DEBATE METHODOLOGY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Introduction

What is meant by debate methodology is the collection of methods, principles, techniques, and rules of debate and their analysis. All together these elements constitute debate, and the employment of specific elements (particular rules, methods…) constitutes a debate format (such as World Schools, British Parliamentary, etc.). Since this is an introduction to debate methodology regardless of the debate format, we will discuss the elements shared by all debate formats such that they establish debate in general. The differences between debate formats come down to, for example, judging criteria, speech time, preparation time, the number of speakers, etc.

Debating is a formal competitive activity where at least two sides clash on a topic given by a debate motion. Debaters from each side prepare a case either in favour of or against the given motion. During the debate, speakers then take turns presenting arguments and reacting/rebutting the speaker that came before them. Thus, the general elements of debating are: competitive nature, motion/topic, at least two sides either in favour or against, case building, argumentation, and rebuttal. Importantly, and this is particularly relevant for classroom debate, debating can be modular and having a full debate isn't necessarily always the goal - teachers can break up the debate into specific elements and use those that fit into their class best.

The goal of a debate is not to reach a resolution. Of course, the employment of debating is valuable for expanding students' critical thinking, general knowledge, etc., but the debater's primary goal is winning the debate. If the student wishes to win more debates, he must cultivate these qualities. Thus, through using the desire to compete, students acquire these valuable qualities almost accidentally. In order for debating to be a competitive activity, it must have judges and clear judging criteria. Debaters are usually judged on the content, strategy, and style of their speech, with the most important criterion being successfully convincing the judges of their position (either in favour or against the given motion). But no single speech wins a debate, and what is really important is what the team as a whole accomplishes to show by the end of the debate. Therefore, the team's position can be seen as the culmination of individual speeches with the additional factor that the team's position must be coherent and synergetic among individual speakers. Hence, the hope is, that the team's position as a whole is stronger than the sum of individual speeches. Another important element is the fact that at the end of the debate students receive feedback and an explanation of the decision from the judges, giving them valuable information on how to improve.

The competitiveness of debating justifies the importance of strategy. Given the time constraints of any debate format, students can't simply present all arguments that come to mind, but they must prioritise what they think is most important. The question they ask themselves then is "What do I have to do to win this debate, and what is the most efficient way to do so?" With practice, this creates a sort of meta-understanding of debate - an understanding of not only particular arguments but also of what needs to be done to convince the judges of their position. Along with strategy, an important component in winning a debate is the ability to explain the value of arguments and the ability to compare this value between different arguments in order to show that your side presented the more significant ones and should thus win the debate.

The competitiveness of debating is an essential and desirable element that uses students' natural drive to get them to improve. Clear judging criteria give a simple way of evaluating students while at the same time making it easy to give feedback on specific ways to improve. The need for strategy and understanding of the value of arguments enhances the ability to recognise what is important and helps students not get lost in the complications of argumentation. However, debate (or elements of it), can also be used in non competitive settings or the competitive aspects can be masked.

The topic of a debate is given by a motion. A motion is a controversial proposition with the requirement that it is arguable from both sides (in support of the motion and against the motion). For example, the proposition "The number 1 is greater than the number 2" is not a valid motion because it is not arguable from the proposing side. Motions are usually related to current events and regard topics such as government and international policy, freedom, justice, ethics, art, sport, etc. Motions are often worded as a proposition starting with "This house…" and treated as a piece of legislation to be passed by a house of parliament. Let us give a few examples of motions.

- This house believes that it is immoral to have children
- This house regrets the narrative that democracy is the only legitimate form of governance
- This house would open all borders

A particular motion is important because it grounds the debate, hence grounding what students must think and speak about. Picking the right motion, therefore, depends on the desired learning outcomes. If, for example, the goal is to teach students about the importance of free speech and its justification, a motion about censorship would be appropriate.

