DEBATING AND PUBLIC SPEAKING TRAINING FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: EXPERIENCES AND ADVANTAGES

E. Miller
Achva Academic College (ISRAEL)

Abstract

Using debate and public speaking (PS) training in preservice teacher training could serve as an effective pedagogical tool to for promoting higher order and critical thinking. This paper is based on data collected during an undergraduate course for first year students in a teacher preparation program in Israel. Since rhetoric, public speaking and debating are often not an integral part of our national curricula, few teachers in training have prior formal experience or training in public speaking and debating. The research on using debate and PS as a pedagogical tool to promote learning is scarce. Debate and prepared speeches can help students gain broad, multi-faceted knowledge across several disciplines, increase students self-efficacy and self-confidence, provide the students with an engaging, active, and learner-centered activity, encourage team collaboration. The research question was: In what ways training in debate and public speaking helped preservice teachers? Method: Over twenty students completed an online open-ended questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of a course in public speaking and debating. Results: Students believed that the course could enhance their confidence speaking in front of groups, improve their teaching and professional communications skills, and in turn enhance their future pupils’ learning. Discussion of the results and recommendations for future studies are included.

Keywords: debating, public speaking, innovative pedagogy, preservice teacher training.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of debate for pupils' learning

Protagoras of Abdera is considered the father of debate for communication skills. He implemented it in an educational environment in ancient Greece [1]. The use of debate as a classroom educational practice and learning through debate and public speaking is considered to be a constructivist approach [5, 6]. Earlier studies have established that debaters consistently value and highly regard the development of speaking skills, communication skills and critical thinking skills [4, 5, 7, 8].

What are some of the advantages of classroom debate?

1.1.1 Speaking

A structured debate can encourage pupils to discuss controversial subjects in the classroom, in comparison to class wide open discussions [2]. It creates a learning environment with more opportunities to communicate with classmates and teachers [9].

1.1.2 Listening

In addition, using debate as a teaching practice enables a learning process which encourages pupils to listen to multiple perspectives and express their opinion while critiquing some of these perspectives.

1.1.3 Active learning and higher order thinking

Debates and various forms of classroom discussions encourage pupils' active learning [6, 14, 16], and to analyse, incorporate and apply their knowledge. Researchers found a positive correlation between pupils' grades, student involvement and critical thinking. This was connection was especially strong for low-grade pupils receiving opportunities for effective and productive conversations [10]. Given such opportunities, these pupils had the courage to take an active part in classroom discussions and express their own opinions and thoughts which in turn could help them achieve progress. Since structured debates require advance preparation, it requires the pupils to expand their knowledge on certain topics, encourages them to be active learners who incorporate the literature, and apply their learning in a novel and dynamic situation. It could also increase their organizational skills [3].
1.1.4 Self-efficacy and self-confidence

As mentioned earlier, debate enhances various skills such as oral communication, the ability to learn in depth various topics, to think critically, and to learn how to listen to each other attentively [16]. These skills could help pupils to experience debate using their prior knowledge and with greater confidence and a sense of self-efficacy [11].

1.2 Debating as a teaching technique and as part of the curriculum in various disciplines

According to García and colleagues [12], debate could be used effectively for teaching various subjects in secondary and postsecondary schools. As a teaching method, it can enhance pupils' ability and confidence to defend or support a certain issue, as well as to explain or explore their perspectives and defend them. Lestari and Awalludin [13] found that a structured debate (British Parliamentary Debating System) helped university students to develop critical thinking and to construct effective arguments, encouraged creative thinking, as well as engaged them in problem solving and in formulating their views when working in teams [14]. Thus, according to Martin and colleagues [14], debate should not be viewed only as a teaching technique but should also be incorporated in the curriculum. It is a useful tool in a variety of disciplines, including cross-disciplinary curricula [15]. It is different from informal classroom debates or discussions in that it is structured, sequenced, and requires pupils to research assigned topics in small groups. The pupils' learning can be evaluated both according to their preparation as well as their debating performance in class [15]. While debate has its disadvantages, including that it encourages a dichotomous view of contentious issues, foster a confrontational environment that may intimidate some pupils, etc. However, by using various types of debating formats, such as meeting-house, four-corner, fishbowl, think-pair-share, and role-play debates could address them [1].

Teacher training should include not only disciplinary knowledge and teaching methods, but also critical thinking skills and effective communication skills. These can be learned and practiced through training in debating and public speaking.

The research question was: In what ways training in debate and public speaking helped preservice teachers?

2 METHODOLOGY

The population of this study was all semester undergraduate students in a course for first year students in teacher training in an academic college in the southern part of Israel. Open-ended questionnaires were completed online by the students at the beginning and at the end of the course. The questionnaires at the beginning of the course included items such as prior experience with debating and public speaking, expectations from the course, sense of self-efficacy when speaking in front of a class. The questionnaire completed near the end of the course included items such as their interest and confidence in using debate and public speaking in their future teaching, how their learning during the course could contribute to their teaching and their students, etc. Most of the items were open-ended questions, in order to elicit text-based, qualitative data. The data was analysed using content analysis. Students responded to the questionnaire anonymously, to increase reliability in data collection and ensure that their responses reflected their true opinion about their experiences during the course.

