

Using Debates to Teach Information Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This experience report details the use of debates in a course on Information Ethics. Formal debates have been used in academia for centuries and create an environment in which students must think critically, communicate well and, above all, synthesize and evaluate the relevant classroom material. They also provide a break from the standard lecture-based learning environment. This report provides advice and suggestions to other faculty faced with teaching a course of this type, based on ten years of experience using debates as a teaching tool in an Information Ethics course.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Ethics, Face-To-Face Teaching, Course Development Models

1. INTRODUCTION

Debates have been used successfully as a teaching method in many disciplines, including Sociology (e.g. Huryn, 1986), Hospitality (e.g. Edelheim, 2010), and even in the technology field (e.g. Scott, 2008). While most Information Systems (IS) topics may not, on the surface, lend themselves to the debate format in a classroom setting, the area of Information Ethics is an ideal subject for using debates to enhance student learning. The use of teaching methods that enhance critical thinking skills, such as debates, may improve the students' abilities to better apply ethical theories and resolve moral conflicts (Vartiainen and Siponen, 2010).

This experience report details the use of debates in an Information Ethics course offered at a typical four-year public university in the United States. The use of debates in the class has been extremely successful. Students are more engaged, multiple points of view are expressed, and there is less reliance on simply reading and regurgitating facts. As a side benefit, debates also help to improve the students' communication and presentation skills. It is hoped that the material and suggestions provided in this report will aid other faculty faced with teaching this sometimes difficult topic.

2. THE INFORMATION ETHICS COURSE

The College of Business offers an Information Ethics course as an elective in the Management Information Systems (MIS) major, although it is open to all students in the College. In most semesters, the course enrollment consists mainly of students majoring in MIS, with one or two students from other business disciplines. It is assumed that the students have little background in ethics, so the first three

weeks of the course are spent introducing the students to the main ethical theories (utilitarianism, deontology, egoism, etc.). The students are then introduced to ethical decision-making, using an analysis process such as that presented in Kallman and Grillo (1996), followed by an overview of the main topics in Information Ethics, starting with Richard Mason's seminal 1986 paper.

The remainder of the course is spent studying one specific topic per week (e.g. intellectual property rights, privacy, censorship, accessibility, etc.). In the first class session of the week, a debate is used to introduce the topic to the students. This debate provides the starting point for discussion of the topic and immediately involves the students in the material.

3. THE DEBATES

The enrollment for the course is usually 20-25 students, making the debate format manageable. The students are divided into teams of three. If necessary, due to enrollment numbers, some two member teams are allowed. Students are permitted to select their teams; those students that do not pre-select a group are randomly assigned to a team.

Each debate consists of a proposition (see the Debate Topics section below). One team is assigned the PRO position (i.e. they agree with the proposition) and the other team supports the CON position (i.e. they disagree with the proposition). The debates are assigned to the teams using a "draft" system. The teams are placed in a random order and then take turns choosing the PRO or CON side of the debates in which they wish to participate. The order is reversed, once each team has selected a debate, and the process is repeated, until all of the debates have been assigned. Some restrictions are placed upon the teams, during this process: each team

must debate at least once as a PRO side and at least once as CON side, and no two teams can debate each other more than twice. Teams often end up arguing for a position with which they may not agree, but most have found this to be an excellent learning experience, and it aids in anticipating the opposition's strategy.

Each team participates in at least three debates, during the course. The general format for each debate can be found in Table 1. Prior to the debate, each team assigns their members a role (PRO#1, PRO#2, PRO#3, and CON#1, CON#2, CON#3). This is to ensure that all three members of the group participate significantly in the debate. Also, each team must turn in a list of all of their sources, prior to the debate taking place.

Section	Presenter	Timing
PRO Opening Statement	PRO#1 PRO#2	4 minutes 4 minutes
CON Opening Statement	CON#1 CON#2	4 minutes 4 minutes
Break		2 minutes
CON Rebuttal	CON#3	4 minutes
PRO Rebuttal	PRO#3	4 minutes
Break		2 minutes
PRO Questions	Any member	3 questions
CON Questions	Any member	3 questions
Break		2 minutes
PRO Closing Statement	Any member	2 minutes
CON Closing Statement	Any member	2 minutes

Table 1: Debate Format

The debate takes place as follows:

3.1 Opening Statement

Each team presents an opening statement that lays out their argument for their side of the debate. The students should apply the ethical theories discussed earlier in the course and include their own research to create a convincing argument as to why their side of the debate is correct. To ensure that two members of the group each present a significant piece of the statement, the opening is divided into two four minute pieces (one for each student), but it should be treated as one continuous eight minute argument. It is important to note that CON may not specifically address PRO's opening statement, during their own opening. Each statement should be independent of the other side's arguments.

