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Graduate students and teaching assistants are invited to submit compositions in the form of a speech, appeal, memoir, essay, conference review, or interview on the policy and practice of language education. Master's and doctoral thesis supervisors are also welcome to contribute or encourage their students to join this vibrant debate. Grounded in the author's reading, practicum, or empirical research, contributions are expected to share an impassioned presentation of opinions in 1,000 words or less. Teaching Assistance is not a peer-reviewed column.

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the way classes are taught and extracurricular activities are handled. The graduating class of 2022 not only needs to use the internet to attend classes, but also to pass interviews with prospective employers. The essayist for this issue's Teaching Assistance column came from Hong Kong. Hin Ming Wong majors in English drama at a graduate school in Japan. Some of her peers stayed behind to study from overseas by email and video conferencing. Along with a TA from America, she recently helped to organize and judge a debate in English held between students located at Seinan Jo Gakuin University in Kitakyushu and at The International University of Kagoshima. The logistics required a blended learning delivery mode to virtually link students and teachers who were communicating online from home with counterparts who were physically in the classroom.

Blended Debating Draws Crossfire from Students at Home and in the Classroom

Hin Ming Wong

The International University of Kagoshima

Popular debate venues have historically been legislative assemblies, public town halls, academic institutions, coffeehouses, or in the streets. A recent debate held between students at Seinan Jo Gakuin University and The International University of Kagoshima took place on a video conferencing platform. Because of COVID-19 related travel restrictions, five students based in northern Kyushu were asked to study at home and refrain from physically attending the extracurricular activity. Forty-eight students in the south of Kyushu were free to come and go on campus as long as they wore masks and disinfected their hands with alcohol before entering a large classroom equipped with personal computers, where the debate was held.

To carry out this activity, the coaches of the debate teams agreed that blended debating (a hybrid

of online and classroom discourse) was the optional forum. Integrating technology and digital media with traditional instructor-led classroom activities was thought to give students more flexibility to customize their learning experiences. A professor of English coached the team from Kitakyushu. On the day of the event, the teacher warmed up the audience—students from both universities—with an online presentation about sustainable development goals (SDGs). After giving his opinion that keeping schools open during the pandemic was a laudable sustainable development goal for achieving quality education around the world, all students had an opportunity to raise their hands in agreement—by digital screen icons or physically with real applause in the classroom.

Debate Procedures

After the lecture, a series of three debates began. Traditional debate is a process that involves formal discourse between two teams on particular topics in which arguments are put forward for opposing viewpoints. The vibrant topics selected for this experimental event included: COVID-19 vaccinations, the Tokyo Olympics, and the best practice of language course delivery modes. Three teams were asked to debate from one of three points of view for each topic: getting a COVID-19 vaccination should be required, should be decided by the employer, or should be voluntary; the Tokyo Olympics must be cancelled, must be postponed, or must go on; The best language course delivery mode is remote learning, is face-to-face learning, or is blended learning. Two teams from Kagoshima and one team from Kitakyushu participated in each debate. Each team had four students. The teams followed the predetermined rules for three-way debates set by Nishihara (2021) in which the first speaker introduces the team's viewpoint, "the second speaker asks questions to others, the third answers the other teams' questions," (p. 38) and the final speaker has to summarize the key points raised by the team. During the debate, each member had three minutes to present in English. They all needed to draw upon debate skills such as presentation ability, time management, and critical thinking.

Research Focus

In this article, I will focus on the strategies taken by the second and third speakers: the questioner and the answerer. Time management was key to carry out those two roles; it was hard for these university students to ask questions for a full three minutes. Furthermore, it was stressful for the students who took the role of answerer to think and respond to rapid-fire questions. In debating terminology, this exchange of communication is known as the crossfire period. Here are the essential points that I wanted to validate:

- Crossfire is at least as important as the introductory and concluding speeches.
- Performing well in crossfire requires preparation and practice.
- There is only enough time for a limited number of questions and corresponding number of answers.
- Crossfire is a very important part of debate and judges are inclined to vote almost exclusively for the team that did the best at asking and answering.