3 RESULTS

Most of the students (n=22) completed the questionnaire sent to them at the beginning of the course (students could still register to the course up to 3 weeks after it began). All the students (n=25) completed the questionnaire at the end of the course (though some needs several reminders). None of the students had any prior experience with formal public speaking or debating during their school years. Students registered to the course with some a priori expectations for their self-improvement, professional development, as well as for the course’s contribution for their future pupils. In addition, their responses outline the skills, knowledge and sense of self-efficacy developed through the course. These are outlined in the following subsections.
3.1 Students' expectations from the course

3.1.1 Students expectations for self-improvement

Students express various expectations at the beginning of the course. Since none of them had any prior formal experience in public speaking or in debating, most of them expected to learn to speak in front of an audience without fear or concern, to demonstrate confidence and a to speak in a relaxed manner, to improve their body language and use of voice, and one student specifically wanted to learn how to debate and develop effective arguments.

3.1.2 Students' expectations for professional development

Some students expressed more specific expectations regarding their future teaching tasks, such as speaking confidently to parents, learning how to construct effective arguments and how to substantiate them during educational meeting and when teaching in class: "I believe that as long as a teacher is in the school or in the classroom, she's involved in some type or another of debate, both with the students and with the teaching staff. Our job as teachers is to deliver the best arguments, to know what tone of voice to use and to manage classroom discussions effectively." Other students believed that learning about public speaking would help them convey authority and confidence to the students and especially during challenging talks with parents/students/teachers/principals etc. One student was expecting that the course will help her learn how to teach debating to her students.

3.2 Students' expectations for the course's contribution to their future pupils

It should be borne in mind that these students were in their first year of teacher training, and were just starting their practicum experiences as the course began. Students believed that when they would feel confident speaking clearly and teaching, their students would feel confident, too, and learn better. In addition, students believed that based on their training in the course they could enhance their pupils' speaking and conversational skills, critical thinking skills (e.g., being able to see both sides of controversial issues, coherent thinking and argumentation). Some students thought that various debate or public speaking topics presented and debated during the course could be brought up in their future classroom, which in turn could contribute to the pupils' general knowledge.

3.3 Skills, knowledge developed through the course

During the course, students learned about argumentation, persuasion and debating for and against various controversial issues, various styles of personal expression and the importance of body language. One of them said: "Every person could convey a message to you even through his or her facial expressions and charisma and confidence. I've learn that in order to convince a person to take my side, first of all my arguments need to be based on credible resources such as studies. In addition, I've learned how to make my audience connect to what I'm saying and how to incorporate emotions into my statements."

Additional responses reflected various public speaking skills. For example, one student mentioned how important it was to learn how to focus on one or two main points, or speaking within a limited amount of time while constructing a coherent speech with a beginning, a body and a conclusion.

Another issue that was raised by some students was overcoming their fear of speaking in front of other people. For example, one of them reported that "after a few lessons I've managed to overcome my fear and not being afraid to speak and voice what I have to say. Another student recalled: "During the first lesson [during impromptu speeches] I chose to speak about a topic that really bothers me. At first I didn't know whether to get up and speak and really voice my opinion but I've decided to do it, and that was a milestone for me to cope with my fear of speaking in front of others. For some students, overcoming this fear was not an easy task despite the course's supportive environment. One of them said: "I haven't tried it [delivering a speech] yet because I'm truly afraid, but I hope that in the next lessons I will do it!".

Another skill developed in later stages of the course was speech and debate evaluations.
4 CONCLUSIONS

Debating is an ancient yet little used structured discussion in which pupils actively research about a certain topic, structure their arguments and engage in a dynamic, stimulating and challenging learning experience. Based on our current understanding of the importance of developing higher order thinking skills, debating and public speaking should be integrated into classrooms at various levels of education and in various subjects, as these skills encourage students to formulate their thoughts and opinions and to communicate them effectively to the class. Teachers who incorporate debates and public speaking into their teaching encourage their pupils to become active learners, and help them increase their confidence and self efficacy. Thus, training programs of teachers should include courses about using these techniques and ways of incorporating them into the curriculum of various school subjects. The present paper was based on the responses of students to an online survey with open-ended questions at the beginning and at the end of the course. It outlined some of the expectations that undergraduate students in a teacher training program in Israel had from a course in public speaking and debating, and their perceptions of the benefits of this course for themselves, for their professional development and for their future pupils. Students expected that the training in the course will help them overcome fears of speaking in front of a class and increase their confidence. They also expected that training in public speaking and debating will help their communication skills when speaking during parent-teacher conferences, educational meetings in their teaching. Students also believed that the skills and knowledge they have developed through the course will also help their future students.

4.1 Recommendations

Future studies should explore the differential contribution and effectiveness of different types of debates and oratory skills to teachers in training. In addition, future studies should examine to what extend teachers in training who gained some experience in public speaking and debating implement these skills in their field experiences, and later on as teachers.

REFERENCES