In a debate, there are usually two sides called proposition and opposition (sometimes government and opposition) where the proposition proposes the motion

(is in favour of it) and the opposition opposes it (is against it). In some debate formats, there are more than two teams that compete with each other. In these formats, the proposing and opposing sides are usually split in two resulting in a total of four teams, where each team tries to be better than every other team. So, even in formats where there are more teams, there is always only the proposition and the opposition - there is no 'third' option.

Debaters don't get to choose which side they want to be on. In a debate tournament, students generally debate both sides of a motion. This forces them to analyse arguments and build a case for a position which they personally do not believe in. Assigning sides provides an incentive for students to understand a topic in as much breadth and depth as possible. This analytic thought-process then frees them from personal beliefs in considering different views and allows them to critically evaluate their own positions and the ones they disagree with.

In a tournament, debates are either prepared or impromptu. In a prepared debate, the motion is announced well ahead of the start of the tournament, while impromptu motions are announced 15-60 minutes (depending on the debate format) before the start of the debate. During this preparation time, debaters must build a case in support of their position. A case is a written document with anything that is useful for the debate. This mostly includes arguments, definitions, evidence, and reactions. More generally, a case is the culmination of views and analysis debaters present in support of their position - their definitions must be sensible, their arguments must work together, and all in all the case should lead the judges and the audience into accepting and supporting their position. Building a case starts with researching the given topic and forming arguments. From there students expand and revise until they have a strong case for their position. This sort of preparation is valuable in getting students to understand new topics they need to research. Prepared debates also motivate students because less experienced debaters can level the playing field against more experienced debaters by preparing more thoroughly. In an impromptu debate, there is, of course, no time for research and meticulous revisions.

To understand the specific ways to prepare a case, one must first understand what argumentation is. Argumentation is the collection of arguments which support or oppose a given motion. Simply said, an argument gives a reason for or against the motion. The core elements of an argument are: proposition or statement, analysis, evidence or examples, and impact. Every argument should start with a proposition. This proposition is what the argument aims to prove, and it is almost synonymous with the name of the argument. For instance, in a debate about censorship, there will probably be an argument about free speech. The proposition of such an argument would be "Censorship goes against free speech." This argument would then go on to show why this proposition is true and why free speech is important.

The most important part of an argument is analysis. Analysis is the pure reasoning behind an argument - it is the journey from the premises of an argument to the conclusion. Creating analysis is the act of asking 'Why?' and answering. Why

does censorship go against free speech? Because censorship takes away some means of expressing yourself and thus decreasing the level of freedom of speech you have. Why does this particular form of censorship take away means of expression? Why can't censorship coexist with freedom of speech?... The goal of analysis is to present a logical sequence of steps from reasonable and well-motivated premises to the conclusion, with each step either being obvious or supported by evidence and examples, such that judges have no option but to agree with your argument. For this reason, evidence and examples are crucial. Evidence must be presented from trustworthy sources, and its importance and relevance in the debate must be explained. Similarly, it needs to be explained how a particular example applies to the debate and what its significance is.

The last thing an argument needs are impacts. Impacts are the reasons why an argument is important. Going back to our example with censorship, if this were, more specifically, a motion about censoring fake news on social media, there would probably be an argument about fake news being a threat to democracy. The most important impact of this argument would be along the lines of how the rise of populism undermines democracy thus taking away peoples' right to representation. For this to be an important impact it also needs to be explained why the right to democratic representation is important. Creating impacts stems from thinking about what actually happens, how it affects people, and why the argument itself is significant.

Knowing how to form arguments is perhaps the most important skill debating offers to teach. Not only does it teach how to present a valid argument, but it also develops students' ability to critically evaluate their own reasoning, to recognize a sound and an unsound argument, and to realise the importance of an argument. When starting to teach how to argue it is beneficial to pedantically require the argument to have a formal structure (proposition, analysis with evidence and examples, and impacts), in spite of the fact that experienced debaters often move through an argument much more naturally.

