Structured Academic Controversy: What Should We Do?

Summary

Through a sequence of scaffolded steps, small groups of students increase their understanding of a community (shared) problem. They consider alternative perspectives and engage in a shared decision-making process.

Student Handouts: Structured Academic Controversy Ethical Discussion Worksheet.

Teacher Instructions

1. Prepare

Select an enduring issue that is central to the course and where values are in conflict.

Clarify for students the purpose of the deliberation — to come to a decision.

State or elicit from students appropriate behavior and norms — for example:

Hear all sides equally and speak one at a time.

Listen well enough to respond to and build upon each other's ideas.

Back up opinions with clear reasons.

2. Background

Students read (or are presented) general background information on the issue. They identify relevant facts, as well as the stakeholders and their primary concerns.

3. Make groups

Students are split into groups of four, and further into pairs.

4. Read positions

Each pair reads about a different position on the issue.

5. Plan presentations

Each pair plans a presentation of its position and arguments. Having students focus on the three most important arguments is helpful.

6. One side presents, the other repeats

One side presents their three important arguments to the other side. The other side needs to listen carefully, take notes, and then repeat the arguments back in order to be sure that they understand them, asking clarifying questions as necessary.

7. The pairs switch and the process is duplicated

Now, the side which originally listened is the one to present their arguments.

As before, the other side will listen, take notes, and repeat the arguments back.

8. Each side provides feedback to the other until everyone is satisfied that their position has been heard and understood.

9. Dissolve pairs to come to consensus/disagreement

The students proceed as their own individual selves, using information both from their experiences as well as the background readings.

Prompt: "Forge a position as a group. Feel free to change your mind. See if you can come to consensus on this issue, or at least clarify the disagreement."

Handout contributed by Rosetta Lee, Seattle Girls School

Modified from David Johnson and Roger Johnson by Parker, Walter C. (2003).
Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life.
New York: Teachers College, Columbia University

NAME_____ Date_____ Period_____

Structured Academic Controversy
Ethical Discussion Worksheet

The Issue:

_____

Team Members FOR

1. _____   2. _____

Team Members AGAINST

1. _____   2. _____

Relevant Facts:

Stakeholders and their primary concerns:

NAME_____ Date_____ Period_____

Structured Academic Controversy
Ethical Discussion Worksheet

Main Argument(s) FOR:	Main Argument(s) AGAINST:
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

List possible solutions:

Common ground reached: