Debate: Where Speaking and Listening Come First

It occurred to me that if I was going to be a lawyer—or, who knows, a judge—I had to learn to speak persuasively and confidently in front of an audience. I couldn't be a quivering mess of nerves.

—Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World* (2013, p. 85)

Famous former school debaters read like a list of world leaders, from Margaret Thatcher to Nelson Mandela; in the United States, the lineup is nearly a roster of all three branches of government, including Barbara Jordan, Antonin Scalia, and Lyndon B. Johnson. While the ancient skills of oral and public persuasive arguments remain relevant today, comparatively few students in this country are exposed to formal debate instruction. Middle school and classroom debate is even scarcer (Kennedy, 2009, p. 1; Rai, 2011, p. 139).

Dr. Kate Shuster and John Meany (2005) explain in their textbook *Speak Out! Debate and Public Speaking in the Middle Grades*: "Debate and public speaking are of extraordinary value to middle school students. Participation in debating can boost student self-confidence, accelerate learning across the curriculum, and improve critical thinking and oral communication skills" (p. 5). Through this *written* commentary, we define debate and argue for its inclusion in the middle school curriculum as a foundation not only for speaking and listening but also for all literacies. We present a model for teaching debate that begins with two simple lessons on argumentation, addresses Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and leads to lifelong skills in oral communications, teamwork, and critical thinking.

In the Middle School Classroom

Kids walk into debate class, read the board, "The atomic bombing of Japan was justified." And the conversation begins. (The teacher remains silent.)

"Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and we needed to get them. An eye for an eye."
"Yeah, but lots of people died and so many got cancer. The animals all died."
"We wanted to end the war."
"We had to prove we were strong."
"That's not right. Innocent people died."
"And they surrendered."
"But so many people got burned and died."

We used to think this passed for debate, even higher-level critical thinking for young adolescents. However, based on our work the past three years with middle school students in central New Jersey, we have learned that this is not debate. It's not even sufficiently sophisticated for the "first constructive speaker." (Context for debate terminology follows.) This classroom dialogue is merely a conversation. And these students—diverse learners including English language learners—are capable of much more.

What Is Middle School Debate?

We'll start with what it's *not*: yelling at your opponent; talking but not listening; presenting but not responding; or even the presidential "debates" we see on television.

Rather, debate *is* "an organized public argument on a specific topic. It is organized in that there are rules of debating. It is public because it is conducted for the benefit of an audience. It involves arguments, which are well-explained opinions. A debate is also on a specific topic, with one side arguing in favor and the other team opposing the issue" (Shuster & Meany, 2005, p. 44). Each student must use argumentation and refutation, supported by reasoning, research, and evidence. Listening and note-taking during the debate are essential.

Easily adapted across the curriculum, debate leads to student-centered learning and the development of critical thinking skills. The result is students who are comfortable with public speaking and argumentation, and who can address complex issues.

When Stone Bridge Middle School in Allentown, New Jersey, and the English-Speaking Union in New York partnered three years ago, both of us were interested in the potential of debate and intuitively believed that this form of public speaking would be a "good fit" for the naturally talkative middle grade constituency. Neither of us considered herself an expert in the field of debate and forensics. Dee has taught middle school in Monmouth County, New Jersey, for over 20 years. Carol has similar experience working in informal education for cultural institutions, for which she creates, writes, and delivers programs for students, teachers, and families throughout the United States. We quickly learned that there are many formats for debate, including several models advertised for the middle school audience. (For a sample, simply Google *debate*.) However, most formats were what we called "debate light": college or high school formats debated in a relatively short time frame.

Based on our collective experiences, we chose the Middle School Public Debate Program model, as developed by John Meany and Kate Shuster at Claremont McKenna College and outlined in their textbook (and accompanying teacher manual for) *Speak Out! Debate and Public Speaking in the Middle Grades* (2005). This model was created over 10 years ago, primarily for 10- to 14-year-olds, as an educational tool with the developmental needs of middle level students at the center. Shuster and Meany explain that it was "designed to maximize skill development including student investigation and collaborative learning" (2005, p. 5). Most important, it is easy for the teachers and students to learn the program. It requires no complex training or sophisticated materials—in fact, everything needed is available for free online. Easily adapted across the curriculum, debate leads to student-centered learning and the development of critical thinking skills. The result is students who are comfortable with public speaking and argumentation, and who can address complex issues.