Though some may find it regrettable, in a debate, no single person is the only one presenting arguments. This is the reason why rebuttal is important. Rebutting is the act of reacting to what was said by your opponents. Whether your opponents were attacking your arguments or building arguments of their own, you need to react to what they said. This is where the proper clash of arguments happens. Since it is impossible to perfectly predict what your opponents are going to say, students need to be able to think on their feet. To be able to do this they mustn't be intimidated by unexpected things. Being able to rebut efficiently ensures that students don't have only a superficial understanding of the topic since rebuttal requires them to find out a link between things they haven't realised it exists previously, thus requiring them to have a deep understanding of the topic while still being able to navigate it.

Further reading:

California High School Speech Association. Curriculum Committee. *Speaking across the Curriculum: Practical Ideas for Incorporating Listening and Speaking into the Classroom*. IDEA, 2004.

Harvey-Smith, Neill. *The Practical Guide to Debating, Worlds Style/British Parliamentary Style*. IDEA, 2011.

Newman, Debbie, and Ben Woolgar, eds. *Pros and Cons: A Debater's Handbook Edited*. Routledge, 2014.

Quinn, Simon. *Debating in the World Schools Style: A Guide*. IDEA, 2009.

My comments:

- I believe I have exhausted the topic. But if there is a need to expand this text, I think I can provide more detail on the different types of motions, the different types of arguments… I have not done so for fear of including too many unnecessary details. I could also try to expand the classroom perspective, but I don't think I have the expertise to write much with any authority on the topic.
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Debate Methodology in Classroom

Implementing a full-format debate in a classroom inevitably takes a lot of time for acquainting students with the rules and procedures of a chosen debate format and preparing the materials for the actual debate, and it is difficult to organise it in a way that engages the entire classroom. The luxury of a less strict syllabus and working with a smaller group of motivated students - something that makes a full-format debate a viable option - is often something reserved for extra-curricular activities while teachers have significantly less room for manoeuvre when choosing their pedagogical methods for the classroom.

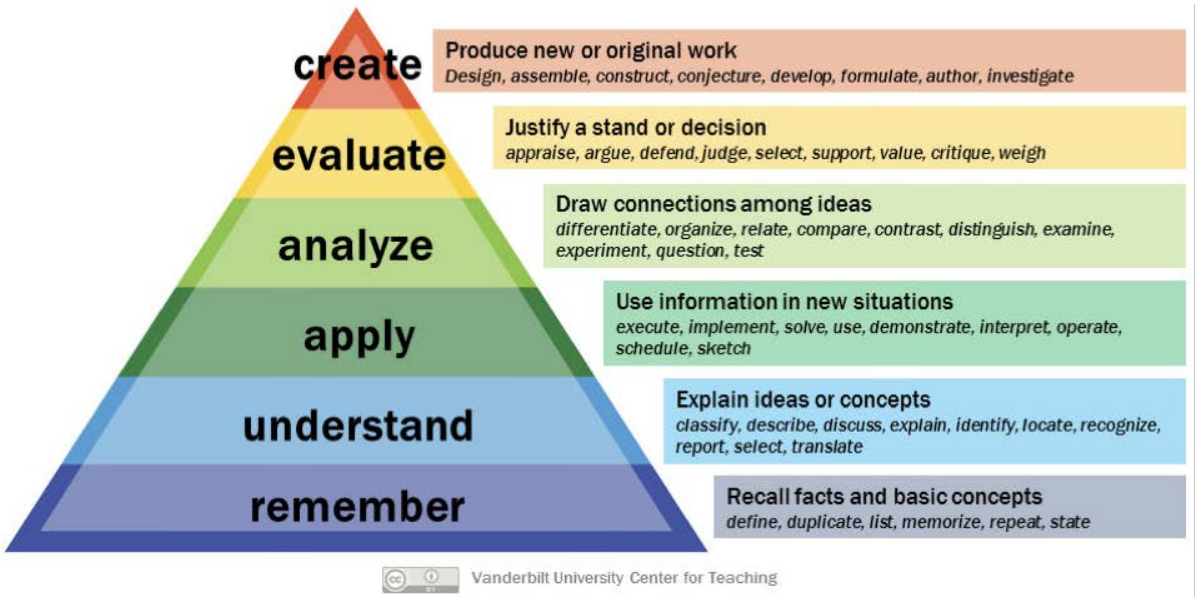
This does not mean that debate is not an appropriate methodology for the classroom, but it does mean that teachers need to, in many cases, limit their expectations and be extremely selective in choosing the segments of debating they are going to apply to their teaching methods. The good news is, as we have already learned in the first part of this module, that debating is to an extent a modular activity, encompassing several elements (argumentation, rebuttal, case-building, research,…). A student ought to put effort into every one of those elements in order to be able to actually debate, however, practising any of those elements brings value on its own - it fosters skills and helps students gain knowledge and can be a valuable part of the overall pedagogical process. Applying debate methodology in the

