

The Negotiator in Us All: Cultivating a Culture of Debate in the Educational System

Derek Pham Project Proposal

Introduction and Anecdote

Cultivating a strong culture of debate and in-class discussion as a pedagogical practice is important in any culture. Debate and discussion strengthens a variety of strong interpersonal skills, and reinforces social cohesion by allowing individuals different channels for self-expression. In this proposal, I start with an anecdote that demonstrates the perceived differences in the Chinese and American approach to in-class debate and discussion, and then proceed to discuss the key features of my proposal. I move on to discussing the importance and relevance of debate in the Chinese system. Finally, I look at possible methods by which I might implement or encourage a culture of debate as an integrated element of the Chinese educational system.

When I was in Beijing last summer studying Chinese, during one particular 個別談話 my professor and I discussed education in China. She asked me what I liked most about my classes and professors. I responded that I always felt I had the opportunity to craft my own point of view and reason my argument in the classroom. In this way, I could contribute to a conversation with my Professor. I could agree, or I could disagree, but so long as I explained my perspective, I was actively participating in educating myself and others. I discussed with her many of my classes' emphasis on "roundtable discussion" and intellectual debate as the pedagogical method.

My Chinese professor was very interested in learning about educational practices in America, and she brought up the point that as a high school or college student in China, it was difficult for her to approach the teacher personally during class hours. The classes were usually large and classroom activities did not facilitate discussion. In short, a typical classroom setting involved a teacher lecturing as the class took notes. As far as debate or discussion was concerned, she could not remember engaging in such an activity with her peers in the classroom. There were "office hours," but the prevailing attitude was to be independent and the general student approach to education is to study hard, memorize the material, and ask questions only for clarification. In-class debate or any form of dynamic discussion was mostly non-existent. A key difference in the American and Chinese educational approach, then, is that students in China have little opportunity *in the classroom* to engage in a discussion where they can take a position, defend it, and encourage peers to understand the issue through their reasoning.

Key Points

My proposal emphasizes some key points. First, in-class debate and discussion practices should become *more* prevalent at the high school level and above in the Chinese educational system. The element of discussion, presenting and arguing one's views, should be an integrated element of the traditional educational environment. Second, the *gradual* acculturation of students to debate and discussion in the classroom is necessary. Since most students of intermediate (high school) level education have developed the tools necessary to think critically and analyze issues, a higher level of debate and discussion should be introduced in the classroom at the high school level. At the college level, educators should stress in-class discussion and intellectual debate as the primary practice to develop a dynamic educational environment.

My proposal will focus on how educators might foster a strong culture of in-class discussion and debate in the classroom, from structured to informal activities. That is, I will not only examine

how to encourage in-class discussion on a range of issues, but also how to develop extracurricular debate programs that also have relevance in a classroom setting (i.e. Model UN classes or programs at various American high schools and universities). My ultimate goal is to provide evidence for the long-term impact of in-class debate and discussion on students and for educators to embrace the culture of discussion and debate as an *integrated* pedagogical tool in the Chinese system. To carry out my research, I will look at debate studies from the literature, carry out cross-cultural observations, and use my own personal experiences.

Why Debate, Why Discuss?: Benefits in the Chinese System

When discussion and debate is encouraged in a classroom setting, students are able to develop several key skills. They are:

Strong leadership skills. An active discussion or in-class debate is conducive to students who want to take the lead on a position. When I was in high school, we were often given in-class debates on a history topic, for example, should the Confederate South secede from the Union? Students were asked to take on specific roles of historical figures, and peers would designate a group leader or representative. These opportunities give students a chance to play the role of group representative and allow him or her to cultivate a sense of responsibility for the group. In that sense, leadership skills are enhanced. In my case, I was asked to strategize solutions or alternatives, lead my group in discussion, and be the first person to respond when no one else in our group could come up with a strong enough rebuttal.

Strong communication skills. A good discussion or debate requires strong communication skills. Classroom discussion and debate activities allow students to absorb methods for effective verbal and non-verbal methods of communication. As I have learned from one of my discussion-based academic seminars, an inability to cogently present your argument detracts from the conversation. The strongest presenters in my classes have often been the ones who deliver their arguments concisely, clearly, and assertively. One professor of mine always reminds presenters before they speak to do so slowly, clearly, and to mentally prepare ourselves before making arguments. We are penalized for excessive “uhs”, “like”, or “ums.” However, I find those peers of mine who participate more in discussion or debate in-class improve their communication skills.

Strong research skills. To be an active participant in classroom discussion or debate, there is a need to be well-researched and knowledgeable in the subject matter. Well-versed in the subject matter allows for on-the-spot responses to debate challenges and keeps the debater quick-witted and adept at rebuttal. Debate, thus, is a mental challenge, and requires students to prepare well before giving speeches or making arguments. In my first year of Model UN, an actual debate class, I felt as if I was preparing for a research paper each time we had a conference (which was often). To prepare, I researched the views of major state actors, possible solutions and recommendations for resolution, and suggestions to improve on weak policy areas. The knowledge I gained from these materials have provided me with a strong foundation for which I can converse with professors or fellow peers at Georgetown about pressing international issues.