How Debate Works

The teacher assigns a topic. Students are charged with researching both sides of the debate so they can understand the full argument and be prepared to defend either perspective. The debate involves two teams, the proposition and opposition, each with three students. Similar to a trial, the debate opens and closes with the burden of proof on the proposition. Each student has one speech to deliver in the following order: First Proposition Constructive speaker; First Opposition; Second Proposition Constructive; Second Opposition; Opposition Rebuttal; Proposition Rebuttal.

A debate is typically one class period, about 30 minutes long plus time for teacher and peer feedback and assessment. Students learn to appropriately interrupt with questions, called *points of information*, and may politely *heckle* (use one word or short phrase to point out errors to the judge). During the debate, the students must listen closely to the other team's arguments and take notes, called *flowing* in debate jargon. At the conclusion, the judge (teacher and/or student peers) declares a winner and awards speaker points (evaluation for each student's speech). (See www.middleschooldebate.com or http://www.esuus.org/esu/programs/middle_school_debate/

educators/ for further information, educator resources, and sample middle school debates.)

Over the past three years, students in the Garden State Debate League, an interscholastic program currently involving eight public, charter, independent, and parochial schools, have debated more than 50 topics, including: close Guantanamo Bay; bottled water causes more harm than good; eliminate the teaching of cursive handwriting; the caste system was good for Indian society; and soccer players should be required to wear helmets.

Why Debate?

Since classical times, debate has been one of the best methods of learning and applying the principles of critical thinking.

—Austin J. Freely and David L. Steinberg, *Argumentation and Debate* (2013, pp. 3–4)

Debate is a cornerstone of 21st-century literacy. It requires research, analysis, reasoning, and evidence. It actively engages young adolescents in critical and complex thinking about both historical and current events. Students who master those skills are ready for high school and college, lectures and seminars, as well as the workplace, where the ability to think on your feet, reason critically, make and affect decisions based on solid reasoning, collaborate on and among diverse teams, and effectively express yourself orally are paramount.

Stakeholders "Speaking" to the Benefits of Debate

Debate experiences, as described by students, their teachers, and parents, support positive outcomes of learning through this form of public speaking. In 2011, the English-Speaking Union and the Middle School Public Debate Program sponsored the formation of the Garden State Debate League, a competitive interschool debate program in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The same year, Burek initiated an elective debate class in her school. The response to both programs has been overwhelmingly positive from all stakeholders.

Students

Based on nearly 1,000 debates in central New Jersey, we can attest that all students, from high-level learners to shy math geeks to ELLs, are excited and engaged. Young debaters take ownership of their own learning, and they care about the outcome; they become knowledgeable and passionate about current and historical events and the "big" ethical questions of science. Students who rarely open their mouths in class come alive. Students who are bored with the curriculum are challenged. ELL students are exposed to unfamiliar words, and they learn to communicate effectively through spoken language. Students with special needs, who often rely on their speaking and listening skills, experience success. Extroverted students, natural talkers, improve their listening skills. Introverted students, natural listeners, improve their speaking skills.

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The best evidence in support of debating was provided by the valedictorian of the 2013 Stone Bridge Middle School eighth-grade class as he ended his speech with a thank-you to his debate teacher, "who gave me my lowest grade ever, made me work harder than I've ever worked, and enabled me to get up on this stage today and not feel like I was going to throw up."

Parents

A sixth-grade parent elaborated on the "real world" applications of debate (Dee Burek, personal communication, 2013): "My daughter attended the town council meeting last night. She spoke at the microphone, as part of a very heated discussion, on the need to revitalize our town. She used her debate skills to argue her point. Perhaps, more importantly, participating in de-

bate gave her the courage to speak out."

According to a family survey conducted in 2006 by the Middle School Public Debate Program, 92% of family members agreed that their student had become more confident; 93% agreed that their student was more interested in learning about the world and current events; and 94% agreed that their student was more likely to see both sides of an issue (Shuster & Meany,2005, p. 96).

Through the clear and persuasive spoken word, debaters work with diverse partners to integrate and evaluate evidence, explore points of view, develop organized arguments, and listen closely to define and further develop their lines of reasoning.

