Utilizing Debates in Athletic Training Education

Malissa Martin, EdD, ATC, CSCS • College of Mount St. Joseph, Kelley A. Moran, PT, DPT, ATC, CSCS • Misericordia University, and Kelly Harrison, MS, ATC • East Stroudsburg University

Creating learning activities that actively engage students in higher order learning can be challenging. Getting students to view situations from multiple perspectives is even more challenging. Based on social learning theory, debates represent an instructional strategy that actively engages students in critical thinking and requires the use of multiple perspectives. The purposes of this report are (a) to provide a step-by-step process to develop debates in athletic training, and (b) to demonstrate how debates can be used to enhance consideration of multiple perspectives when making decisions.

Developing Debates in Athletic Training Education

The first step in developing a debate is to construct a question that can be answered from several defensible perspectives. Questions can be created by the instructor that relate to specific course learning outcomes or they can be generated by the learners as part of a constructivist approach.

The best topics for debates are those that are controversial and that have an impact on multiple levels of society. Examples of debate questions that we have found to be very successful include the following:

1. Should high school athletes be tested for drug use?
2. Should professional athletes be allowed to return to sport after having repeatedly tested positive for drug use?
3. Should static stretching be included in pregame warm up?
4. Is low-level laser therapy an effective treatment for relief of localized musculoskeletal pain?
5. Should collegiate athletic training clinics bill insurance companies for the rehabilitative services they provide?

In classroom debates, students are typically divided into three groups: (a) a group that defends a position, (b) a group that opposes a position, and (c) a group that judges how well the other groups either defend or oppose the position. Typical group sizes are between 2 to 4 students.

A clear outline of the debate sequence, rules, and expectations is provided by the instructor prior to the debate. The National Debate Tournament (NDT) provides a resource to assist in formatting the logistics of the debate. The NDT is the oldest and most popular form of debate used at the college level.

The length, time, and type of preparation expected for the debate is determined by the instructor. A typical classroom debate

© 2009 Human Kinetics - Att 14(1), pp. 31-34
sequence takes approximately 30-50 minutes to complete, but the duration can be modified. It is critical that students adhere to time limits. A student who serves as a judge should be designated as the timekeeper to help individuals and groups stay on track. During the debate, the instructor assumes the role of a moderator or discussion facilitator.

To set the stage for the debate, the classroom should be arranged with the opposing groups facing each other and with the judges placed between the two groups (refer to Figure 1). Prior to beginning the debate, the facilitator should review the roles of each group, the debate rules, and the debate format. The timekeeper is recognized, and participants are informed that the timekeeper will provide a warning to indicate that 30 seconds remain for completion of an oral presentation. Figure 2 provides some additional tips for organizing debates.

The debate begins with the facilitator announcing the question. The affirmative group has 5 minutes to make their first presentation. One member of the group presents arguments to support the group’s position on the issue. After the first 5-minute period ends, the opposing group has 2 minutes to cross-examine the affirmative arguments. During cross-examination, a member of the opposing group questions the affirmative arguments to identify flaws. Next, the opposing group has 5 minutes to present their first opposing argument. Following this period, the affirmative group has 2 minutes to cross-examine the opposing argument. A series of oral presentations and cross-examinations by other members of the opposing groups follows (Table 1).

After all of the arguments have been presented and cross-examined, time is allowed for both groups to develop rebuttals. Rebuttals do not make new arguments, but rather extend the arguments that were previously presented. Each group is given a specified amount of time to present rebuttals. After the rebuttals, each group is given time to present a final summary statement.

A rubric can be used by the judges to evaluate debate performance. The rubric addresses presentation style, quality of arguments in relation to established facts, quality of preparation, use of multiple perspectives, the extent to which cross-examinations identified flaws, and quality of rebuttals as a means to extend previous arguments. Figure 3 provides addresses for web resources that provide debate rubrics and additional information that is relevant to use of debates for learning.

Post-debate questions are often useful as a means to facilitate further discussion on a debate topic. A variety of strategies can be used to augment the learning experience, including online threaded discussion or a short reflective writing assignment.

Using Debates to Enhance Multiple Learning Skills

Classroom debates can be used to heighten awareness of issues, reinforce knowledge on a specific topic, sharpen analytical thinking, provide the opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills, and develop tolerance for ambiguity.1,3,4 Debates can be used to explore the wide range of backgrounds and diverse perspectives of students. In some cases controversial issues can highlight the complexities of healthcare