THE DISCUSSION PROJECT
Learn to Discuss • Discuss to Learn

Structured Academic Controversy

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Purpose

The Structured Academic Controversy is a small-group discussion strategy based on the principles of cooperative learning. It is not a debate. Structured Academic Controversies are designed to engage students in ethical and political issues – most often structured as a "Should…" question. For example, "Should the federal minimum wage be increased to $15 an hour?" The purpose is to structure the discussion so that students dig deeper into an issue and consider alternate perspectives before making a decision.

Protocol

1. <u>(Optional) Hook</u>: Introduces the topic and gets students thinking about the issue. A hook can take many forms. A few example ideas include a video clip and short discussion; a partner discussion of a political cartoon; a quickwrite and paired discussion; a Venn diagram activity.
2. <u>Background:</u> Students receive shared background information about the issue. The background should help create a common starting point for discussion. Background materials could include readings done at home, a longer video, a lecture, or some combination.
3. <u>Prepare the Arguments</u>: Students are assigned into groups of four, which are then broken up into two pairs. One pair is assigned the PRO position and the other pair takes the CON position. It is best if the instructor makes those assignments so that students are asked to defend views that they might not agree with.
   a. In the more simple version of a SAC, students are given a short position statement; PRO for those supporting the question, CON for those opposing it.
   b. Pairs work together to discuss their position statement and develop the best 3-4 arguments for their assigned side. PRO and CON must not discuss with each other during preparation! (approx. 8-10 min)
   c. Pairs plan how they will use their two minutes of presentation time. Both members of each pair are expected to share in the presentation.

4. <u>Present the Arguments:</u> There is NO DEBATE during this part of the process.
   - PRO has 2 minutes to present their arguments to CON (CON listens and takes notes). CON may ask clarifying questions, "I didn't quite understand what you meant by … Can you explain?" The retelling begins with, "What I heard you say was…."
   - CON has 2 minutes to tell PRO   what they heard for arguments. And CON's time ends with, "Did we get that right?"
   - Repeat the same process. CON has 2 minutes to present their arguments to PRO (A listens and takes notes).
   - PRO has 2 minutes to ask clarifying questions (if needed) and provide their retelling before asking "Did we get that right?"

5. <u>Open Discussion</u>: All participants drop their assigned position and have a free discussion about what they individually think about the issue. Students may try to come to some consensus as a group – is there some policy/action on which they can all agree?

6. <u>Debrief</u>: Discuss the issue as a whole class. Some ideas for the debrief: Ask for a show of hands on where people are, ask students to stand along a continuum of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," or have people move to a Pro side of the room and to the Con side of the room. It is good practice to ask, "Did anyone change their mind about the issue?" and "Which argument on the other side do you find the most compelling or hardest to respond to?"

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To minimize moves for making groups, do the following in Zoom...

1. <u>PREPARE PAIRS</u>: To make pairs for the *Pairs / Prepare the Arguments* stage, simply make randomized pairs once everyone has arrived in class, knowing that the pairs will alternate PRO / CON all the way down the list. Thus, odd numbered rooms are PRO and even numbered are CON. Don't forget to set the timer!

2. <u>NOTIFY OF POSITIONS</u>: Before you send participants to rooms, and after you've explained the Pair / Prepare the Arguments instructions, <u>orally call out names and positions</u> (PRO/ CON). In other words, you'd say, "Alyssa and Aisha you are PRO, Belinda, Bob, and Praya you are CON, Chiara and Kim you are PRO, Dan and Lamar you are CON" and so on until everyone has heard their assignment.

3. <u>PROVIDE DOCUMENTS</u>: Then, be sure to send the links to the relevant PRO / CON documents in Chat or however you distribute.

4. <u>PREPARE QUADS</u>: When the *Pair / Prepare the Argument* session is done, and after you've pulled them back to the main room, post the *Quad / Present the Arguments* instructions in Chat and ask students to read them while you make the Quads (sometimes there will be groups of 5 or 6).

   ○ To make the Quads, simply move the CON people up into the group above them so that they join a PRO group to form a Quad (or larger). You are combining sequential odd and even groups. Don't forget to change the timer to the correct number of minutes!