

Using innovative assessment to enhance student engagement and develop critical thinking skills: the case of The Big Debate.

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Introduction

This case study presents the development of an assessed activity, **The Big Debate**, designed to move final year undergraduate business students from a surface to a deeper learning perspective. In doing this, it aims to build their confidence with the use of a wide range of academic material and to think critically. We discuss how insights from existing literature informed the design and objectives of the intervention. Details of the implementation and how it has evolved as a result of feedback received from a small, pilot cohort (n = 24) will be explored, along with plans for future developments.

Context and rationale

Following a strategic curriculum review and the arrival of new senior staff, business undergraduate students at our university are no longer required to write a dissertation and so are not exposed to formal teaching in research methods and critical thinking. Consequently, these students undervalue the importance of such skills, perceiving their significance only in the context of postgraduate study. Many do not fully understand the concept and the tools of critical thinking and do not see the point of having to look for deeper and interconnected meanings in academic content.

Transition to final year is challenging. In addition to obtaining a good degree, students must equip themselves with the skills necessary for employment. Business is a radical and dynamic arena with new issues constantly emerging and critical thinking skills are highly valued by those operating within it (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). It is crucial that students can knowledgeably comment upon contemporary business issues with potential employers.

In-class exploratory research conducted by the authors using a questionnaire, indicated that students going into their final year lack confidence in their ability to think critically and reflectively when reviewing and commenting on academic literature. They reported negative learning-related emotions, feeling anxious and overwhelmed by the task. This impacts on their ability to perform well in final year assignments which involve critical analysis, and where synthesis and reflection on a wide range of literature, is a key requirement. Consequently, a teaching and assessment strategy has been developed to equip students with appropriate critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

This case study will illustrate how in-class debates, backed up by reflective writing, have been integrated within an innovative teaching and assessment intervention called **The Big Debate**. It was developed following a review of relevant literature which focusses on; defining critical thinking, how to teach it, how to assess it and the importance of doing so by using active learning techniques such as debating.

Our approach: insights from the literature

Elder and Paul (2008) highlight that a number of educators are not fully aware of what critical thinking is, how it should be taught and assessed and which tools should be used. A range of different perspectives of critical thinking are presented in the literature. For the purpose of this case study, we have reviewed a range of these (e.g Roy & Macchiette 2005; Scriven & Paul 2008; Elder & Paul 2008) against the generic undergraduate grading scheme used at our university so that we can produce meaningful learning outcomes for a relevant assessment of critical thinking skills.

Scriven and Paul (2008, cited in Mulnix, 2012, p. 465) provide a definition which appears to most closely match this grading scheme which includes language such as a critical approach, using well-justified and reasoned arguments, evaluating a range of evidence thoughtfully and accurately, synthesis of ideas and information. For them, critical thinking is an “intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication”. This definition has provided the basis for the design of the **Big Debate** assessment. It has informed the learning outcomes, namely for students to be able to assess and critically evaluate contemporary marketing perspectives, judge and create personal viewpoints, and comments and reflect upon these, and has guided the implementation of the innovation.

According to a number of studies (e.g. Mulnix, 2012), critical thinking is a learned skill which can be explicitly taught and embedded within an existing curriculum. This requires on-going opportunities to practise the skills learned and plenty of feedback should be provided. According to O’Doody and Condon (2012), active learning teaching strategies, particularly debating, can increase student engagement with learning and improve critical thinking and reflection skills. Studies (e.g. Kennedy, 2009) state that educators should not just teach students *what* to think but *how* to think, guiding their ability to develop higher order thinking skills and move up Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001 cited in Krathwohl, 2002), see Table 1. Students should be encouraged to assess their own reasoning, think logically and broadly and consider alternate conclusions, which will enable them to become more autonomous in their learning, taking ownership and responsibility (Elder & Paul, 2008). D’Souza (2013) has stated that learning through participating in debates improves students’ critical thinking skills as they provide the necessary opportunities to interrogate and critique information, recognise the inferential connections between statements, use evidence to synthesise arguments and critically reflect on the outcomes. In-class debates can be more beneficial than a traditional lecture as they help students learn a discipline more deeply, increase the level of intellectual challenge and enable them to demonstrate the ability to think and write critically (Roy & Macchiette 2005; O’Doody & Condon 2012; D’Souza, 2013). Students benefit from opening their minds to alternative viewpoints and reviewing their existing opinions.

