INTRODUCTION

The literature on classroom debates generally suggests they are an effective active learning technique (Kennedy 2009; Moeller 1985; Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008).

However, there is less clarity in the literature on what kind of debate preparation can help student learning and enhance the quality of classroom debates.

This led me to my teaching-as-research question: Will preparation for a classroom debate through different writing/research assignments help students think critically about food systems, sustainability, and climate change and enhance the quality of the classroom debate?

OBJECTIVES: Desired learning outcomes from preparing for and participating in the classroom debate

Students:

- Develop and demonstrate an enhanced understanding of how food systems, climate change, and sustainability are interrelated in the “real-world” (Bloom’s classification: Synthesis)
- Effectively apply scientific evidence to defend different positions on a debate topic (Bloom’s classification: Application)
- Analyze a political figure, his/her background, and constituencies to develop plausible arguments that such a figure might use to defend a particular position in a congressional debate (Bloom’s classification: Analysis)
- Re-assess and reflect on their own positions on the debate question after the classroom debate (Bloom’s classification: Evaluation)

METHODS: Debate preparation/scaffolding activities and structure of the classroom debate

1) Students generated possible debate questions in class in teams about food systems, sustainability, and climate change.

2) Writing assignment 1: students generated two more debate questions, as well as a “scenario” and list of relevant stakeholders for each.

3) One debate question students had generated - “Should the US government incentivize insect farming/raising/feeding for human food consumption in the next Farm Bill?” - was selected for the classroom debate.

4) Writing assignment 2: students wrote essays using academic literature to support “for,” “against,” and “middle-ground” positions on the debate question.

5) Pre-debate, the 15 student class was divided into three teams/positions (“for,” “against,” or “middle ground”) for the classroom “congressional-style” debate.

6) Pre-debate, students were randomly assigned a U.S. senator and a position on the debate question that they would have to argue, in-character as that senator, during the classroom congressional debate with their like-minded senators.

7) Writing assignment 3: Pre-debate, students outlined the argument they would be presenting as their senator on debate day and refining with their teams.

8) Classroom debate was held, and after it ended, we had a discussion about how a) people felt about their assigned senators and positions and b) how their personal positions on the debate question had changed, if at all.

RESULTS

- The average score on the debate preparation essay was 93/100.
- 13/15 students responded to the question, “To what extent did the debate preparation essay help you learn about food systems, sustainability, and climate change?” with “a lot” or “a great deal.”
- 14/15 students responded to the question, “To what extent did the classroom debate help you learn about food systems, sustainability, and climate change?” with “a lot” or “a great deal.”
- 6/15 students changed their position on the debate question after the classroom debate.
- Written feedback on the SALG indicated that debate preparation activities enhanced the quality of the classroom debate.

LESSONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

- This Delta Internship project suggests that debate preparation through multiple writing and research assignments helps students think critically about the debate topic and provides good scaffolding for the classroom debate.

- Structuring a classroom debate as a congressional debate was well-liked by the students, and students found it “really interesting to see how politicians blend policy, expenditures, science, and personal views.”

LITERATURE CITED

