Tips for Teachers

Using Debate to Strengthen Academic Writing

Rachel Bradshaw, Josiah Quincy High School, Boston, MA

I teach English in an ethnically and linguistically diverse urban high school. About half of its students are the children of immigrants from East Asia or the Caribbean and speak languages other than English at home. Most, native speakers as well as English language learners (ELLs), would be considered "disadvantaged" or lacking the social and economic capital they need to be well prepared for further education or training. While the reasons for their difficulties may vary, both the native speakers and the ELLs are below grade level readers and astonishingly weak academic writers. Nevertheless, many aspire to further education after high school, and most who reach this goal are the first in their families to do so.

Last year, I became the school debate coach. In that capacity, I saw students, including some of my own struggling readers and writers, engaged in a verbal activity where they excelled: face-to-face debate. I began to wonder whether their oral language skills might somehow be used to strengthen their writing. One day, after reading a typical set of disappointing homework papers written by my eleventh graders, I saw a way to examine the relationship between their speaking and writing skills.

We were reading Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* and I had asked my students to write a one-page paper stating whether Maya or Glory deals more effectively with the overbearing Mrs. Cullinan. No one wrote more than a third of a page, and some wrote only one sentence. Only two of twenty quoted any textual evidence to support their opinions. There were circular arguments: "Glory deals better with Mrs. Cullinan because Maya couldn't handle with Mrs. Cullinan." There were non sequiturs: "I think Glory is because she was a descendant of slaves that had worked for the Cullinans." There was simple summarizing: "Maya doesn't like Mrs. Cullinan because she call her by the wrong name and Glory is her mistress and she is used to serve her." And everywhere, there were developmental English errors, as well as errors in spelling, punctuation, and word choice. Instead of marking and grading each paper individually, as I would normally have done, I tried this series of steps:

1. I removed student names from the papers, photocopied them, and handed them out in packets the next day.

2. I asked for two volunteers to come forward to hold a brief debate. One would defend Glory's approach to dealing with Mrs. Cullinan, and the other would defend Maya's approach. The only catch was that each had to choose one response from the packet of homework writings to read aloud, verbatim, as her opening statement.

3. I gave the debaters time to search through the packet of collected writings to find the words they wanted to use in their debate.

The rest of the class cheered and then jeered as they realized just how weak the arguments were. "I can't even read this!" the debaters exclaimed. "This has nothing to do with the question!" "This is going to be the worst speech ever!" And finally, turning to me: "Do we really write like this? I'm ashamed!" The "debate," of course, was hilarious, a total failure on both sides, but individual debaters were not embarrassed. After all, they were just reading what other people had written, and the class as a whole immediately recognized the connection between good writing and good debating: if a response to a controversial question cannot fare well in a debate, it is probably not very well written.

4. Afterward, I told the class that their new homework assignment was to rewrite their responses for use in a new round of debates.

5. Over the next few days, I repeated the process twice more. Thus, students wrote three drafts and held a series of three debates.

6. After each debate, I allowed time for debriefing and reflection. By participating in and observing the debates, students gradually discovered, on their own, a need to add content, improve organization, and use more specific vocabulary. They also discovered the thrill of crafting a winning argument. One student voiced this discovery saying, "This is better, but I'm still losing the debate."

Final drafts were not perfect, but they were substantially better than the original papers. The shortest response was a third of a page, the same length as the longest response in the first round. Eight of eleven included at least

one quotation from the text, and five used more than one quotation. Even the handwriting was neater. A student who had written three sentences on his first attempt, including one of those quoted above, produced a third draft of a page and a half with evidence-based arguments including no fewer than eight quotations from the text. His last sentence summed up his main point: "Therefore, Glory deals better with Mrs. Cullinan because Glory didn't caused any big trouble for Mrs. Cullinan."

Responses were not only solidly supported; they were also more sophisticated and better organized. No longer satisfied with simple arguments, some students developed multi-faceted attacks. Accordingly, topic sentences like "I think Maya deals better than Glory with Mrs. Cullinan for few reasons" and organizing expressions such as *first* and *lastly* made an appearance for the first time. One student, who had written only one sentence on her first draft, ended the project with a solid paragraph in which she used two supporting quotes and expressions like *on the other hand* to manage her argument. Perhaps most impressive of all, another student (a debate team member, incidentally, and a non-native speaker of English) even began to anticipate and refute possible counterarguments, a skill I had not yet taught explicitly.

It is important to note that I had been telling my students for months everything that they learned to do on their own in these three days. They had heard me say repeatedly to focus, clarify, organize, and support their arguments—but until the first debate, they were unable to do so. Whether they lacked understanding, purpose, motivation, vocabulary, or examples, debate provided what they needed. Perhaps most importantly, their writing was now addressed to a skeptical audience rather than to a vacuum, and that made all the difference. It was real, and therefore it was good.

Conclusion

The series of activities described here benefited all of my students, both native and non-native speakers of English. Teachers in both ESL and EFL settings, particularly those teaching IELTS or TOEFL preparation courses, may find that incorporating an element of oral discussion or debate into their writing process could help students envision an audience and write with a purpose.

About the Author

Rachel Bradshaw teaches high school English and coaches policy debate in Boston, MA, where she participates in the Boston Debate League's Evidence-Based Argumentation Initiative, a program designed to increase rigor and engagement by bringing elements of debate into the classroom.