Debate Styles (Formal & Informal)

Formal

Parliamentary-style debates

Here, your students are divided into two teams of three or four, with or without a third group of students who form their audience and judging panel. Group A propose and defend the motion; Group B reject and attack it; if there is a Group C, they decide at the end who had the better arguments and whether the motion is carried or dismissed. Allow time beforehand for each group to think of arguments and counter-arguments to defend their position (Group Cs can help As or Bs), and to decide on the order of the speakers. To make it really formal, at the start of the debate, board "This house believes that…" followed by the motion to be debated. I discuss parliamentary-style debates more fully in this post about the Stop Online Piracy Act currently being discussed in the US House of Representatives.

Balloon debates

Ask each student to think of any famous person in history - real or made up in a film or book. Then separate them into groups of between three and eight and explain this posit: They are in a hot-air balloon, floating serenely through the summer sky when it gets into trouble and starts to sink. If it continues to sink they will all die, so to save all of the people in the balloon, one of them has to be jettisoned, but only accompanied with a very good reason. This gets the group talking and, more importantly, debating in English, and makes up a very long and interesting lesson. It also throws up some staggeringly surreal outcomes, including The Little Match Girl being thrown out of her balloon by Pavarotti, Michael Jordan and Mao Zedong.

Debate pods

Here, students work in teams of two or more, to prepare their case (thinking about arguments and counter-arguments, as well as putting these in order of importance) and then argue it against another group who are their opposition. Make sure you board who will be debating who before your students start their preparations, and that all groups know what they will be arguing for or against. When it's time to debate, you can have listening groups, who judge the winner and make notes (on presentation, clarity of speech, quality of argument, body language and/or powers of persuasion) for subsequent feedback, or (if your colleagues don't mind) pit three or more teams against each other at the same time. Be warned, this last option is likely to be LOUD!

Informal

Class mingle

This method asks students to share their real opinions. Based on their attitudes to the proposed motion, and the reasons behind them, students mingle and try to persuade others to take their side. Set a time limit, and ask your students to form a line from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with the motion at the mingle's end. Have any of them changed their minds? What were the most persuasive arguments they heard? Whose opinion did they disagree with the most, and can they remember the arguments this person used to defend their position? Such mingles are a good way of encouraging students to speak about more controversial topics, especially when there is a real diversity of opinion in your class. By its nature, it is less structured than the more formal approaches above, so less preparation time is necessary. You might simply ask your students to think about how they feel about the issue(s) to be debated, or to spend five minutes creating a mind-map of associations or other notes about the issue, before beginning the mingle.

Debating stations

This is a nice way of debating several related motions. Print or write these out and stick them in various places around the classroom. Divide your students into groups of 4 or 5 and ask them to move around the class, sharing their thoughts about each issue and trying to persuade others of their case. This method works best with moral and political issues and, due to its informality, can be used with more controversial topics provided your students are happy to discuss these (with certain classes, I might be tempted to provoke discussion on euthanasia, the existence of God, and so on).