This helps them appreciate the more complex elements of the debate topic (O'Doody & Condon, 2012). These findings are supported by our research which is discussed in the evaluation section.

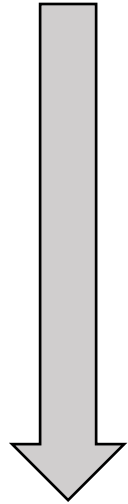
There are a number of different academic views on how debates should be run and assessed but no specific format is recommended. As a starting point, students should feel secure and able to state their view with confidence and conviction and every view must be seen to count (O'Doody & Condon, 2012). With this in mind, and considering the diversity of the student cohort, we evaluated a range of different formats in order to determine which one would meet their needs. Our key objective was to promote participation and build confidence so we were keen to avoid confrontation. Indeed, Roy and Macchiette (2005) suggest that debates which are too formal can hinder the development of critical thinking and that it is key to create a comfortable environment to allow the flow of ideas. Consequently, we have adopted the "fishbowl" format (Kennedy, 2007, p. 186) where students are divided into two groups and present arguments for and against followed by rebuttals. The lecturer acts as a moderator, encouraging and guiding students to critically evaluate arguments, asking challenging questions, helping them identify areas of disagreement and encouraging students to reflect on and summarise the various arguments (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). This helps students develop a critical and evidence-based perspective.

The student learning and assessment experience is enhanced if they are assessed based on the process of preparation, discussion and critical thinking rather grading based on participation and on the basis of which side actually won the debate (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). We felt it was important to encourage students to take the time and opportunity to critically reflect on the arguments made during the debate, critique the work of other students and reflect on the impact their own reading had on their views (Oros, 2007). Consequently we wanted to be more innovative and settled on grading students based on a reflective account of the debate. Studies (e.g. Mair, 2012) have shown that engaging in reflective writing enhances learning as students engage in a deeper learning process. Students benefit from getting explicit teaching on how to write reflectively and use guided questions. Consistent and regular formative and summative feedback enables them to improve (Moussa-Inaty, 2015). In summary, the assessment aims to provide a novel way for students to develop their understanding of contemporary business issues, and equips them with essential critical thinking skills. As a result of participating in **The Big Debate**, students should develop a critical approach to reading, be able to synthesise ideas and concepts, produce critical and reflective arguments and debate these with colleagues. They must then reflect and comment on what they have learned from the activity and this is where we believe **The Big Debate** is innovative. Table 1 summarises the approach and shows how the pedagogy of **The Big Debate** can be mapped onto Bloom's Refined Taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001 cited in Krathwohl, 2002) to move students from lower to higher order educational objectives

Table 1 – based on Bloom’s refined taxonomy

(Anderson *et al.*, 2001 cited in Krathwohl, 2002)

Lower order skills



Higher order skills

Stages in Bloom’s refined taxonomy	Big Debates activity
Remember	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn key terms and definitions within the concept area • Attend the guest lecture and start to source literature.
Understand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review guest lecturer materials • Make sense of their own notes • Evaluate the credibility of sources
Apply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the critical thinking templates (The Critique, The Thematic Analysis grid and Argument Maps) to begin to find connections
Analyse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate arguments based on evidence and record in The Big Debate reflective journal. • Discuss with peers and tutor for formative feedback
Evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider which sources to use to support or rebut the motion of the debate • Compare and contrast the opinions of others during debates • Evaluate the debate once finished
Create	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a point of view based on the evidence read and presented • Reflect on the process, record and critically analyse for assessment purposes.

