

WHY STUDENTS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO DEBATE

Phillipa MARTIN¹, Leslie ARTHUR and Christopher MARSH

¹Nottingham Trent University

ABSTRACT

This paper will provide a new perspective in design curricula, looking at the skill of debating within design education. Historically, debating techniques have been used heavily as a teaching strategy, however product and engineering design education seems to have overlooked this as a means of encouraging students to talk, discuss, form and develop their own opinions. Based on teaching practices developed at the Nottingham Trent University (NTU), design students from various BA and BSc design disciplines showed positive rewards in their personal and professional development. Debate sessions were introduced as a means of integrating students across different design disciplines, as well as to 'deschool' new students, enhance their awareness of design issues, and aid their personal development.

A current educational issue, specifically relevant to the nature of design education, is that of the changing student culture. Debating can be effective in facilitating discussion in large student groups as well as enhancing students' personal skills and critical understanding [1], [12]. Debating practices offer a useful means to actively engage students and encourage them to accept the responsibility of comprehension [11]. With rising numbers of design students entering university directly from school education, university practices and curriculum need to change to adapt to meet new student needs.

Keywords: Debates, independent, development

1 INTRODUCTION

The historical precedence of this teaching technique and the value of this practice has been discussed heavily in educational literature, [1][11][12]. With this in mind, it is interesting to note debating techniques have been largely ignored in current product and engineering design education. In contrast, other disciplines have incorporated this successfully; within sociology, architecture, politics, history, computing and nursing [1]. Debating can offer immense opportunities for students to enhance relevant skills; both for personal development and in a professional context. Debating, as a skill, can be seen as a means of discussion, however it goes beyond this, requiring a structured argument to be developed. It challenges students to consider, present and discuss their views with others. These elements can all be aspects in which students may fear or lack confidence, but need to be individually developed by students. Helping students to improve is about encouraging them to develop their own style and about learning to be confident [2]. From a professional standpoint, the debating process encourages an individual to consider multiple viewpoints, arrive at a judgment [12], enhance students' oral critical communication, as a means of self-expression, social interaction, and working in a team [1]. These skills are invaluable to the designer; discussing ideas, problem-solving, and working with colleagues.

This paper will present the use of debating practice at the Nottingham Trent University (NTU) as means of educating and enhancing student development; it does not look to advocate where and when debating should be used. Sessions were developed with design students from various BA and BSc design courses at level one. Research was gathered based on short reflections from students who discussed their experience and whether they learnt anything specifically from doing the debates. Morrison and Twyford [3] discuss the need for design students to have an individual awareness of design and how this impacts on wider issues. Findings will show that debates provided students with a number of educational rewards as well as developing their understanding of design issues.

1.1 Do we need to rethink our teaching to suit the changing student culture?

Central to this work, teachers at NTU uncovered concerns relating to the changing culture of first year students entering university. The Widening Participation scheme has meant that students coming into Higher Education now have a broad spectrum of skills, abilities and backgrounds [4]. Staff coined the phrase ‘deschooling’, determining the need to re-educate students away from the directed passive learning within schools and colleges, and towards a more active involvement and independent approach to their own education.

Specifically within the design area, students were entering NTU directly from schools or colleges, where previously entrants had completed an additional foundation year. Many first-year students find the transition from secondary to higher education difficult, as they have unrealistic expectations [6], and are under prepared to begin higher education [5]. Students coming directly from schools commonly struggled to become independent and active learners, whilst this was something staff was expecting them to develop. Debating could encourage students to adapt their approach from passive to active [1], therefore this practice indicated potential benefit in tackling staff concerns.

The impact and consequences of rising student numbers have been heavily discussed within Higher Education from varying perspectives [2][4][7]. Habershaw et al [7] argues that increased student numbers offer little personal contact and feedback for students, which encourages them to be dependant and that teaching has to do more with less [4]. This issue impacts heavily on design courses, where teaching and learning seeks to encourage independent learners, commonly using small group teaching and consistent feedback.

2 USING DEBATE TO ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Students’ independence and critical thinking links strongly to students playing a more active role in their learning. Students learn more effectively when they apply what they are learning [8][10]. and cultivate active student engagement, giving them responsibility to comprehend [11]. Students place a higher value on participation during learning than on learning by receiving information passively [9].

Debating techniques were used to encourage students to think, question and express their own views about design, and not look to being lead by educational staff. Teaching of this would run over a maximum of 5 weeks culminating in the final debate forum, where staff would offer support and guidance for students. From this teaching staff determined an established formula that was found to work well in achieving the overarching aim; ‘deschooling’ students, initiating independent and educating students on design subjects.

2.1 Student should produce the topics

The first week entailed students working in small groups, discussing and justifying issues in which they were particularly interested. Staff would question and challenge these to initiate further discussion. Students were not, at this stage, briefed on the debates work, the emphasis initially was on them thinking about and presenting their voice. From this students produced a range of topics or statements that they thought were important to design currently. Some examples of the topics included: the value of drawing to a designer, whether a design is only as good as its marketing, design is/is not a man's world, can older designers be taught new tricks, and the value of technology in design.

These statements then formed the topics which students debated in the following weeks. By offering students this control, and limiting the involvement from staff, students are fundamentally taking responsibility and having to consider their views from the outset. Whilst it is only a small part of the debates, students can see that staff are not directing all the work, and that they have had an input into what they will look at. Additionally, by producing the topics, students can work on subject in which they are interested, and encourage their engagement in the subject matter.

2.2 Organising the groups and the importance of teamwork

These debate sessions integrated several design disciplines; BA and BSc computer aided design, and the product and furniture design courses. All students involved were assigned to a debating team, commonly consisting of 8 students per team. Each team was instructed with a topic and an opinion on that topic; either for or against.

The organisation of these groups was critical in challenging students' views and perspective and, thus, enabling them to explore and develop their own views independently. In some cases BA students worked directly with BSc students; in their debating team, or opposed BSc students in the final event. By doing this, students were more exposed to differing perspectives and their initial views were commonly challenged. This opportunity for integration also enhanced the students' awareness of design issues, in that they were not considering these in a vacuum of their own design disciplines.

“It was also intriguing to see how peoples' opinions, from a slightly different background, differ from mine. I feel I have developed a greater respect for other people's ideas, with their unique viewpoint and understanding of things.” Level 1 BSc Product Design Student

It important to note at this point, this means of resource management was independently determined by students; not directed by staff members. Commonly many students (25%) identified the need to assign roles and responsibilities to their teams to make it more effective; allowing them to be more organised and making tasks tangible.

Teamwork was be seen as a means of 'deschooling' as it offered a tangible means for learners to develop their ideas, having to do so without the direction from staff. Students were therefore using the support from other students; they questioned issues, bounced ideas around and discussed uncertainties. On occasion, students did rely too heavily on other students to do the work, and did not form their own ideas, thus limiting their activeness and independence. This put a strain on those other students who may have to work harder to compensate.

2.3 Students need to be challenged to fully develop their opinions

Another element of the debating formula is that students need to feel challenged; in their views and opinions. Students were challenged when staff assigned specific opinions. Until this point, students had the freedom to independently present their ideas. By being assigned a viewpoint appeared, on the surface, too restrictive and directed. However in doing this, students were forced to challenge their ideas and not stay with comfortable topics or views.

Students did disagree with their opinions, but there was still freedom for students to imprint their views into the debate. A clear example of this scenario was the topic 'Design is a Man's world', where teams argued for and against this statement. Those arguing 'for' this statement had a large proportion of female students, and their initial reaction was to disagree with the opinion they were assigned. Through further discussions, students realised they could still argue for this statement, if they took away the value they placed on this and simply showed evidence to prove whether Design was a Man's world. They could still use their opinions to support their claims, but were approaching the subject in a different manner.

Students commonly discuss the influence of other peoples' views had on challenging their understanding of the subjects under debate. This provided students with an opportunity to become independent, whereby they actively drew from other views and then questioned the relevance of this in response to their own views. Many students (31%) reflected on the value of this, stating this impacted on their individual views. Some discussed the value they saw in being exposed to others' opinions in the final forum; to fuel debate or learn other approaches to tasks.

3 STUDENTS REFLECTIONS ON THE DEBATES

Whilst it has been important to lay out the key elements of this debating formula, as these aspects may be beneficial to other practitioners, it is also valuable to discuss the students' reflections to this learning experience. Students discussed several rewards; both personally and socially, which relate heavily to a professional context, either as transferable skills or directly relevant to the product design industry.

3.1 Improved confidence in airing views and communicating

As may be expected with this form of assignment, students commonly (25%) commented on this project aiding their communication skills, discussing how this work aided their confidence to air ideas.

"I have developed my communication skill; I now feel it easier to talk to new people and express my views in large groups, which I struggled to do before." Level 1 Furniture and Product Design Student

Students raised several different means where the debates sessions enhanced their confidence. The final presentation in the debates forum spurred many to feel confident about communicating to large audiences. However others discussed aspects in prior weeks; such as conducting primary research, discussing ideas in the groups, which increased their confidence to communicate.

3.2 Improved understanding of key design issues

Almost all students (92%) continued to debate their subject matter within their reflections, even through they were directly asked not to discuss the subject matter. However other students directly discussed how the debates session, improved their understanding of key design issues.

“I can’t say that I have learnt all things about drawing through this project. However I found out about issues, which I never tried to think about before – to perceive what drawing is to a designer, and I will try to find out more and be aware of this more in future.” Level 1 BA Product Design Student

Students highlighted a clear knowledge of their subject matter, not simply in understanding the overall facts, but also in developing their views of key concepts. This suggests that debating techniques, can still offer a means of educating design students about key issues, without having to use standard means; such as lectures or seminars. This may provide opportunities to develop students to have a more in depth level of understanding through a more creative approach.

3.3 Valued being part of a group

One of the more surprising findings from this research was the social implications, this teaching technique offered. Whilst this may not be exclusively within debates teaching, it was something which, through group work and team building, enhances students’ experience socially. Several students discussed how the opportunities within group discussions, teaching sessions and outside extra sessions, encouraged them to feel part of a group. Interesting, one student, from South Korea, discussed this issue in detail:

“It is the first time that I belong to a certain group, which has a same purpose, since I came to the UK... I made friends more than I expected by having conversation with members, including on-line meetings... We can barely see this kind of free and active debate in my country. Because of lectures, which fill whole timetable, there are no interactions between students” Level 1 BA Product Design Student

By encouraging flexible interaction with people, student felt comfortable in working with and getting to know others. As these students are new to university; indeed many are new to the geographical area, this could be an important and valuable benefit to them. Whilst the management of the groups had an important practical outcome; in getting required jobs done, it also aided students socially, and ultimately personally, by making them feel part of a group.

4 CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has provided a useful insight into a well-established, but underused teaching practice within design education. By discussing the clear benefits to students’ personal, professional and educational development, it is hoped that this will offer a greater awareness of the potential of debates teaching. Specific findings have shown that debates techniques can be used to develop students critical thinking, and enhance active and independent learning; by challenging students opinions, encouraging teamwork as well as exposing students to differing perspectives.

The foundations to use this technique came from pre-existing concerns from NTU staff about the changing culture of students. These concerns, coupled with other external issues, can provide the need to re-evaluate teaching practices. Whilst rethinking this teaching practice was relevant, the students’ experience was central to the redevelopment. Wider issues may encourage staff to introduce new practices; these should not negatively affect students’ experience of their learning environment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kennedy, R, In-class Debates: Fertile Ground for Active learning and the cultivation of Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Skills, *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 2007, 19(2), 183 - 190.

- [2] Peelo, M, *Helping Students with Study Problems* (SRHE, 1994).
- [3] Morrison, J, and Twyford J, *Design Capability and Awareness*, (Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997)
- [4] Ramsden, P, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, (Routledge, 2003)
- [5] Cook, A, and Leckey, J, Do expectations meet reality? A survey of changes in first year student opinion, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1999 23(2), 157–171.
- [6] Ozga, J. and Sukhnandan, L. Undergraduate non-completion: developing an explanatory model, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 1998, 52(3), 316–333.
- [7] Habershaw, S, Gibbs, G, and Habershaw, T, *Problems with large classes: making the best of a bad job* (Technical and Educational Services Ltd, 1992)
- [8] Bonwell, C, and Eison, J, *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*, (Jossey-Bass, 1991).
- [9] Berdine, R, Increasing student involvement in the learning process through debate on controversial topics, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 1987, 9(3), 6-8.
- [10] Meyers, C, and Jones, T, *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*, (Jossey-Bass, 1993)
- [11] Snider, A, and Schnurer, M, *Many sides: Debate across the curriculum* (International Debate Education Association, 2002).
- [12] Moon, J, *Critical Thinking*, (Bristol 2005)

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge all staff and students involved in this research.

¹Phillipa MARTIN
School of Architecture, Design and the
Built Environment,
Nottingham Trent University
4 Burton Street
Nottingham
NG1 4BU
phillipa.martin@ntu.ac.uk
+44 (0) 115 8482308