3.2 Rebuttal

The rebuttal is the responsibility of the third member of the group. In this section of the debate, the student has the task of specifically addressing (and critiquing) the opening statement of the other side. This is the only section of the debate where PRO does not go first. Putting together a rebuttal takes some time, so the order is reversed in this section of the debate, to give each team the most time possible to prepare a proper argument. It should be noted that neither side is permitted to introduce new opening arguments in this section – the focus is on the critique of the other side's opening argument.

3.3 Questions

In this section of the debate, each team is allowed to ask three questions of the opposition. The question is asked, and the opponent is permitted to respond without interruption or further comment by the team asking the question. This continues for each question. The instructor must ensure that the questions are actually questions (as opposed to new statements regarding the case), and that the answering team does not deviate dramatically from the topic of the question.

3.4 Closing Statement

Each team provides a two minute closing statement. In this section of the debate, the team is allowed to say basically anything that they wish, and any member of the team may give the statement. This is where the team should make its final case.

3.5 Evaluation

The students in the audience are instructed to take notes on an evaluation form, during the debate. At the end of the debate, they fill in grades for each team. These grades are averaged (dropping the highest and lowest scores) to give each team a grade from the class. This is one-third of the team's debate grade. The other two-thirds of the grade is given by the instructor. Each team is provided with a final grade and one-page evaluation by the instructor, plus copies of the written comments and grades from the audience (there are no names on these forms – they are anonymous, from the point of view of the student teams).

3.6 Debate Winner

Finally, the audience votes on the winner of the debate. This has no impact on the grading, but adds an element of competition to the event. The winner is simply the team that receives the most votes. Standings are kept throughout the term, although no prize goes to the winner, at the end of the course.

4. DEBATE TOPICS

The topics used in the debates vary from year to year. It is important to stay abreast of current events, and especially of topics that may be of more interest to the students (for example, privacy issues involving Facebook). It stands to reason that they will be more interested in issues that specifically impact their lives.

The following topics were all successfully used in Previous offerings for the course:

1. It is unethical to download copyrighted music from the Internet (without permission from the copyright holder), even if it is for personal use only.
2. An individual places pictures and comments on a social networking site. It is now ethical for the site to sell those pictures and comments to any other legally operating company, without the user's knowledge.
3. Our university has the ethical obligation to ban the viewing of websites that contain racist information, in all public computer labs.
4. It is unethical for a video game manufacturer to create and sell a virtual reality game that allows the player to rape and murder an innocent person.

5. The government has an ethical obligation to provide all school children with a basic education in the use of information technology (i.e. PC tools).
6. Wikileaks has behaved unethically in making available the recent information allegedly stolen from classified US systems.
7. Google has an ethical obligation to offer an uncensored search engine in China, no matter what regulations are created by the Chinese government.

When selecting the order of the debates, care should be taken to start with topics that are familiar to the students, and that are more straightforward in nature. For example, the music piracy debate is an excellent first choice, as students are usually familiar with this situation, and it is a fairly simple conflict between a utilitarian viewpoint (the benefit outweighs the harm, no one is hurt, etc.) and a deontological viewpoint (pirating is stealing, violation of the copyright agreement, etc.). More difficult and complex topics should be withheld until the students become comfortable with the debate structure and format.

5. STUDENT FEEDBACK

While students are initially apprehensive about the debate format, by the end of the course, the feedback is almost always very positive. The following two examples from the most recent course offering are typical of the written feedback on the anonymous semester-ending student evaluations:

“Brought in real world examples that helped make the subject matter applicable.”

“Most interesting class I have had. Also, it was beneficial for public speaking.”

The course also received a perfect rating of 5 out of 5 (with 5 being “Excellent”) from the students, on questions relating to learning in the course and the overall evaluation of the course. In informal discussions, the students often bring up the debates as their favorite aspect of the course, both from a participation and an audience perspective.

More importantly, the evaluation of the students’ knowledge clearly indicates that they have a firm grasp of not only the material provided in the course, but the ability to use that material to recognize ethical dilemmas, and to apply their knowledge to reach a defensible ethical decision.

6. DISCUSSION

Students have been shown to learn more effectively when engaged in an active learning environment, such as that provided by a debate (Kennedy, 2007). The course detailed in this report has been taught using debates for the past 10 years, with excellent results. The evaluation procedure ensures that the students watching the debate stay involved, and the debates provide the extra benefit of helping to improve the students’ presentation and communication skills. In general, the first one or two debates are relatively poorly done; an instructor using debates for the first time should anticipate this problem. Students are not used to formally debating, and they tend to be very non-confrontational with

their classmates. Consequently, it can be useful to grade the first debate leniently, and to use the debate to educate the class on what went well, and what was lacking. Problems in the past have included students not properly applying the material to the debate, students failing to properly follow the debate format, and students simply being unwilling to criticize their opponent’s arguments in their rebuttal. Poorly prepared teams will often finish their opening arguments well before the 8 minute limit has been reached.