Teachers

Our high school teachers saw changes immediately with the first graduates of the Stone Bridge Middle School Debate Program. One commented: "I have to teach fewer organizational skills." Another teacher in the Garden State Debate League described benefits that extended to nontraditional students: "I have a debater with a substantial stutter. This student loves to debate and deserves to be heard. With cooperation and planning with the student's parents, speech therapist, teachers, and most important, the student, he has had an extremely positive experience. I stress the importance of listening skills when coaching debate, and this student has had the opportunity to be heard." The teacher continued: "Coaching debate makes me a better teacher. Additionally, my students who debate have impressed their teachers with an increased ability to think, reason, listen, and speak intelligently" (ESU, Teacher Survey, 2013).

Enhances Success

Improves Academic Success

While there is a need for additional research on the educational outcomes of debate, particularly among middle school students, studies indicate a positive relationship between participation in debate activities and academic attainment (Akerman & Neale, 2011; Wood, 2013). Additionally, according to Akerman and Neale's international review of qualitative and quantitative research, evidence links debate to improving subject knowledge, developing critical thinking, promoting communication skills (including improved English when it is not the student's first language), and boosting aspirations, confidence, and cultural awareness.

Meets Common Core State Standards

Debate is an obvious fit for the Common Core, linking to over 50 standards. The anchor standards in Speaking and Listening read like a

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Building Informed Arguments

In "The Great Service-Learning Debate & Research Project," students analyze their own schooling experiences by imagining what their education would be like if service-learning was a requirement for graduation. They engage in a preliminary classroom debate—either agreeing with the proposed change in curriculum, opposing it, or taking a middle-ground stance—before they have all of the facts. From here, students research service-learning and work in groups to prepare informed debates. At the end of this lesson, students reflect on the implications of making uninformed vs. informed arguments as well as what it takes to build a strong, successful argument.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/great-service-learning-debate-30628.html

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www.readwritethink.org

description of debate. Through the clear and persuasive spoken word, debaters work with diverse partners to integrate and evaluate evidence, explore points of view, develop organized arguments, and listen closely to define and further develop their lines of reasoning.

Debate also incorporates the other literacies, notably:

- Close reading of text (Reading)
- Inclusion of information texts (Reading)
- Analysis and evaluation of textual evidence (Reading and Writing)
- Use of reasoning and evidence (Reading and Writing)
- Command of Standard English in writing and speech (Language)
- Vocabulary acquisition and use (Language)
- Use of literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

Supports Career Success

Debate serves students beyond the classroom, making them "career ready," as defined by many employers. The skills that 21st-century employers seek can be honed by the speaking and listening skills taught in a debate unit. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *Job Outlook* (2010), the top four skills that employers seek are outcomes of our middle school debate program: 1) communication skills (verbal), 2) strong work ethic, 3) teamwork skills (works well with others), and 4) analytical skills. "Each year, without fail, strong communication skills come out on top" (p. 25).

Are You Ready? Debate in the Middle School Classroom

Many schools spend so much time and money focusing on reading and writing that teachers are at a loss for ways to teach speaking and listening. Those skills are often perceived as "extras" or add-ons to a unit, as in: present a PowerPoint, debate "Who Stole the Tarts in *Alice in Wonderland*," or memorize the Gettysburg Address. Even more likely, speaking and listening is relegated to presentations or small-group discussions. That outcome is not surprising as school districts can purchase ready-to-teach curricula in Reading and Writing. In addition, as readers and writers, teachers are already trained and certified in those subjects. However, speaking and listening are not standardized components of teacher preparation programs. Public speaking classes are usually electives, and most people avoid them like the plague.

By teaching argumentation and public speaking, you also teach the core skills of analyzing both fiction and nonfiction texts that your students use—and develop with increasing complexity and sophistication—during the entire year.

Speaking and Listening Come First

Speaking and Listening naturally develop before Reading and Writing, so there's much to be gained by flipping the ELA curriculum and starting the school year with debate. By teaching argumentation and public speaking, you also teach the core skills of analyzing both fiction and nonfiction texts that your students use—and develop with increasing complexity and sophistication—during the entire year of reading and writing in your language arts classroom. The students further hone those skills in their history/social studies, science, art, and even math and technology classes (Doyle, 2007, p. S7; Scott, 2008; Martens, 2007, p. 5). Even if those subject-area teachers choose not to incorporate the debate model in their classes, the students have the tools they need to read, analyze, and interpret the evidence presented in the informational texts, which thereby deepens their subject knowledge.