classroom in the majority of cases thus means putting in place different debate related exercises, the choice of them depends on what is the specific pedagogical goal or the desired learning outcome for the students. Additionally, traditional (competitive) debate formats can be tailored to become simpler, shorter, and engage more students - they can be made more classroom friendly (*add a reference to part of the result where this is discussed*).

Apart from the learning process, debate methodology has other uses in the classroom - it can be used as a method that helps the teacher identify how much the students know about a certain topic or what they are motivated to learn more of. It can encourage team work or can serve as an ice-breaking activity, providing benefits to the learning process that impact other methodologies used in the classroom as well. Furthermore, debate methodology can be used as a tool to evaluate students and grade them. The potential of debate in the classroom is immense, and this module is here to explain how pedagogical goals can be linked to specific debate related methods.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Goals and Debate Methodology

Bloom's Taxonomy is one of the tools used by teachers that help them organise learning objectives and with doing that plan and deliver appropriate instruction, design valid assessment tasks and strategies as well as ensure that instruction and assessment are in line with the learning objectives. We are going to have a look at the debate methodology and identify how different methods can be used to attain the different 'steps' in Bloom's taxonomy.



Remembering, the ability to memorise and define theoretical concepts and most 'easily' attainable goals in the taxonomy, is achieved through practically all types of debate related exercises. Whatever the exercise, it is likely that it will involve students having to actively engage with the given topic and will often include listening to views or arguments expressed by their peers. Often, the presented material will have to be repeated by the student in order to make this engagement possible, enhancing the process of memorisation. Moreover, in order to prepare their speeches or in order to gain the necessary knowledge to engage with the ideas and arguments presented, the students will either be instructed to do research (either through textbooks, the internet, or through discussion with others) or will be motivated to do so on their own with the goal of doing better at debate exercises.

Understanding, the ability to classify, summarise, and explain concepts, is enhanced structurally through debate methodology as there will always be a limited time the students will have available to them to participate in the exercise by expressing their own ideas (be it arguments, rebuttals, or just discussing motions) which makes the selection and prioritisation imperative on the students' side. Additionally, debate methodology pushes students to be selective in the use of information by creating a frame for its use - there will always be a debate topic or a motion, or at the very least an argument, an idea; this encourages students to utilise the gained knowledge in a specific context; helping students to understand the significance and the role of the knowledge they are operating with.

Applying, the ability to actually use the gained in order to solve problems and utilise it to support their thoughts, is fostered by the role-play element that debate methods to an extent always contain. Through debate related exercises students take upon roles, for example: they need to be in favour of a motion, they need to find a flaw in an argument, they need to figure out an argument that will help a specific stakeholder. This sometimes happens in a relatively unnoticeable manner, not only because the students might actually identify with the arguments they are making, but also because they aren't actually 'pretending' to be someone else - they are just placed in a position when they need to 'defend' a certain concept. This means that not only they are required to contextualise acquired knowledge inside a given frame, as explained in the previous paragraph, but have to utilise gained knowledge to prove the claim they are making and interpret the knowledge in a way favourable to them. The achievement of this learning objective is further enhanced if students work on a same or similar topic for more than one session, as they will likely be pushed to apply their knowledge in radically different situations, for example being in favour of the motion one minute and being against the next.