Observations

The idiomatic expression, ‘the gloves and masks came off,’ perfectly describes the crossfire period of the debate that I observed. It was an exciting final match. At the start of the debate, to determine the best language course delivery mode, the following two questions were raised by a team member who defended the efficacy of remote learning: “Despite COVID-19, why does your team think blended learning is a good way for students to be educated?” and “Why does your team think face-to-face learning is best?” The spokesperson for blended learning asked the crossfire question, “Both face-to-face and online learning classes are convenient ways for students to take a class, so why should they just choose face-to-face teaching?” Finally, the face-to-face team asked, “Things are getting better. It is not so dangerous to come to class with masks and washed hands during the COVID-19 period, don’t you both think?” (see Figure 1).

After a round of questions, the team spokesperson who supported a blended learning style replied, “If students know the techniques of how to take online classes as well as face-to-face classes, it will be easier for them to maintain the current system and to ensure they receive quality education until the end of the COVID-19 crisis. Online classes are only one of the choices we can have.” The face-to-face team answered that, “Students prefer to make new friends, and teachers barely have enough time to prepare the online classes for students. Further-

more, students can easily focus on the teacher who is present in the room. The teacher can quickly see who looks confused; who is out of focus in the class. Also, teachers can help students to solve problems when they do not understand the lesson at hand. Additionally, not all students have their own computer to download the necessary software applications to have an online class.” During this crossfire melee, the team that supported online learning immediately replied that, “students can easily download those apps by smartphone. Nowadays, all people own at least a smartphone” (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Time pressure spurred the learning of debate skills



Figure 2

Wielding dual smartphones at the debate duel

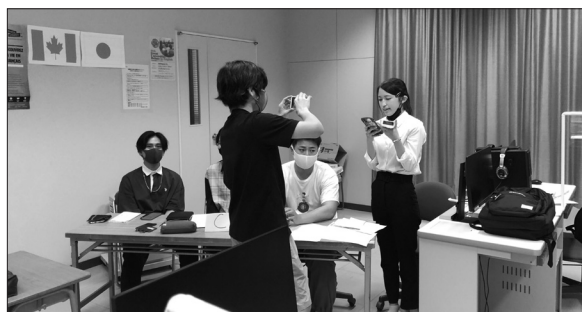


Figure 3

On-screen team watching the TA support an on-site team



Discussion

I think the most difficult part of the debate was answering the slew of questions the teams had prepared. The teams could have tried to predict which questions they might have to field, but they were unsure as to the kind of questions the other team could ask. The third speaker was required to prepare an answer before the timekeeper of the roundtable debate called on them—within six minutes or so from when the question was first posed.

The best way to make good use of time is to make a list of questions ahead of time. Advice by Stefan (2017) continues to be valid during the Coronavirus pandemic: For debate teams to win, they must prepare questions in advance. Questioners may decide to only use one (or none) of those questions as they adapt to their opponents' responses, but thinking of questions ahead of time helps when facing a crossfire of questions and answers under the pressure of a timed performance. If debaters can think about the topic, questions, and answers ahead of time, they will be even more likely to think of good questions during the debate. Therefore, questioners should try to prepare as many questions as possible or repeat their questions, thus ensuring that they can fully use their allotted time. Talking for a full three minutes—rather than quitting early—allows their own team's respondents to simultaneously prepare answers for fielding upcoming questions from the opponents.

However, during online debates, unforeseen problems can arise, and debaters need to think and act accordingly. When accepting the most valuable player certificate during the award ceremony, the student explained that during a Zoom session, he could not clearly hear the voices and sometimes the video was interrupted. He felt sorry for the opposing university teams, and definitely wanted to have a face-to-face debate next time (Kisaki, 2021).

Conclusion

Acting as a judge in the debate afforded me the opportunity to observe how students developed keener interpersonal behavior and sharper communication skills when they debated. Debate really did enhance their critical thinking skills. According to Matthew (2021), even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and zooming have come to the fore, debating continues to be “an excellent school tool to encourage higher-order and critical thinking skills. It teaches students to structure and organize their thoughts while also developing their analytical and research skills” (p. 1). The experience could be useful for the students'

future careers and implies that they could be better prepared when asked to make public presentations or participate in business negotiations. For me as the judge and for the TA who assisted (see Figure 3), it was a good experience to learn more debating skills, to analyze the strategies of crossfire communication, and ultimately to form better judgment skills. It was very challenging for graduate students to organize this debate event because we worked in roles such as emcees, timekeepers, and judges. Extracurricular debate is not an activity just for the teams who join, it also includes all the people who organize and watch the debate. The audience also formed their own opinions, considered who they thought should have won the contest, and had an opportunity to express their thoughts afterwards.

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