However, by each team’s second debate, there is usually a significant improvement, and even a greater enjoyment of the process by the students. Several students will become quite competitive, and students have often used humor to good effect in their rebuttals, as they get to know their classmates. The instructor needs to ensure that the proceedings remain polite (it is occasionally necessary to rein in a team that is becoming too confrontational or even rude), but the students generally understand the limits of what is acceptable behavior. Also, they tend to prepare well, as the term goes on, for fear of being embarrassed by a better prepared team.

Table 2 lists the major problems encountered with the debate format in the initial years, and the interventions used to alleviate these problems. In all cases, the intervention led to a better experience for the students in future semesters.

Another interesting aspect of the debate format is that the students begin to develop strategies for improving their debate performances. For example, on several occasions, instead of jumping straight into their rebuttal when the break ends, teams have taken an extra minute to prepare a solid argument, leaving themselves only three minutes of rebuttal time, but ensuring a better presented rebuttal. Similarly, teams become more adept at using their three questions to lead their opponents into a trap, as opposed to simply asking three disconnected questions. Some teams bring in props to emphasize points, or prepare PowerPoint presentations. The students learn *how* to debate, as well as the topic at hand, and teamwork often improves as the course progresses.

In a future semester, the audience will be allowed to ask questions of each team, after the closing statements. This will be part of the formal debate process and will be included in the evaluation of the debate teams. This should increase the involvement of students not directly participating in the debate and add other viewpoints to the discussion. It is important to continually seek ways to improve the experience for the students and to improve the learning environment.

The rapid nature of change in the information systems field, combined with the speed of assimilation of new technologies, makes the field of information ethics different from the study of ethics in many other disciplines. For example, social media applications were almost non-existent just ten years ago, but now they are ubiquitous. Consequently, there has been little time to study the ethical issues surrounding these applications and, by the time viewpoints into the discussion. Sometimes, the students can be more familiar with new technologies and their impacts than the instructor, so creating a more participative environment can lead to a better learning environment for all involved.

Problem Encountered	Intervention
Originally, all segments of the debate were in the order of PRO first, followed by CON. However, this led to poor rebuttals by PRO, due to a lack of time to properly put together a response to the CON opening argument.	Flipped the PRO and CON order for the rebuttal, thus providing PRO with more time to develop a rebuttal to CON's opening.
Originally, students in the audience were simply asked to pay attention. However, this often led to students not following the debates closely enough for the experience to be useful.	Audience members are now required to fill in an evaluation form for each debate, as well as vote on a "winner". Discussion takes place after each debate and audience members are expected to participate and use the information from the debate.
Originally, the questions segment was timed (4 minutes each), but this led to some teams asking multiple questions while others ran out of time before developing their argument. Also, teams ran out of time to answer.	Eliminated the time constraint on the questions segment and switched to a format whereby each team can ask a maximum of three questions.
Originally, each team debate only once (or maybe twice) per semester, usually on an important topic, but the teams did not understand the debate format well enough for the debates to be truly successful.	Teams now debate a minimum of three times each, with the first debates being very basic and introductory in nature, and with more help from the professor early on. The students, therefore, become comfortable with the debate format before taking on more difficult topics.
Originally did not have breaks between segments. Consequently, everything became very rushed, especially for the audience, who had no time to digest the information.	Added the 2 minutes breaks between debate segments. This allows the debate teams to catch their breath and prepare the next segment properly, but also allows the audience to consider the information. Interestingly, some good conversations take place (quietly) amongst the audience, during this downtime. Students also have time to fill in their grading forms, during these breaks.
Some teams still do not prepare properly and simply do not cover the material appropriately.	The instructor must be prepared to lecture on the material, if it is not properly covered in the debate! Have a backup lecture ready to go.
Occasionally, a team member does not turn up.	Make sure the students understand that they will have to go-ahead, even if a team member is absent. In this case, either of the two remaining students can take the role of #3 in the debate, or they can split #3's responsibilities as they see fit.
In the first year, we discovered early on that both teams were arguing the same side of a debate, as the CON team did not understand that they were arguing against a proposition that stated that an act was unethical.	Make absolutely sure that the teams know which side of the debate they are arguing, and especially that PRO means that you support the statement, and CON means that you do not support the statement.

Table 2: Problems Encountered and Interventions

7. CONCLUSION

Debates are an excellent way to develop students' critical thinking skills, communication skills, higher level learning skills, and to simply have a more entertaining classroom experience. This report outlines the use of debates in an elective course on Information Ethics, where debates have been an extremely successful element of the classroom setting. Student feedback indicates that they enjoy the debate experience (albeit after some initial trepidation), and informal comparisons to previous course offerings with no use of debates provide anecdotal evidence that student learning is increased. It is highly recommended that instructors consider the use of debates in any class of this type. The next step is to incorporate the debate concept into other courses in the IS curriculum.

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ISSN 1055-3096