

Want to engage students using academic controversy?

Also known as Cooperative Controversy, Structured Controversy, or Structured Academic Controversy, Academic Controversy is a cooperative learning technique in which learners are grouped to debate two opposing views on an issue before attempting to reach a consensus on the issue.

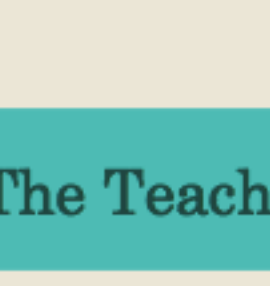
Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity and sets us at noting and contriving ... Conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity.

Dewey (1916)

How does it work?

By arguing both sides of contentious issues students can safely and candidly explore multiple perspectives free from the pressure of only expressing politically correct or popular perspectives.

I find a controversial topic to present to the class.



The Teacher

We debate for and against each side, before proposing a solution.



The Students

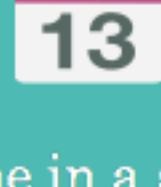
Essential Characteristics



Highly collaborative



Focus on reading and discussion



Done in a single session



Transferable to online setting

1 Select Topic

A good topic will be:

- Thought provoking
- Generate opinions
- Relatable
- Not too contentious



Craft controversy into mini-case and hand out instructions.

2 Craft Case & Distribute



3 Support Argument

In pairs or small groups have students brainstorm arguments to support their case.



In small groups students present both sides of the argument. Each side listens then asks questions.

4 Present Case



5 Switch!

Then have students switch sides of the argument.



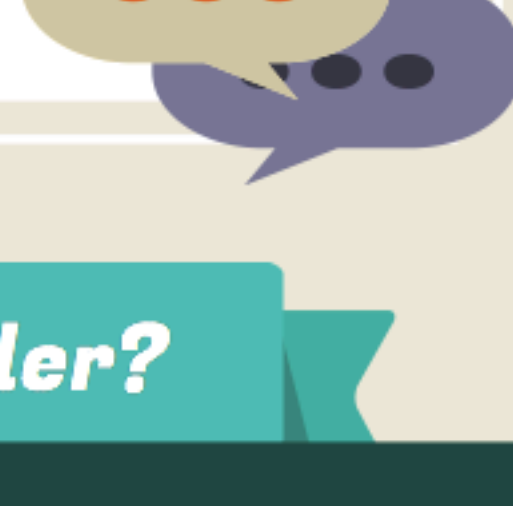
Have the groups come to agree on one side of the issue.

6 Come to Consensus



6 Debrief

Reconvene ask a group to debrief and discuss.

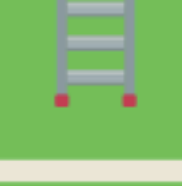


What do I need to consider?

Pros?



Encourages a range of modes, other than speaking, to present views (images, etc.)



Teachers, peers, and materials provide scaffolding for struggling students.



Value in being able to empathize and argue both sides of an issue.

Cons?



Potential for one person or pair to dominate or over power conversation.



Can require an extended period of time to allow for positive inter-dependence to form.



May provoke heated debate beyond the assigned issue.

Why is it important?

Encounters with a range of views on a complex issue can lead students to re-examine and possibly revise their own ideas.

Piaget (1975)

Enjoying the struggle involved in researching, grasping and presenting views can provide intrinsic rewards that spur similar future engagement with the same or other controversial topics.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

Possible Academic Controversies

#1

Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987): Art or blasphemy?

#2

Parthenon Marbles: Should Britain return them to Greece?

#3

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917): Avant Garde or Indecent?

Sources:

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