University of Chester

Author(s): Ruth L Healy

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The power of debate: Reflections on the potential of debates for engaging students in critical thinking about controversial geographical topics

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Dr Ruth L Healey

Department of Geography and Development Studies

University of Chester

Parkgate Road

Chester

CH1 4BJ

r.healey@chester.ac.uk

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Abstract

Many controversial subjects characterise geography in the 21st Century. Issues such as climate change, sustainability and social exclusion generate much discussion and often involve clear differences in opinion of how they might be addressed. Higher education is an important space for critical engagement with challenging issues. Preparing for and participating in debates enables students to develop critical thinking skills, alongside a variety of oral presentation and discussion skills. This article reflects on the potential for teaching through debate in geography. The arguments are illustrated through a debate about whether asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the UK.

Key words

Debate; critical thinking; communication skills; oral presentation; controversial subjects; asylum seekers

Debates as a method for developing critical thinking and oral skills in geography

Many controversial subjects characterise geography in the 21st Century. Issues such as climate change, sustainability and social exclusion generate much discussion, particularly when explored through a geographical lens of who gains and who loses, when and where. Consequently a student graduating from an undergraduate geography degree should be able to analyse critically the evidence on such topics from several different perspectives and be able to express their opinions on how these issues should be tackled orally as well as in writing (QAA, 2007). Organised debates in class are one teaching method which supports students to develop such skills.

It has been proposed that we should "devote heightened levels of energy to activities that offer the potential to sustain universities as places for critical, activist and just scholarship" (Hay, 2001, p.141). The debate activity discussed here supports the development of critical thinking skills, but also has the potential to support critical engagement, along the lines suggested by Hay (2001). Teaching which offers students the opportunity for critical reflection on the wider world may have long lasting impacts on their views and the potential for social transformations potential (Castree, 2000; Cook, 2000; Wellens *et al.*, 2006).

This paper argues for the value of debate in teaching geography in higher education. As a pedagogic exercise a debate offers the potential to engage students in critical thinking, analyse political issues, and develop a range of transferable skills. The extent to which a debate delivers on all of these aspects depends upon the design. For example, it may provide opportunities to develop transferable skills, but the topic under discussion may not relate to critical thinking about a political issue. Here both critical thinking about

controversial issues and the development of key transferable skills are brought together. This paper focuses upon an example of teaching through debate in a small class, at a post-1992 University in the UK.

Debates within teaching

The use of debate to explore different perspectives and arrive at conclusions dates back to the Egyptians over 4000 years ago (Kennedy, 2009). Debates as a method of teaching began in ancient Greece with the 'father of debate', Protagoras of Abdera (481-411 BC) (Smith, 1918; Kennedy, 2009). Whilst academics in the 1980s highlighted debate as "a promising teaching device" (Lewin & Wakefield, Jr., 1983, p.116) only certain disciplines, such as law, have taken the method on board to any great extent. The use of debates within higher education has generally remained restricted predominantly to extra-curricular debate teams outside of the classroom (Bellon, 2000). This limited use may relate to the criticisms levied against the Socratic debate method, for being too adversarial and combative. Yet, research has indicated the effectiveness of debates in supporting learning in a variety of disciplines including economics, education, history, marketing, medicine, nursing, psychology, sociology and social work (Dundes, 2001; Helenius *et al.*, 2006; Kennedy, 2009; Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008). There is, however, a significant dearth of literature specifically reflecting on the use of debates in teaching geography, despite the range of topics in the discipline which offer potential for such a method. Research has discussed opportunities for exploring particular sides of debates through role playing activities such as in preparation for planning a public inquiry (Livingston 1999; Maddrell 1994). This offers the opportunity to focus upon particular perspectives of issues, but not the same level of 'thinking on your feet' which forms a central part of a debate. Learning to cope with the uncertainty

associated with participating in a debate is a useful skill in future employment and is seen as an increasingly important function of higher education (Barnett, 2000).

A debate is defined as a formal discussion about an issue or a problem (Thomas, 1996). Historically debates have an oral tradition, although web 2.0 technologies have the potential also to create a space for online debate in a written format (Selwyn, 2007), or virtual debates via Second Life or Skype. Other pedagogic options for developing oral communication skills, include oral presentations and discussions. During oral presentations the students who are not participating in the presentation are often largely passive audience members, whereas in discussion activities and tutorials students rarely have specific sides that they have to argue for. Debates are therefore distinct as an active, argument form of oral pedagogy (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008; Kennedy, 2009), which can bring drama to the classroom and engage students in lively discussion (Green & Klug, 1990; Crone, 1997; Helenius *et al.*, 2006). Kennedy (2009, p.225) argues that "students learn more effectively by actively analyzing, discussing, and applying content in meaningful ways, rather than by passively absorbing information." It is suggested that through debate students gain greater knowledge by reinforcing material already covered in lectures (Crone, 1997; Kennedy, 2009). However, there is relatively little research demonstrating the value of this method to students and little scholarship comparing debates with other teaching methods (Omelicheva & Avedeyeva, 2008).