Implementation

Two main challenges needed to be overcome in order to implement **The Big Debate**. The first was the lack of readily available material to use as teaching resources. The second was achieving support from faculty colleagues. Despite the apparent consensus in the literature that critical thinking should be overtly taught (Mulnix, 2012), many questioned how it could be done and whether it was even necessary. There was a feeling that it was a thinking process which innately happened and which could not be learned. To overcome this, a workshop took place for faculty teaching staff to discuss the importance of embedding the teaching of the skills within the curriculum, to review what the literature suggested and to consider how it might be done within existing schemes of work and assessment methods. As a result, agreement was reached to embed the debates and critical thinking workshops within a final year 'Contemporary Marketing' module of 100 students. Guest lectures were arranged using practitioners to provide the most up-to-date thinking in the topic areas, and key insights from the critical thinking literature were used to develop teaching materials.

A scaffolded approach was developed which slowly reduces the amount of support given to students regarding the process of debating and allows practice before assessment. A range of active learning and group based exercises are used along with associated support documents (Everett, 2013) to progressively build critical thinking and reflection skills (McWilliams & Allan, 2014) and to allow for a gradual building of the students' knowledge base of the topic in question (Kain, Buchanan, & Mack, 2001). Following student feedback, critical thinking and reflective writing workshops, as well as a practice debate, are now embedded into the scheme of work. A **Big Debate** reflective journal guide is provided which contains information on the style and format of the debate, with guidelines on how to analyse and critically reflect on academic viewpoints and how to present a compelling argument supported by evidence. Templates to help students track arguments pre, during and post-debate are also provided and all students are given the opportunity to go through their arguments in advance in class with both peers and tutors in order to benefit from formative feedback. This particularly benefits less confident students and those for whom English is a second language. A series of three debates are carried out and additional formative feedback is given before each submission in order to allow students to improve. All of the materials are made available on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The debate motions are as contemporary as possible, for example "social media is more of a hindrance than a help to marketers", "the pursuit of profit is can only be unethical" or "government led marketing is a waste of time and money" and are related to the curriculum. We source a range of the latest academic and practitioner material on the concept and upload it to the VLE at least 2 weeks before the debates. Students are also encouraged to source and critique their own material. Electronic sign-up sheets are made available one week in advance for students to declare which side of the motion they will stand for, on a first-come, first-served basis. This choice is based on their own reading around the topic in question. On the day, the tutors introduce the topic and outline the structure and timings. The 'Yes' side outline their main arguments with evidence and then the 'No' side do the same with points recorded by the tutor on whiteboards. Students reflect on the arguments and record these in their journals. Plenary evaluation is held to discuss

“moments of truth” when students experience understanding of a different view point can openly evaluate the key points of the debate. Students can then physically swap sides if appropriate, to create a bit of theatre. It is interesting to note that few students took this opportunity during early debates but, this increased as student confidence developed and they felt able to challenge their thinking and accept alternative perspectives.

Finally, the tutor summarises the main arguments, asks probing questions and occasionally states their own view on the topic debated.

The marking rubric assesses students’ ability to use an evidence based approach to critique the literature, analyse their colleagues’ views and evaluate their impact on their own opinions and this reflects the learning outcomes and generic undergraduate grading scheme detailed in the insights from the literature section. Greater weighting is given to using a critical approach to analysis and argument development using a wide range of appropriate sources as evidence. For the highest marks, evidence needs to be used critically to develop an independent and well-justified argument. Students use notes from their journals to write up their reflective accounts which cover their views pre-and post-debate, the key points made, the persuasiveness and quality of debaters’ arguments and any points missed. There are three reflective account assessments in total and submissions are planned on a staggered basis to allow students to use both formative and summative feedback to improve each subsequent account. Final submission takes the form of a literature review based essay which asks students to critique in more detail a particular topic from the debates.

Evaluation

The Big Debate has run since September 2013 with a cohort of 100 students and on-going improvements have been made based both on student feedback and lecturer observations. An action research plan has resulted in a range of qualitative and quantitative data being collected. A pre and post assessment confidence questionnaire was administered to 25% of the cohort (n=24) with voluntary participation resulting in a 100% response rate. In addition, 4 focus groups (n=24) took place to explore student perceptions of the assessment. Results have increased our understanding of how students feel **The Big Debate** assessment impacts on their confidence in their ability to critically evaluate, comment on and discuss a range of literature. It has also shown us what skills they feel they had acquired as a result of taking part in the debate and their views on how these were taught.

Overall, students have identified a positive impact on their learning experience and report increased confidence in their ability to think critically:

- *“It is much more interesting and challenging than a lecture”.*
- *“I think my critical analysis has improved since doing the workshop and working on my individual reflective account”.*
- *“I learned to weigh different opinions and sometimes the same ones but presented in a different way”.*
- *“I can pick out key themes in articles and am able to evaluate arguments from both sides more effectively”.*
- *“It improved my critical thinking skills by analysing arguments that were given on the debate”.*

Students appreciated the support and feedback from the in-class workshops and exercises:

- *“We had a first session which was a Critical Thinking workshop which helped me to be careful when I was reading all sources.
“I was able to evaluate and compare my work with my peers”.*
- *“It allowed me to search and find relevant academic journals, the tools helped me to minimise wasting time searching for the information I needed”.*

On the other hand, students found it hard to criticise the points of view of others and to formulate their own opinion based on the literature.

- *“I was nervous about being critical of my friends in class”*
- *“Who am I to criticise an academic viewpoint? That made me uncomfortable”*

As a result of this feedback, additional time was spent in classroom sessions helping students to dissect literature and construct arguments. The result of this intervention is shown in the quantitative data collected.

Quantitative data has been collected pre and post the intervention, to gather descriptive statistics on students' perceptions of improvement in confidence against specific critical thinking skills, including synthesising themes and drawing conclusions and identifying their own point of view about a topic. Across the cohort self-reported confidence levels have increased. Overall, prior to taking part in **The Big Debate**, 54% of the group expressed that they were not confident about some aspects of critical thinking and their ability to achieve higher order learning objectives. After the intervention, this figure dropped to 8%. When asked to specifically consider critically discussing views from literature and identifying and presenting their point of view in class, 16% of the sample stated that they were not confident to do this. After taking part in the intervention, this figure reduced to 8% with 46% of the group then stating they were now confident or very confident in their ability in this area.

Staff have indicated a number of positive benefits. Debates inject some theatre into the classroom, which makes content more memorable with students engaging much more than with a traditional lecture. While this experiential approach may not suit all lecturers, and the authors identified that while there is more work to do in terms of preparation, guiding and marking, it appears that the benefits to the students far outweigh these downsides.

Conclusion and next steps

In summary, we believe that we have developed and evaluated a practical intervention which allows us to both teach and assess valuable critical thinking skills. It provides students with a vehicle that allows them to research, evaluate and discuss contemporary issues in the classroom and to form their own opinions which are evidence based. It appears to have resulted in increased confidence in their ability to think critically and reflectively and has potentially increased their employability skills in that they have been exposed to a range of current views on contemporary business issues and are able to express their opinions on them. There are some limitations with the study in that more data needs to be collected to substantiate any claims. Sample sizes have been small and larger groups allow

patterns to be established. There has not been a control group as it is an assessed activity, so excluding some students is not possible. There are also issues with the subjective understanding of terms such as “confident” versus “somewhat confident”. To improve this, we plan to explore quantitative results in more detail by using focus groups next time this activity is run. Further research is also planned to evaluate quantitative module results data to establish if ongoing feedback is improving students’ ability to write critically and reflectively.

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