Teach Argumentation and Refutation

Classroom discussion is not debate, nor does it produce an effective persuasive essay. Debate includes an argument (supported by reasoning and evidence) and refutation (also incorporating evidence).

Lesson One: Argumentation—Assertion, Reasoning, Evidence (ARE)

Start with an issue that students know. Open the class with a series of discussion questions: "Have you ever tried to convince your parents that you should get something? What did you do? Does that approach always work? Why not? How can you improve your request? When do you have to argue? Do you always win? What are some things people do to win?"

At the conclusion of these lessons, you and (more important) your students will have the verbal and written skills to argue subjects as mundane as the benefits of school uniforms and as complicated as the role of the United Nations in world hot spots.

Suggest a few popular ideas: "Cell phones should be allowed in school." "Coffee should be served in school." Is it enough to simply state these points, or, in debate speak, state *assertions*? (Introduce the vocabulary word.) Students like these ideas, but they are only statements that start the *argument*.

Provide a reason to support your assertion. For example, you could provide this prompt: "Cell phones should be allowed in school *because* . . . ." Let students volunteer reasons. Once they have filled in that piece of the puzzle, remind them there's more to do:

"Great! But these two parts still don't make a good argument. We need *evidence* to back up our reason. Without evidence, it is just our opinion." Have students volunteer evidence. The most common result in my classroom is, "Cell phones should be allowed in school *because* children can use them to call home in an emergency. *For example*, if there is a disaster, the kids could contact the police and get help there quickly."

Repeat with other statements that the students generate. Practice in pairs, and by the end of the lesson, the students know how to create an argument that is supported by reasoning and backed up by evidence.

Lesson Two: Refutation—Answer the Argument

"Yesterday, we learned the parts of an argument. What were they? (Assertion–Reasoning–Evidence) Do we live our lives letting people just make assertions? What do you do when you disagree with someone? Stomp your foot? Yell? Cry? What works? How do you win arguments?" Students discuss the need to prove opposing sides of an argument using refutation.

Use these keywords to signify the four steps of refutation:

They say: Restate argument in seven words or less.

but I disagree: State counter argument (can be the opposite of opponent).

because: Offer reason for your argument.

therefore: Show your argument is better.

Now practice the argument: "Cell phones should be allowed in school because kids need to call their parents in case there is an emergency. When an emergency happens, kids can call the police."

Refutation: "*They say* that cell phones can be used to call parents in emergencies, *but I disagree because* the kids will not have time to call their parents. Students should listen to teachers in emergencies. Teachers must give instructions and have the kids listen. Cell phones are distracting in an emergency and at school. Students using phones can cause many problems. *Therefore*, cell phones distract from learning and possibly cause more confusion in an emergency."

Repeat with other statements that the students generate. Have them practice in pairs, and by the end of the lesson, the students will know how to refute an argument.

Teaching debate can be accomplished in as few as seven class periods. Start with argumentation and refutation as described above. Students learn to argue effectively and engage with each other. They listen, respond, and quickly understand that to succeed at argumentation (i.e.,

win), they require relevant and reliable evidence to support their reasons. Now add research—how to find and evaluate evidence from print and online resources—and note-taking skills. Note-taking requires listening and is essential to effective refutation, and it's the most difficult part of debate for some middle school students (Martens, 2007, p. 12). At this point, introduce the structure of the Middle School Public Debate Program format. Then practice debates in your ELA classroom and share the format with your cross-curricular colleagues. (See www.esuus.org for complete plans for a lesson unit.)

At the conclusion of these lessons, you and (more important) your students will have the verbal and written skills to argue subjects as mundane as the benefits of school uniforms and as complicated as the role of the United Nations in world hot spots.

Sample Debate: The Atomic Bombing of Japan Was Justified

Proposition

"Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and we needed to get them. [Assertion] An eye for an eye. [Reason] Over 2,000 people died." [Evidence]

"We wanted to end the war. [Assertion] The Allies had issued the Potsdam Declaration setting terms for surrender. [Reasoning] According to the document [Source], "the government of Japan is to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction." The Japanese chose to ignore this and we needed to act. [Evidence]

Opposition

"*You say* that we needed to drop the bomb, *but I disagree* that we needed to drop the bomb to end the war *because* violence does not end violence. It causes more problems. According to the Manhattan Engineer District's best available figures, 105,000 people died and 95,000 were injured in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Most suffered severe burns and many got cancer. Many of these people were innocent victims, not soldiers. *Therefore*, dropping the bomb caused innocents to suffer and die and we should not have dropped the atomic bomb."

Proposition

"*You say* we should not have dropped the bomb, *but I disagree*; if we did not drop the bomb, thousands more soldiers would have died, *because* the war would have lasted a lot longer, and millions of dollars would have been spent to kill more people during more battles. *Therefore* dropping the bomb was justified."

That's why it's important to consider the skills of debate as a tool for teaching across the curriculum and throughout the year.

If It's So Great, Why Not Debate?

Time

Who has time to add yet one more element to the curriculum? Let's face it, if it can't be written down and graded, some schools won't allow time for it. That's why it's important to consider the skills of debate as a tool for teaching across the curriculum and throughout the year. With that perspective, we have found that debate, in fact, saves time in the classroom. By teaching the building blocks of debate skills, we do not have to teach argumentation, research, and evaluation of sources again in other ELA units on informational texts (reading) and argumentative/persuasive essays (writing) (Dickson, 2004).

Assessment

Speaking and Listening are in the Common Core State Standards and are also traditionally regarded as components of the language arts, and yet assessment strategies for both areas of focus are not widely disseminated. However, rubrics with specific Standards-based skills are simple to create and use. Students are able to honestly self-evaluate and offer constructive feedback for their peers.

Student-Centered

The teacher must be at the back of the classroom. Debate requires students to work, perform, and even assess each other. The direction of the class may not be exact, but we have found that—with the scaffolding of debate instruction and format, and the students' innate ability to talk—the program proves beneficial for all levels of learners.

Finding the time and the fortitude to teach debate can be challenging, but enabling students to find their voices—through their own process of discovery—gives them tools to succeed in high school, college, and life.

However, all of those constraints pale in comparison to the greatest hindrance to teaching debate in middle school: *glossophobia*, also known as the fear of public speaking. It is often stated to be the greatest fear, even surpassing fear of death. "Young adolescents are eager to talk, not so good at listening, but also less likely to be concerned about appearing 'smart' in front of their peers" (Shuster & Meany, 2005, p. 3). Use this window wisely; teach debate before the fear of speaking prevents students from developing lifelong presentation skills.

Finding the time and the fortitude to teach debate can be challenging, but enabling students to find their voices—through their own process of discovery—gives them tools to succeed in high school, college, and life.

No Room to Debate that Debate Belongs in the Classroom

"All adults today need to be able to communicate with clarity, to articulate ideas, to reason, to separate key facts from the barrage of ideas we all are exposed to every day. No single activity can prepare one better than debating."

—Helen M. Wise, former President, National Education Association (Hunt, 1994, p. 14)

Indeed, argumentation and debate have been critical in the development of new countries and in the history of democracy. Professor of English Richard Andrews explains: "The encouragement of argument in the classroom, not only in English but in other subjects as well, is something we should celebrate and shape to the positive. It's essential to thinking as well as to social harmony" (1994, p. 69). Debate requires students to be better listeners, and better listeners become better citizens. Teachers who teach the art of debate empower their students to think like world leaders. Young adolescents spend their entire middle school careers learning to make the correct choices. This is the perfect time to provide these young adolescents with the tools to evaluate both sides of an argument, find reasons to defend their decisions, listen to others' opinions, and clearly present their perspectives.

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2014 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2014 elections, Middle Level Section member **Susan Houser**, Pinellas/Duval Counties, Florida, was chosen vice president. Houser will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

The Middle Level Section also elected new members. Elected to a four-year term on the Steering Committee were **Christopher Lehman**, Christopher Lehman Consulting, Bronx, New York, and **Laurie Sullivan**, High Rock School, Needham, Massachusetts. Elected to the 2014–2015 Nominating Committee were **Lori Goodson**, Kansas State University, Manhattan, chair; **Juliet Duggins**, Motto Middle School, Bronx, New York; and **Dorothy A. Fontaine**, Wakefield School, The Plains, Virginia. On the NCTE website, see additional 2014 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2015 elections (http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections).