

## Aufsatz

# Fostering Innovation through Debating in the Classroom:

Lessons from the Development of an E-learning Course  
for Secondary School Teachers in Hungary\*

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### Abstract

The paper introduces the e-learning material titled *Debate and Innovation: An Introduction into the Use of Debating in and Outside the Classroom* developed within the framework of the EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00022 project. The material prepares secondary school teachers in Hungary to introduce debating in the classroom with the aim of developing a number of competencies and fostering social innovation. The paper first details the methodological reasoning behind the make-up of the material while giving an overview of the units. Next, it analyzes the results of a survey intended to gauge the level of interest in and knowledge about using debating in the classroom among pre- and in-service teachers of English studying at the University of Debrecen. The paper discusses the findings of the survey pertaining to the respondents' concerns regarding the introduction of debating into the classroom and addresses the results that confirm the need for a face-to-face course on debating as well.

*Keywords:* ESL methodology; debating; debate competitions; EFOP; e-learning; social innovation

### Introduction

Critical thinking, proper argumentation, teamwork, public speaking—the multitude of competencies developed by debating can undoubtedly yield numerous benefits for the individual (cf. Bellon 2000: 164ff; Jackson 1973:

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151ff). However, debating and social innovation are also closely linked for a variety of reasons. Firstly, engaging in structured debates provides an opportunity to do research and get well-versed in a topic (cf. Hooley 2007: 18). This is useful not only because of the immense amount of knowledge gained during the process, but because a well-chosen topic relates to pressing global, regional, or even local issues, to which meaningful solutions can emerge in the process (cf. Bellon 2000: 166). Secondly, discussing such issues fosters a deeper understanding of—and in turn raises interest in—them (cf. Pace 2003: 45), which then has the potential of resulting in community development and an increased interest in civic values (cf. Tessier 2009: 151). Thirdly, this problem-solving attitude along with the networking opportunities offered by taking part in debating competitions (cf. Bellon 2000: 167) can engender a paradigm shift among young people insofar as they put their newly acquired skills into practice by joining forces and establishing start-ups aimed at innovation.

Taking these advantages into consideration, this paper focuses on the methodology of learning and teaching debating. In the following, I will introduce the e-learning material I co-developed with Balázs Venkovits, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen, whose paper titled *Debating in and Outside of the Classroom: Key Benefits, Challenges and How We May Help* details, among other topics, how debating fits into the National Core Curriculum of Hungary. Next, I will describe the results of a survey conducted online among pre- and in-service teachers of English studying at the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen, and discuss its findings. Finally, I will reflect on the possibilities of further investigation into the methods of reaching an even wider audience with the goal of promoting debating.

## 1 The e-learning material

The course titled *Debate and Innovation: An Introduction into the Use of Debating in and Outside the Classroom* is primarily targeted at secondary school teachers who have limited experience with using debating. Its main goal is to take an educator from being a novice in the methodology of debating to not only understanding the principles of using it in a group setting, but to being able to prepare students for debate competitions as well as to being able to judge and organize such events. Although debating can be used extremely effectively in an ESL classroom, the language of the material is Hungarian so that its audience would not be limited to teachers of English only. What is more, the pool of potential users is not strictly limited to teachers: professionals working in corporate environments or in

any state-sponsored context would benefit from it. Learning and being able to coach the skills associated with debating could ultimately foster greater respect, better communication, and an innovation-centered attitude among members belonging to organizations of various profiles; thus, leaders and coaches serving various communities could profit from using *Debate and Innovation*.

The nature of the material is interactive: the user is often asked to solve various tasks and submit written answers to a number of questions in order to aid the learning process by facilitating critical thinking. In other words, the structure is centered on problem solving, which already in itself fosters an attitude of seeking innovative solutions. The units are designed with the user as a reflective practitioner in mind, that is, the user is expected to adapt the material to her/his context and then reflect on the outcomes.

Examples of such guiding questions and tasks will be given in the overview below.

Apart from 4 brief components such as the Foreword, User Feedback, Bibliography, and a Bonus section containing additional tips and tricks, the course has 11 core units. In the following, I will provide a detailed introduction of some of the units and a cursory glance into others, focusing on the methodologically driven decisions that we made during the development of the material.

### ***1.1 Introduction***

The introductory part serves as a gateway to the more information-laden units of the course. It starts by contending that debating pervades our everyday lives to a huge extent, then asks the reader to add to the list of situations in which we need to use debating in everyday life, such as during job interviews or even marital disputes. It argues that learning proper argumentation can lead to positive outcomes in all walks of life.

