Using Ethical Debates to Improve Students’ Critical Thinking Abilities

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“IT IS BETTER TO DEBATE A QUESTION WITHOUT SETTLING IT THAN TO SETTLE A QUESTION WITHOUT DEBATING IT.”
Joseph Joubert

Ethical debates can greatly increase student participation in class, enhance their oral and written communication skills and improve their critical thinking. In fact, research supports the need for a variety of teaching styles to be implemented into the classroom environment especially those that promote active learning. Debating is an innovative strategy that requires students to think critically as they weigh different views against evidence-based practice literature. Classroom debates can encourage beginning nursing students to explore ethical issues upon entering the profession and potentially strengthen their role as patient advocates. Graduate students can also benefit from this teaching strategy as they draw on their level of knowledge and experience with practice situations while preparing for and participating in the debate activity.

**Background**

Ethical debates can greatly increase student participation in class, enhance their oral and written communication skills and improve their critical thinking. In fact, research supports the need for a variety of teaching styles to be implemented into the classroom environment especially those that promote active learning. Debating is an innovative strategy that requires students to think critically as they weigh different views against evidence-based practice literature. Classroom debates can encourage beginning nursing students to explore ethical issues upon entering the profession and potentially strengthen their role as patient advocates. Graduate students can also benefit from this teaching strategy as they draw on their level of knowledge and experience with practice situations while preparing for and participating in the debate activity.

**Why Ethical Debates?**

- Improve critical thinking and clinical reasoning skills
- Promote active learning by ALL students in the classroom
- Allow for a variety of teaching strategies and learning styles
- Encourage reflective practice
- Force students to think “outside of the box”
- Formulate quality responses due to student preparation ahead of time
- Help students synthesize literature in a succinct way
- Generate teamwork and cohesiveness among members
- Enhance communication skills
- Heighten assertiveness skills
- Promote accountability among team members
- Support in-depth learning of relevant topics of interest
- Incorporate peer review evaluation activities
- Strengthen problem solving skills

**Ethical Debate Guidelines**

- You will be working in groups (teams) of 4 students
- The team will develop debate questions related to nursing/healthcare/education topics
- Your team will be assigned a debate question and a pro/con stance after a group process activity and a final determination by the instructor
- Debates will occur during the dates specified in the course calendar. You will be assigned which date your group will debate
- All students in the class will ask the debaters questions during the discussion period and vote for the winning team
- The debate assignment (discussed below) is worth x% of your final course grade
- This activity requires you to demonstrate critical thinking and include thoughtfully developed arguments at the level of course work. Your materials also need to reflect that your group researched the topic and used reputable resources to develop your argument. Your group also has to be familiar with the opposing argument so you are prepared for the debate. The details of the evaluation criteria are outlined in the grading rubric
- Electronic devices including computers, iPads and cell phones are not to be used during the debate

**Ethical Debate Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Debate</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Group presents Pro position. Evidence submitted to support argument.</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Group presents Con position. Argument is introduced Evidnece submitted to support argument.</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Group presents Pro position. Secondary arguments are introduced. More evidence submitted to support argument. The negative position evidence and arguments are rebutted.</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Group presents Con position. Secondary arguments are introduced. More evidence submitted to support argument. The positive position evidence and arguments are rebutted.</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break for teams to plan the rebuttal</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pro Group rebuttal Respond directly to opposing teams arguments. Sum up key points of your team’s position</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Con Group rebuttal Respond directly to opposing teams arguments. Sum up key points of your team’s position</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Debate Discussion</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Audience creates questions for the group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Audience poses questions to each group</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Voting</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Audience evaluates debate teams (see rubric criteria)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Audience votes on each group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Undergraduate Ethical Debate Topics**

Students choose a pro or con stance

- National Healthcare (government provided insurance for all citizens) should be enacted in the United States.
- The government should be allowed to tax unhealthy (fatty, sugary) foods in an attempt to lower the high levels of obesity in America.
- Competent, terminally ill adults should be able to request physician assisted suicide.
- Convicted felons should be eligible for organ transplants.
- Employers should be able to mandate influenza vaccines for healthcare workers.
- Employers should be able to enact mandatory participation in wellness programs for their employees, which may result in penalties or rewards.
- People whose lifestyle choices (e.g., smoking, drinking, drug use, unhealthy eating, etc.) damaged their organs should be given a chance to receive an organ transplant.
- Patients’ family members should be allowed to be present during cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

**Graduate Ethical Debate Topics**

Students choose a pro or con stance

- Students must pass standardized exit testing, such as a HESI exam, to graduate.
- Students have better learning outcomes in simulation versus live clinical experiences.
- A higher grading scale should be used to reflect higher learning/standards.
- There are better learning outcomes for online versus face-to-face courses.
- Nursing students should be allowed to use smartphones in the classroom.
- Nursing schools should change programs to accommodate younger generations’ ideals.
- The BSN should be the entry level to nursing practice.

**Lessons Learned**

- Verify that topics are relevant, current and debatable.
- Foster teamwork from the beginning.
- Be organized with ethical debate assignment guidelines.
- Promote professionalism among students.
- Follow rules and structure of an ethical debate format.
- Ensure the physical setting supports the debate environment.

**Conclusion**

The use of this innovative teaching strategy is an effective way to create a legacy of best practice in nursing education by promoting strong communication in professional settings and strengthening problem solving through critical thinking.