Analysing, the ability to differentiate and question theoretical concepts, is something that is arguably organically built into debate related activities. What separates debate methodology from methods more geared towards public speaking is the characteristic of debating as an activity that goes beyond the expressing of opinions

or views for the sake of the views themselves - debating has controversy in terms of content built-in, as motions always have two sides to them, and both sides should be defensible. Students, when constructing arguments or discussing different debate strategies, don't do it an vacuum, they know that their arguments will be responded to by their peers (or at least given feedback on the basis of intellectual merit), and students themselves might, through various debate exercises, be put into a position where they themselves need to engage with the content presented, offer feedback, or compare different arguments in favour of the same motion among each other. Analysis thus happens indirectly, since students, in order to do well in the activity, have to question their own arguments in order to strengthen them, as well as directly, by having to respond to the content presented by their peers.

Pedagogical Tips

In his article "Teaching Critical Thinking in the 'Strong' Sense (...)" (1982), Richard W. Paul points out that teaching students how to think critically can be a tricky task for quite obvious but very often neglected fact. Students, namely, are not 'blank slates'; they have their own personal beliefs, core values, "deep-seated uncritical, egocentric, and sociocentric habits of thought by which they interpret and process their experiences (…).". And they are, as we all are, very prone to keeping those habits of thought intact. Whenever we try to teach students some kind of critical thinking skills in a "weak" sense, as he calls it, we inevitably risk that they will learn how to use such skills in order to perpetuate their own position and rationalise their rejection of every point of view that they view as different from their own. Such students would be more skilled, efficient, logical… in defending problematic, biassed and unexamined views.

Two main features characterise teaching in the "weak" sense: "the idea that critical thinking can be taught as a battery of atomic technical skills independent of egocentric beliefs and commitments" on one side, and assumption that this can be achieved through analyses of "neutral", non-problematic examples of reasoning.

There seems to be some kind of pedagogical hint in this insight. Introducing debate in the classroom is very often a project that requires learning students how to distinguish an argument from non-argument, recognizing specific argumentative and logical fallacies, etc. We prepare a workshop on motion analyses, show students how to organise their work and teach them how to take notes. Organising a debate itself is some kind of grand finale of such an endeavour, a festive activity at the end of a learning block. And as it was mentioned earlier, teaching students how to debate should be a modular activity. After all, they do not possess skills that are required to even start debating in the first place. Yet, with the definition of "weak" learning in mind, a word of caution is in place here.

Certain features render debate to be an extremely efficient pedagogical tool in itself: it is a competitive, student-led, active method of doing things; researching new topics, preparing presentations, evaluating other student's work etc. Its effectiveness is a product of more motivated, engaged students (see above) who try to distinguish themselves among other students and the fact that we are learning new things more efficiently by doing them, by immersion. It is obvious that even more mechanical objectives of learning (remembering and understanding, for example) can benefit from debate, as it has been shown in different studies (Kennedy, 2007). But when this effectiveness leads to more biases, to more rationalised opposition to science, for example, something obviously went wrong. And that is not just a hypothetical possibility, as many studies showed that in some cases observing a debate just strengthens existing beliefs, and that students, preparing for a debate tend to focus on information that validates their personal position and ignore the majority of available resources that contradicts it.

On the other hand, students can change their biassed opinions, to an alarming extent even, as some studies (Emily L. Lilly, 2012, for example) have shown, when/if some additional conditions are met. Firstly, students must debate. Observing or even adjudicating a debate is not enough; debate demands active participation. Secondly, students should not be given an opportunity to choose which position they would like to represent; the roles must be assigned. And thirdly, debate motions should not be neutral; they should challenge the way we see and understand the world.