The next aim of the Introduction is to familiarize the user with the wide range of the potential benefits of debating. First, the user is invited to think about these benefits in general and list them in the order s/he wishes. Then, s/he gets a list of specific aspects—such as “benefits for the individual,” “benefits at school,” or “benefits for society”—along which s/he can group them. This two-step process makes it possible for the user to follow up on a short brainstorming session by taking more time to generate even more specific ideas. The user then gets immediate feedback as the next page lists potential answers organized along the aforementioned axes.

After examining the numerous advantages of using debating in a group setting, the user might still have lingering doubts about whether this method is suitable for her/his specific setting. Therefore, the next sub-unit attempts to quell these fears by inviting the user to come up with possible

solutions. Again, asking the user to approach the topic critically—instead of providing ready-made answers—fosters a deeper understanding of the material at hand. It also facilitates an attitude that favors taking responsibility for making the best of one’s circumstances. This principle is emphasized in the text itself: the user is reminded that some of these doubts might only be excuses that could be circumvented with the help of some foresight. After reacting in writing to statements such as “I’m afraid that debates would end up as fights” or “We can’t use debating because we don’t have the time, we are overwhelmed as it is,” the user reads a short text that provides detailed answers and gives tips on how to overcome these fears. As flexibility is a salient feature of the course, the text underlines the importance of tailoring these solutions to the specific needs and assets of the group.

As debate competitions organized for secondary school students are gaining ground in Hungary, a sub-section of the Introduction gives a brief overview of the different types both here and abroad.

## ***1.2 Short Activities***

The next unit introduces several games and other short activities that serve multiple purposes: they develop various skills and qualities ranging from active listening and effective note-taking to respect and patience; they can break the ice at the beginning of a session or when the groups starts tackling a new topic; or they simply help the participants to feel more at ease in each other’s presence. Keeping in line with the ethos of the entirety of the course, the structure of this unit ensures that the user is not merely a passive recipient. Instead of just reading about the activities, the user is asked to think about each one critically and to answer several related questions. Thus, after reading an outline of each game, for example, the user has to answer the following questions:

- In what stage of preparation would you use this activity (e.g. when the group members are novices, or when they are already acquainted with the mechanics of proper argumentation, or when it is time for finishing touches...)?
- How much time should be allotted for this activity (e.g. the first/last couple of minutes of a session would do, or it would take at least 45 minutes, or the entirety of an afternoon workshop is needed...)?
- What would you say its goal is? What skills does it develop?
- Are there any age restrictions (e.g. it is inappropriate for those under 14, or those over 18 would find it boring...)?
- The instructions contain some specific restrictions. What would you say the reason behind them is?

- What could be the next logical step after completing this activity?

The user thus has to read the instructions very carefully to be able to answer all the questions, all the while thinking about ways each activity relates to her/his specific working environment. The sample answers in the brackets facilitate the brainstorming process: they intend to provide the user with options that s/he can then tailor to her/his needs.

Only after contemplating her/his answers can the user read detailed sample answers for each activity. These suggested answers provide her/him with an opportunity to check her/his own answers. They also serve as a springboard for further ideas since they contain suggestions for further practice or other, related skills development activities.

As the unit gets progressively more challenging, the next step for the user is to read some supplementary material including the description of several other games and activities, and then to think about which activity would be the best match for her/his specific teaching or coaching practice. The next steps demand even more: complementing or extending existing games with elements that make sense in the own practice of the user asks her/him to reflect on her/his practice in an even more detailed and critical way, all the while keeping in mind what skills related to debating need to be developed. Finally, the user has to construct new activities and, if applicable, write the instructions. Thus, the unit takes the user from analyzing and understanding the benefits of several games to considering how to modify them to finally being able to create new ones.

The first two units, then, are somewhat “soft” insofar as they are skill-based: they attend to skills development and they ease the user into the process of debating by focusing on attitudes and self-reflection. The next units in turn offer hard facts and informative descriptions while still being built in a progressive manner.

### ***1.3 The Karl Popper Debate Format I. and II.***

As the Karl Popper format is the one most often used in the European context and especially in Hungary, these two sections of the material aim to familiarize the user with its rules. However, instead of merely summarizing the format, the first of these two units offers an introduction to it by asking the user to watch a complete recording of a round of debate and jot down her/his impressions. Thus, in keeping with the principles of discovery learning, the user gets to observe and formulate the rules: with the help of several guiding questions, s/he has to describe the particulars of the format, such as the number of participants and judges as well as the time limits. At this point, the user is not expected to have a firm grasp of the rules; however, several preliminary questions about the (dis)advantages of

this format or about the individual performance of the participants help the user become aware of the mechanics of the format.

