussion into only two opposing and extreme positions on a particular subject. However, in reality there might be multiple viable solutions to the issue being debated. An issue cannot just be seen as black and white but one should also consider the grey areas involved. One has to be aware of both sides of the issue and realize that there is no clear-cut answer to most issues that we face in life. It has to be impressed upon the students that a decision on any topic/issue has to be based on several considerations and conditions.

In class debates cultivate active engagement of students, placing the responsibility of comprehension on the shoulders of the students (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). The students’ approach changes dramatically from a passive to an active one (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). This is intended for the present day classroom especially where students have already acquired the basic facility in the target language and can be moulded to become critical and creative thinkers instead of listening passively to prepared lectures.

Surveys of business leaders reveal the perception that college graduates do not possess adequate oral communication skills (Combs & Bourne, 1994; Cronin & Glenn, 1991). This is in fact very true in the Malaysian context as we have such comments from the corporate leaders in charge of recruiting local personnel for multi-national corporations who lament the fact that our graduates lack both confidence as well as communication skills needed to succeed at the workplace.

As such it can be said that the debate can be utilized as one of the teaching-learning strategies that can generate a lot of excitement among students and in the process help them to improve their communication skills as well as lose their inhibitions and fear of expressing their thoughts in public. Widespread use of the debate may be the answer that we have been looking for to develop Malaysian students of the future who will be equipped to think on their feet and be able to present their ideas in a coherent and logical manner on any issue.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Questionnaire Development**

A questionnaire was developed to measure the students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of debates as a teaching tool for Medical Students of UniKL RCMP. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from Clinical Debate Post-confidence and Satisfaction Survey by Blackmer, Diez and Klein (2014). The

original questionnaire consisted of 14 items. The researcher decided to add three more questions in order to collect data that will be helpful for the analysis of the study. The questionnaire has three different parts. The first part consists of demographic data of the respondents. The samples were required to give their age, gender, programme, MUET level, module participated in the English Debate and the role in the debate session. The second part covers 14 statements on student's perception and preference on the Debate as a teaching tool for Medical Students of UniKL RCMP on a 5-point scale where number 1 indicates strong disagreement and number 5 indicates strong agreement. The 14 questions were grouped under three major categories as follows:

- i. Level of Confidence (question 6, 8, 10, 13 and 14)
- ii. Knowledge (question 1, 7, 11 and 12)
- iii. Critical Thinking Skills (question 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9)

### **3.2 Sample**

The sample size was 135 MBBS Year 1 medical students. This group of students were exposed to the debate as a teaching and learning strategy in their classrooms during the first semester of their Medical education programme.

### **3.3 Study Design**

The students were given exposure to the Parliamentary Style of debating which has three main speakers and a reserve speaker in each team. The structure and method of the debate was taught explicitly in the classroom during the English classes so that all the students were familiar with the debating mechanism that was in use. The students were divided into three groups of 45 students each. The three lecturers had agreed on the content to be given as input to the students as regards the debating procedures and techniques of debating.

Within the group, students were divided into four groups of about 11 to 12 students each and they worked on a debating topic provided by the lecturer. They had to organize themselves as debaters, researchers and strategists who would plan the right strategy of approaching the topic of the debate. All planning and strategizing were to be done at their own free time (Student Learning Time).

The questionnaire was administered at one session when the students were gathered at a particular venue. The objective of the survey was explained to them and it was impressed upon them that they need to give honest answers to all the questions. The students were advised to give their own personal feelings regarding the topic of the survey and not to discuss with their friends before answering the questions. The questionnaire was collected right after they had answered all the questions. The outcome of the survey was measured based on the student's scores on the questionnaire.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Procedure**

Data was collected in January 2015 at UniKL RCMP Ipoh. A consent form was attached to each questionnaire to ensure that respondents were not forced to answer the questionnaire and to guarantee that respondent's details and information obtained will be strictly confidential. Each participant who agreed to be part of the study proceeded to answer all the 14 items. 135 sets of questionnaires were completely answered. No items were left unanswered.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The researchers presented the data via descriptive statistics: mean and frequency. Information in part 1, the samples personal information were represented using frequency and percentage. On the other hand, the respondent's perception on the use of debates in the classroom in part 2 was represented by their mean scores

## 4.0 FINDINGS

**Table 1 Demographic information**

<b>Profile</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency (N=135)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Gender	Male	41	33.33
	Female	90	66.67

Table 1 displays demographic information of the participants involved in the study. The percentage of female participants (66.67%) is higher than that of male participants (33.33%)

**Table 2 Debate experience**

<b>Profile</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency (N=135)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Debate experience	Yes	105	77.78
	No	30	22.22

Table 2 displays debate experience of the participants involved in the study. 77.78% of the participants had debated before. 22.22% of the participant had never involved in debate activity.

**Table 3 Major impact of debate**

<b>Major impact of debate</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
Level of confidence	3.78
Critical thinking skills	3.74
Knowledge	3.68

Table 3 presents the major impact of debate to the participants. Respondents agreed that level of confidence (3.78) improved tremendously once debate is implemented. The second major impact of debate is critical thinking skills (3.74). The least impact of the debate among respondents is gaining knowledge (3.68).

**Table 4 Level of confidence**

<b>LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
1. Helped me to develop self confidence	3.9
2. Improved my ability to defend my opinions in a professional manner	3.8
3. Improved my confidence in communicating a clinical viewpoint	3.8
4. Improved my ability to communicate effectively	3.7
5. Was a very beneficial and learning experience	3.7
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.78</b>

Table 4 shows the level of confidence gained by students through debate. Most students believed that debate helped them to develop self confidence. Debate also improved their ability to defend opinions in professional manner.

**Table 5 Critical thinking**

<b>CRITICAL THINKING</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
1. Improved my critical thinking skills	3.9
4. Improved my ability to develop evidence based opinions	3.9
2. Improved my ability to do literature searches	3.7
5. Improved my ability to think on my feet	3.7
3. Enhanced my ability to analyse medical literature	3.5
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.74</b>

Table 5 presents the critical thinking skill gained by students through debate. Most students believed that debate helped them to improve critical thinking skills. Debate also improved their ability to develop evidence based opinions.

**Table 6 Knowledge**

<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
1. Helped me to understand the importance of both sides of a controversial topic	3.8
2. Increased my knowledge to a greater extent than learning independently	3.7
3. Helped me to focus on learning and retaining information in a self-directed manner	3.7
4. Improved my knowledge of medicine	3.5
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.68</b>

Table 6 shows the knowledge gained by students through debate. Most students believed that debate helped them to understand the importance of both sides of a controversial topic. Debate also increased students' knowledge to a greater extent than learning independently.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

This study shows that the use of the debate as a teaching/learning technique in the classroom gives positive impact to the students. In the current educational context, where students are widely exposed to technology, it is necessary to use a wide variety of instructional strategies because students learn in many different ways. The use of mundane methods of teaching most often leads to boredom and lack of interest in the topics being taught. Debates provide an opportunity for active learning because it allows direct interaction with the course material with fellow students as the main medium of information transfer where they 'teach' one another through peer interaction while the teacher plays the role of coordinator and advisor and remains in the background (Doody & Condon, 2012).

Debates foster students' active learning by giving them responsibility to understand course content, an approach that completely transforms their perspective from passive to active (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Participants of the study viewed academic debate in three positive ways which are improvement of critical thinking skills, avenue for gaining confidence and a way to increase specific knowledge on a particular topic and subject. Most students' responses were directed to a common finding that pointed to the three elements mentioned above.

The most significant outcome of the study is the increase in the level of confidence experienced by participants as a direct result of engaging in debating activities with mean score of 3.78. Most of the subjects acknowledged that participating in a debate helped them to speak in public more confidently. Being first year students, most of them find it difficult to express opinions and thoughts openly besides feeling intimidated by their seniors. Participating in debates, especially for students who had no experience, provided a stage for them to speak and build-up their level of confidence.

The second impact of debating in the classroom is the development of critical thinking skills with mean score of 3.74. The students' responses and performance in the debates were surprising. Most of the samples had to prepare for the debate in a forced manner. However, after the end of the debate session, many of the respondents pointed out that the debate experience managed to help improve their research skills as well as help them approach the given topic through various perspectives.

Additionally, as many responded in the open-ended questions that lack of time to prepare was one of the weaknesses, it indirectly contributed to the maximum use of the critical thinking skills. To elaborate further, if more time were to be given, students would probably have turned to the internet to compile references and would then 'parrot' all the information found. Whereas in this debate, the lack of time in turn provided an opportunity for the debaters to think independently and process the information before using it for the debate in the best possible manner.

The students perceive that the least impact of classroom debates was on helping students to gain knowledge. The results show that gaining knowledge through the debate was marginally less significant with mean score of 3.68 compared to the other two outcomes. This was probably because not all the debating topics/motions were directly related to the medical field. This is food for thought for the lecturers. They could in future think of ways of incorporating subject matter from the students' area of discipline (medicine in this case) so that the debate can be more relevant to their field of study and consequently more interesting for them.

Moreover, the students also commented that through debates, it was difficult to ascertain if information put forward by the opposing team on a particular topic was true or acceptable as there was not much of lecturer/teacher interference during the process of the debate. However such matters of ambiguity can be sorted out during the post-debate sessions when the lecturer or the adjudicator is called upon to give his/her comments. All in all, the study showed that debates play a major role in enhancing self-confidence, followed by promoting critical thinking skills and gaining knowledge of the topic being debated.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Generally the survey indicates that there is a positive perception and impression among the participants of this survey towards the use of the debate as a teaching/learning strategy in the medical classroom. The overall experience of the debate and the processes that the students go through while taking part in the debating activity seems to have increased the confidence level of the students to face the audience on any issue at hand and it seems to have increased their ability to put forward ideas and opinions formed after much investigation, research and discussions within the group.

Though this activity does help them to gain new knowledge on the topic in question, generally, the participants consider the increase in the level of confidence and critical thinking skills as being the more significant gains achieved through their involvement in the debate. However, it has to be agreed that this survey was done on a very limited scale and has only investigated on a specific group of students who have had some limited exposure to the debating mechanism. Besides the fact that the results of this research cannot be generalized to other situations, it has to be said that a more elaborate and encompassing research needs to be carried out to arrive at a more conclusive and acceptable outcome.

But the fact remains that the debate can actually be used as a teaching tool/technique in the classroom once students have acquired a reasonably good level of proficiency and facility in the language. It is obviously a technique that can motivate students to challenge one another and encourage them to explore and exploit their facility in the language for the purpose of exploring and expanding points of arguments with the express objective of winning over the audience and also to convince the opposing side to accept their stand on the motion being discussed and debated.

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