



Take a Fresh Look at Debating

By Janine Wilkins, Homeschool Committee Member and Former Homeschool Representative

Imagine an activity you could incorporate into your classroom or homeschool that is guaranteed to:

- improve critical thinking skills,
- increase content knowledge,
- raise grade point averages,
- enhance reading skills,
- develop writing and organization, and
- expand self-confidence.

Imagine if this activity was student led and easy on the teacher. What if research showed that students would thoroughly ENJOY this activity and beg for more? The impact of this pursuit is historically well-documented, and it has been successfully used in education for the last 100 years. It is an old idea that is getting new attention. Let's take a fresh look at the debate!

In their study, "Enhancing civic education through the use of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate across the curriculum," Leslie Wade Zorwick and James M. Wade explain "how critical civic knowledge, as well as the skills and dispositions to effectively participate in civic life, can be promoted across the curriculum through the use of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate" (2016). They surveyed 238 middle and high school teachers who coach forensics (forensics as in the study of debate and speech, not crime scenes) using debate-based activities in regular classes. Remarkably, 73% of the

social studies/history teachers reported a significant positive impact on the following outcomes:

- citing textual evidence
- determining central ideas
- summarizing
- evaluating author's premises/claims/evidence
- comparing evidence
- writing well-developed content
- writing organized paragraphs
- gathering relevant information from multiple sources
- digital research
- identifying logical fallacies
- speaking and listening with discernment

There was a unanimous agreement of improved student ability in writing position papers with precise claims and counter claims. This robust list of outcomes sounds too good to be true.

What Created These Outcomes?

So what was the magic activity? Teachers assigned students to advocate for a particular claim. The students were paired off to research for evidence to support that claim. Students then presented their arguments and engaged in a controlled discussion of opposing ideas. Next, they switched sides and presented the counter argument. This mimics how debate students argue for and against a resolution at a debate tournament. The clash of ideas is encouraged, and the element of competition fuels the search for more credible evidence along with clearer arguments.

Structured controversy with civil disagreement facilitates discussion and trains students to respect opposing views and get hands-on practice with collaborative problem solving and civil discourse. Logical, reasoned thought with credible evidence wins debates. As the students practice, they become more comfortable with disagreements and diverse views. This has a powerful impact on student learning of civics as teachers model and encourage interactive and active citizenship. Debaters need a deeper understanding of the issues and their own values to be able to advocate and argue them. Social studies and history must be more than a list of dates and facts. A democracy "of the people, by the people, and for the people" requires citizens with the knowledge and skills to take on the responsibility of leadership and participation in their democracy. Imagine if everyone in our society had the benefit of this type of training. How would our civil discourse and public conversations sound?

It does not have to be complicated to include debate in your classroom. Creating resolutions and assigning advocacy exercises can be applied in any class. Resources are readily available for incorporation of "Debate Across the Curriculum." Zorwick and Wade cite research done by the Boston Debate League in which teachers who attended a summer program reported a 99% increase in understanding of class content. That handbook is available at: <http://www.bostondebate.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2009/10/1-DAC-Teacher-Manual.pdf](http://www.bostondebate.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/1-DAC-Teacher-Manual.pdf). Rather than lecturing to your students about civics this fall, implement the debate method and give them a chance to actually “do democracy.”

Practicing speech and debate was the single best educational decision I made in my 27 years of homeschooling. My children loved debating with me and each other. We took it a step further and competed in a national league (see stoausa.org and ncfca.org), traveling and making friends all over the USA. We used relevant resources on Monument Members (www.monumentmembers.com), library books, YouTube, and the internet.

Janine Wilkins is a former homeschooling representative on the Nazarene Educators Worldwide Council. Now, she is thoroughly enjoying being a HEN, “Homeschooling Empty Nester,” a Nonna of five grandsons. She has recently started a master’s in communication and leadership at Park University.

References

Zorwick, L. W., & Wade, J. M. (2016). Enhancing civic education through the use of assigned advocacy, argumentation, and debate across the curriculum. *Communication Education*, 65(4), 434–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1203005>

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