More importantly, when the user answers questions such as “What practical benefits can debating using this format yield later in the participants’ lives?,” or “How and why would you use this specific format in your own practice?”, s/he has the chance to critically engage with the know-how of debating as well.

Once the user’s curiosity is piqued, *The Karl Popper Debate Format II* delves into the specifics of the rules.

#### ***1.4 Argumentation***

Following a unit on how to construct a proper statement that can form the basis of a debate, argumentation becomes the main focus of the course. The course guides the user through the steps of research needed to meaningfully engage in debates, then gives practical advice on how to construct as well as to refute arguments.

#### ***1.5 Public Speaking, Judging, and Organizing a Debate***

A unit on public speaking follows, complete with video illustrations and a sample lesson plan. Then, the user can learn and practice how to evaluate and judge complete rounds of debates. In the next unit, the user gets the opportunity to think through how to organize a debate event. Guiding questions help her/him to determine the particulars of such an undertaking: when and where to organize the event, or whom to invite and how. The user is required to anticipate challenges as well and think over a number of less-than-optimal scenarios that could occur before, during, or after the event. Again, the user is encouraged to solve these tasks with her/his specific circumstances in mind.

Another feature of the course that promotes seeking individual solutions is its heavy reliance on feedback. Several chatting and feedback modules are built into the course, which facilitates communication between the creators of the course and the users, and among the users themselves. This way, users—whether educators or corporate coaches— can share their best practices with each other. These features of the course also make self-reflection and self-assessment possible.

Following a year of extensive work on the project, the e-learning material will soon be available for the public. It also has the potential of being re-worked as a face-to-face or a blended course that would fit in the teacher training program. At the beginning of January, 2019, we conducted an online survey to explore this possibility.

## 2 The survey

### 2.1 Objectives

The goal of the questionnaire was to gauge the level of interest in and knowledge about using debating in the classroom among students enrolled in two English teacher training programs at the University of Debrecen: the four- or five-year full time and the one-year part-time MA programs. There are several in-service teachers among the students of the latter program: some might be teachers of other subjects, while some might already be teachers of English at the primary level. Therefore, we expected that some respondents might already be familiar with using debating in the classroom, but that a significant portion of the respondents—mainly pre-service teachers in the full time program—will be complete novices.

Our hypotheses were the following:

- the majority of respondents is not overly familiar with using debating in the classroom and that even though some of them might have tried it, they would consider themselves less experienced;
- the majority of respondents, whether experienced debate trainers or not, would show interest in learning more about debating; and
- the majority of respondents, given their (supposed) young age would prefer online, e-learning based platforms and methods of education.

### 2.2 Methodology

After collecting some demographic data about the respondents' gender, age, and type and level of experience, we asked them whether they have used debating in the classroom, and, if yes, how often. A few question focused on debate competitions, such as “Have you ever heard about DEbate, the debate competition organized by the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen?,” “Have you ever heard about other debate competitions, whether in English or in Hungarian?,” and “Have you ever prepared your students for debate competitions?”

The most important questions for our purposes were “What is/are your biggest concern(s) regarding the use of debating in the classroom? Feel free to choose more than one option,” as well as two questions related to the material we have developed: “Would you be interested in learning about how to use debating in the classroom?” and “What kind of educational material would you be interested in using in your preparation? Feel free to choose more than one option.” Finding out more about what psychological or logistical factors hinder the introduction of debating into the educational setting helps us further improve the material by identifying ways in which we can address these issues. Similarly, obtaining more information about

what format students are the most interested in helps us tailor the material to their needs in the future.

### ***2.3 Main findings***

57 students filled out the survey, three quarters of whom are female. As expected, more than 90% of them are between the ages of 18 and 25. An overwhelming majority of the respondents say they are not in-service teachers yet. Among the 14% percent who are in-service teachers, only one person has more than 5 years of experience (6-10 years), while three people chose the option of 1-5 years, and four people chose “less than a year.”

Correlating with the data above, only a little over 12% (that is, 7 individuals) said they had used debating in the classroom: one of them uses it at least once every week, one of them at least once every month, while 5 respondents claim they have only used it a few times.

The questions about debate competitions tell a similar story: the majority are not familiar with debating competitions, and only 3 respondents have prepared students for one.

Regarding the fears around debating in the classroom, the option “I am worried that my students would be too shy to participate” has 29 responses, “I am worried that my students would be unwilling to participate” has 27 responses, while “Our lessons are too short/we do not have enough lessons to do it” has 25 responses.

When asked whether the respondents would be interested in learning more about how to use debating in the classroom, nobody chose the option “no”: 46 individuals selected “yes,” while 11 selected “it depends.”

Regarding the type of educational material the respondents would be interested in, the top four options are: a face-to-face course, websites, printed material, and a university course for credit. The latter option is further underpinned by a comment left in the “other remarks” box:

I believe it would be beneficial for university students as well (especially in the teacher training program) to debate at the university lessons. I do not think that there are enough courses now to develop our communication in English. [...] Moreover, most of the university students are not only unable to stand up for themselves, they have no idea about proper reasoning or providing structured arguments. Debating would be great to overcome these issues, since (I hope) it is a common goal to train excellent teachers.

### ***2.4 Discussion of Findings***

The findings clearly indicate that there is considerable interest in debating in the classroom among pre- and in-service teachers of English studying at the University. Even though the majority of respondents has limited or no



experience with teaching in general and teaching debating in particular, they would be interested to know more about it.

When asked about their concerns, the respondents indicated two fears that are connected to the ability and willingness of the students, and one fear connected to time management. The e-learning material addresses the potential shyness of the students in the unit dealing with public speaking: we offer a number of games and tricks which can help with boosting confidence. The students' willingness to participate can be boosted by introducing the games described above in the class, and by asking them to debate issues that have direct bearing on their lives. Alternatively, as we suggest in the Bonus section, if the class discusses current topics—maybe even seemingly trivial pop culture phenomena—, their interest can be upheld longer (cf. Reboy 1989: 412f).

We address the concern regarding time management directly by offering a number of engaging activities that could easily be incorporated into any busy schedule. We also encourage users to incorporate debating into skills development activities and argue that doing research improves reading or potentially even listening skills, responding to arguments in a written form contributes to the development of writing and composition skills, while debating itself improves listening and speaking skills (Brown 2009: 546ff; Leow 1995:167). Certain grammatical structures and vocabulary items can also be put at the forefront by, for example, instructing students to use them during the debate. Doing research on an issue related to the target country can enhance students' knowledge of its culture. As for non-language classes, spending time researching and debating an issue can certainly result in better information retention (cf. Bellon 2000: 163). Therefore, time spent on these skills development activities and the teaching and learning of grammatical structure, vocabulary items, or of other data will be substituted by a project focused on debating.

The respondents' interest in face-to-face and/or university courses that center on how to learn and teach debating suggests that there is a legitimate need for instruction beyond an e-learning course. The syllabus for a semester-long university course could be developed along the lines of our material, that is, the 11 core units could correspond to 11 weeks of face-to-face instruction. Each week, the focus would be two-fold: firstly, the debating and linguistic competencies of the pre-service teachers would need to be developed; secondly, the course would grant them the methodological knowledge needed to then train their own students. The remaining 4 weeks of an average semester would be spent with 1) orientation and discussion of requirements, 2) an end-term examination, 3) feedback and evaluation, with one week being the consultation week. While students in the teacher training program learn how to “do” and

teach debate, they gain skills that undoubtedly benefit them in their future profession and contribute to innovation through teaching.

Given that the majority of the respondents are in their twenties, it is quite surprising that their answers show a clear bias toward printed material and face-to-face instruction. Experience could be a major factor here: it is our contention that pre-service teachers might favor hands-on instruction and plenty of opportunities to practice and get real-time, personal feedback, while an e-learning material might be more suitable for those in-service teachers who already have a busy schedule and need a course they can complete at their own pace. Further studies will need to be done to get a definitive picture.

## Conclusion

In the future, then, the professionals who complete our course will have a solid understanding of how debating works. They will be able to introduce it to a classroom step by step and then go as far as preparing their students for in-house competitions they themselves have organized – or even for prestigious debating competitions in Hungary or abroad. In the meantime, students will learn how to do research on complex topics, how to eloquently speak in front of an audience, and how to argue in a constructive manner. These skills will undoubtedly benefit each student on an individual level—in their future careers and even private lives—, but once young people experience that their voices are heard and their ideas are given serious thought, they will be more inclined to participate in civic action. Their solution-focused mindset will thus benefit society as well. As the results of the survey described above suggest, our e-learning material urges educators to approach debating in a way that satisfies the demands of the target audience; however, the development of a face-to-face course or offering individual/group workshop sessions might even better cater to their needs.

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