Strong presentation skills. A final characteristic of discussion and debate-based learning environments is that students generally have strong presentation skills. YouTube is filled with clips of students in various debate programs or in the classrooms who do phenomenal jobs presenting their ideas, either with the aid of dramatic flair, props, or by force of personality alone. From

experience, in one rather “mellow” MUN committee session on nuclear weapons, a delegate who had been very persuasive in committee, brought a balloon to the podium, proceeded to warn the committee of the threat of nuclear weapons, and to touch off his smooth presentation, popped the balloon to symbolize nuclear destruction. He also maintained a strong degree of seriousness throughout the speech and rest of committee session, and eventually won the award for best delegate.

Other skills overlap with the aforementioned, for example, critical thinking, public policy and values research, computer research proficiency, public speaking, advocacy and civic participation, and conflict resolution skills. China’s growing economy also means a growing citizenry, and a generation of Chinese that others will look towards to lead the country. Whether this is in business, government, technology, or other areas, being able to cultivate an environment of discussion and debate in (and out) of the classroom equips Chinese students with the tools to succeed in the national and international workplace. Debate can provide social cohesion and channel passions into structured and tangible perspectives. With regards to discussion, I find that learning through peers, understanding the mindset of others from their expressions, is the best kind of value-based education. This form of active learning is useful for students as they are not only pushed to depart from the standard textbook notes, but also pushed to contribute to the learning process of others.

Methods

To foster this appreciation for an environment of in-class discussion and debate will require a gradual acculturation to an activity traditionally seen as anti-mainstream with Chinese educational practices. Debate and discussion truly is another form of experiential-based learning. Educators might encourage a history class studying political issues in Imperial China to simulate the actual historical debate by role-playing. Or, educators might take students on trips to debate panels, debate competitions, or even courts of law to see the power of debate in action. As a pedagogical tool, educators could foster a spirit of discussion by having a few or a group of students lead class discussion by preparing a short presentation and a list of discussion questions (common practice in US universities). Professors might encourage students to formulate positions on certain issues – environment, political, cultural, social, economic – and have the students share their opinions and the class respond. Finally, educators could design student roundtables with other faculty across departments and campuses to organize interests and allow students to explore different perspectives on common issues.

I believe that the best way to convey the advantages of in-class debate and discussion is through a PowerPoint presentation. A PowerPoint presentation provides structure to my argument, however, I would also like to rely on video clips of debate competitions and different debate teams from around the world to emphasize the international embrace of debate worldwide. Finally, I hope to be able to implement a short debate program during the course of my field studies, and have students from that program participate in a live simulation to demonstrate the four main advantages of debate: strong leadership, strong communication, strong research, and strong presentation skills.

Outline

I. Anecdote of

- a. Teacher story

- i. Chinese side – little opportunity to discuss/debate in class, no avenues for expression
- ii. American side – Socratic method, values discussion and debate as pedagogical method

II. Key Points

- a. Propose the embrace of debate and in-class discussion as a prevalent pedagogical practice.
- b. *Gradual* integration
 - i. High school level – researched and hone presentation skills (personality and communication); open discussion still ok.
 - ii. College level – Structured discussion in favor of open discussion. Learn to better structure argument to appear well-researched, persuasive, and coherent. Transform difficult concepts into a lay-man’s approach so audience understands and follows argument.
- c. Methods: How might educators foster culture of debate/discussion in classroom?
 - i. Requires a gradual acculturation. Experiential learning.
 - ii. Encourage a history class studying political issues in Imperial China to simulate the actual historical debate by role-playing.
 - iii. Take students on trips to debate panels, debate competitions, or even courts of law to see the power of debate in action.
 - iv. Foster a spirit of discussion by having a few or a group of students lead class discussion by preparing a short presentation and a list of discussion questions (common practice in US universities).
 - v. Encourage students to formulate positions on certain issues and have the students share their opinions and the class respond.
 - vi. Organize student roundtables with other faculty across departments and campuses to diversify interests and allow students to explore different perspectives on common issues.
- d. Research tools and design

III. Benefits in the Chinese System

- a. Strong leadership skills
 - i. Lead discussion
 - ii. Take responsibility for debate team platform
 - iii. Design platform
 - iv. Point-person for discussion/debate rebuttal
- b. Strong communication skills
 - i. (Strengthens presentation skills)
 - ii. Develops confidence in interpersonal communication
 - iii. Refines use of verbal and non-verbal communication
- c. Strong research skills
 - i. Enhance knowledge of variety of topics
 - ii. Research and hard-work ethic
- d. Strong presentation skills
 - i. Builds self-esteem
 - ii. Strengthens force of personality
 - iii. Demonstrates structure in argument
 - iv. Reinforces public speaking skills

IV. Research supporting use of debate programs or initiatives in classes

- a. American – the implementation of actual debate programs *into* classroom setting
 - i. Model UN – positives/negatives
 - ii. Mock Trial – positives/negatives
 - iii. UDL – positive/negatives
- b. National Debate Project, academic sources and surveys
 - i. Evidence that debate or Socratic/discussion method enhances:
 - 1. Strong leadership, communication, research, and presentation skills

V. Conclusion

- a. Debate and discussion as a pedagogical practice is extremely important for a student's individual and educational development
- b. Debate and discussion are *academic*, experiential-based learning tools (advances student learning). They are also *life* tools (reinforces student's skill sets and personality traits)
- c. Discussion environments should be made available starting at the high school level, with most discussion-based learning in college.