Debate's main value as a pedagogical tool lies in praxis; in doing debate. There are some things that we should tell students before they start doing debate, of course: what an argument is, how to construct it, how to evaluate it, how to do rebuttals, which debate format will be used, etc. It's not forbidden to use more traditional teaching methods in this case. Explaining what an argument is and showing students some examples is even desirable. There are some other things that students can or should do on their own (or in groups): they can prepare an argument, research the topic, discuss possible refutations etc. But debating is not just about presenting two (or more) different arguments; it's about proving that your argument is more relevant than an argument from the opposing team. Debating a problem means that we should interact with the opponent's arguments. This part cannot be sufficiently prepared in advance and therefore forces a student to analyse and evaluate existing material and create new content that helps such a comparison; and that exactly are the higher goals that we want to achieve, when preparing learning lessons. That is actually also suggested as an alternative approach to "weak" teaching by Paul Richard: "strong" teaching "*(instead of "atomic arguments") emphasises argument networks (world views); (instead of evaluating atomic arguments it) emphasises a more dialectical and dialogical approach. Arguments need to be appraised in relation to counter arguments.*``.

From a pedagogical point of view this implies that a vast majority of debate related activity in a classroom should lead to some form of debate, and that every kind of debate should include every student and give every student equal opportunity to participate in it. For obvious reasons this rules out the majority of “elaborated” debate formats (WSD, BP etc): it is time consuming both in preparation and execution, and it actively involves too few students. But there are a variety of other forms of debate (see further readings) that can be used: short SPAR debates, where each student in a pair presents his or her view in a one-minute speech, “balloon” debates, where students collaborate in groups effort to compete with each other student group etc. We should not refrain from “childish” forms of debating, as long as it evokes cooperation, deliberation and evaluation of different views among students. At the same time, we should insist on using a specific form of debate (each student is given certain amount of time, they can advocate only one argument and they have to react to opponents view etc) as it provides every student with an equal possibility to present his or her reasoning, the limited time and number of presented arguments aims focus on developing arguments. Format rules, with clear definitions of roles, tasks, roles etc. ensures an argument where both sides are balanced, regardless of personal features of students involved in a debate , gives each student an equal opportunity to present their specific understanding of a problem without interference of more vocal or rude voices of other students. Time limitations and role divisions force students to be focused on specific arguments or points of view, and binary formats where each side is given equal opportunity to present and defend its position forces students to weigh in their arguments in advance; it forces them to put their own reasoning in context. Those “essential by products” of debate force students toward using higher skills of learning by default, which should be a nice by- result even when we try to lead students toward more basic learning goals, such as understanding or using acquired knowledge in new situations.

Second condition that we mentioned is linked to the demand that roles that students partake in debate should be assigned. When debating a prepared debate motion in competitive debate, every team has to develop two different debate cases, a proposition and an opposition case. But it is not realistic to expect students to do the same in the limited time that they have within a lesson. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, letting students choose their preferred side is counterproductive as it enables confirmation bias and meddles with expected results. Assigning positions, on the other hand, allows students to distance themselves from the motion that they are trying to debate, and forces them to think about possible ways that the assigned position would tackle with their own rationalisations of personal beliefs. It forces students to think really hard about what the strongest arguments competing with their own beliefs are, and about reasons why those arguments should at least seem stronger in a debate. And that, as J. S. Mill points out, is the only relevant path to knowledge: “He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is

equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”.

Mill’s remark here is really to the point. Let’s take an example. In recent years, there has been reported an alarming rise of people believing that the Earth is flat (article). Majority of people, of course, still believe that this is not the fact. But, as Mill points out; there are only two beliefs, one for each side. And the real question is: how can we be certain that we are right? The problem is that even if we cannot explain to FlatEarth people why they are wrong and why their “proofs” are not justified, we may still be right. And we actually are right, but since we cannot explain why this is so, being right is a game won only by chance, since being right in this case has nothing to do with knowing why a particular answer is justified, but only by being on the right side. Knowledge, as Plato puts it, is not just about having a true belief, it’s also about the ability to explain reasons for your belief. And in this case, we obviously have none. The real question here is, therefore, how to assign a role that will oppose the unreflected biases that the student holds, since we cannot predict how students think or feel about a certain topic.

Let’s examine, then, what a debate motion is and how it should be structured. First of all, debate motion should be debatable: rational people should be able to find it interesting to discuss. In competitive debate, “debatability” means that both sides should have comparable possibility to win the debate: that there are persuasive arguments on both sides. “Technical innovations are influencing the way people live.” or “Barack Obama was the first black president of the USA.” are examples of bad motions, since they, among many other things, put one side (or team) in an inferior position: if they want to prove that statement is false, they have a much harder job to do. That also means that debate motions should not be statements of taste or of subjective opinion; they should express some kind of value or policy that is controversial or is addressing a conflict within them. If we want to debate, say, a motion that “State should eliminate inheritance tax”, both sides can deal with and try to present us with the view on certain positive or negative consequences that such a policy would bring along, more just distribution of wealth on one side, and unjust and numbing financial pressure on most productive members of society on the other. But at the same time, this motion addresses more principal aspects of our life: What kind of society do we want? What is just? Which value should we, as a society, promote?. And even if questions about practical outcomes of such taxation are not as debatable as it would seem (yes, the wealth inequality would be diminished, and yes, the rich people would be taxed more), the principal questions really demand a debate; we should discuss what it is that we want. So a good motion should expose not only the practical side of a problem, but should be mixed with more abstract questions of value(s).

This suggests that debate motions should not be, as mentioned before, neutral: they should force students to discuss values that shape their worldview; to challenge them. The problem is, of course, that students have different worldviews, beliefs and values. Since we cannot possibly know every one of them and since we cannot make them debate all the motions on all positions (pro et contra), we should adapt our goals in the classroom a bit. It is, as mentioned earlier, important to make all students debate; being in person or as an active member of a pair or a group that discusses a certain topic. And students will be more motivated to be an active member of a pair or a group, if they would discuss a topic that is intriguing; not necessarily provocative, but at least counterintuitive. What is our task here then is to decipher dominant discourse, to point out the most obvious common sense underlying premises and to challenge them. A debate motion “Electric cars pollute less than fossil fuel cars” is still debatable in practical point of view (“dirty” production, how we fuel them, etc) but a debate motion “Electrical cars are a distraction from a real problem” should really lead students beyond googling empirical data and into understanding and evaluating different solutions. It’s not a question if “smoking is harmful”, but can “ban smoking” work, etc. Which means that we can give all students the same motion (and challenge them to present to us the strongest pro argument they can come up with); (and later challenge them to do rebuttals of other teams’ arguments) as long as they are all baffled by the motion to some extent. Additional explanations and examples of different motion types can be found in Result 3, the Toolkit.

Lastly, the role of a teacher should be mentioned. Debating is, to a certain extent, a skill. And as majority of other skills it is learned by doing (it, ie. debating). All the strong points of a debate as an alternative approach to learning are linked to that fact; being a student-led, peer to peer, active approach to learning. All of those points lose their convincibility when we try to teach debate in some kind of frontal approach. Of course we, as teachers, should present students with some notions and definitions, explain to them what an argument is and when it is true, sound or valid. But, as Hegel said once, one cannot learn to swim without water: we should throw our students into debating and we should tell ourselves that we are mere moderators of a dialogue: mistakes, weak points and factual inaccuracies should be something that students should point out on their own.

Further reading:

Alfred Snider, and Maxwell Schnurer. *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum.* IDEA, 2002.

Alan Crawford, E. Wendy Saul, Samuel Mathews, and James Makinster: *Teaching and Learning Strategies for the Thinking Classroom.* IDEA, 2005.

Debbie Newman. *The Noisy Classroom*. Routledge, 2020.