Although, as already noted a debate does not have to be conducted in an oral format, the opportunity to engage in immediate counter arguments and rebuttals is likely to be enhanced through live oral communication. In whatever format a debate takes place, it

offers the opportunity to develop enhanced written and/or oral communication skills; research skills; analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills; critical thinking skills; argument and persuasion skills (Green & Klug, 1990; Dundes, 2001; Kennedy, 2009). Significantly, these include the development of the higher level cognitive skills of Bloom's Taxonomy (Kennedy, 2009). Omelicheva & Avedeyeva (2008, p.606) go as far as to argue that "debates appear to be more effective in developing students' comprehension of complex concepts and application and critical evaluation skills" than lecture based teaching. The method makes it necessary for students to seek reasons to justify their view point by developing such abilities as identifying value assumptions within arguments and judging whether data is misleading or absent (Green & Klug, 1990). This pushes students to evaluate critically the evidence on either side of a debate and creatively build counter arguments. Debates offer such opportunities as they encourage students to question people's behaviour and perspectives, helping them to recognise the complexity of decisions and opinions.

The method of debate offers students the opportunity to stimulate development of their critical thinking through encountering students with views contrary to their own, and in doing so, induce them to either change those views or learn to defend their own views with better logic and more substantial evidence (Green & Klug, 1990). Students rarely experience a direct challenge to their ideas, and as such they infrequently have the opportunity to defend their own arguments (Green & Klug, 1990). The highly engaged atmosphere of a debate supports students to focus on their attitudes and opinions from a particular perspective (Omelicheva & Avedeyeva, 2008). Yet although they are focused on one side of an argument, the formation of successful counter arguments requires an understanding of the opposing view point.

Teaching for critical thinking through debate

"Critical human geography must make radical pedagogy a central concern – and must recognize the classroom as a site of potential political engagement." (Heymann, 2000, p. 303)

Critical thinking skills can "give students the tools to understand what they are learning" (Wolf *et al.*, 2010, p.43). This ability relates to analytical, interpretation, inference, explanation, and evaluation skills (Facione, 2000). Through using these skills students may monitor and, where appropriate, correct their own reasoning, meaning that critical thinking is about "judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe" (Facione, 2000, p.61). Critical thinking is a complex term, meaning different things to different people. It may be considered as "the identification and evaluation of evidence to guide decision making. A critical thinker uses broad in-depth analysis of evidence to make decisions and communicate his/her beliefs clearly and accurately" (Critical Thinking Co., 2011, no page). Table 1 outlines some of the different meanings associated with the term critical thinking, alongside different types of activity which support the development of critical thinking and its subsets.

Table 1: Critical thinking and its subsets

Critical thinking and subsets of it – tools for the manipulation of knowledge	Forms of primary and secondary representation

Critical thinking - which includes critical:
    appraisal
    evaluation
    reflection
    understanding
    analysis
    review
    appreciation
    management
    awareness
    care
	Oral representation –
	    debate, discussion and other oral representation
	
	Written representation -
	    critical reports, reviews, critique, satire, essays, metaphor –
	
	Graphic depiction - cartoon, pastiche, sketch

Critical incident analysis Problem-solving and decision-making are forms that can be broadly similar to critical thinking when there is no one fixed solution to be sought	Forms of action - assertive action; critical or professional practice, reflective practice, dramatic or the applicable representation, etc. Various forms of representation

Source: Moon (2008: 30)

Focusing upon oral representations specifically it is possible to recognise how students may engage with the different elements of critical thinking as they prepare for a variety of different types of oral activity. However, a debate provides engagement in a quite specific way by forcing a student to evaluate and reflect on materials and to produce a supporting argument for a particular position. In order to do this, it is necessary for the student to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing position(s) and put forward a case for why their argument is the strongest. A discussion encourages students to explore different ideas depending upon how the conversation goes, but may lead to an exploration of the most interesting aspects of an issue; an oral presentation may lead students to focus on the arguments in the literature that support their point and ignore those that do not; in contrast in order to be successful in a debate students need to appreciate the issue from

several different angles, and develop these views to form the most appropriate argument. Geography as a discipline is well positioned to contribute to teaching critical thinking as the subject often requires students to present informed opinions based on the analysis and synthesis of information from a variety of sources (Korkmaz & Karakuş, 2009). Preparing and conducting a debate requires such analysis and synthesis of the opposing sides of the argument. Fullan (2003, p.23) suggests starting with the notion of a moral purpose, identifying key problems with that purpose, suggesting desirable directions, but allowing the students to find their own path through the topic. Through the preparation for a debate students are then able to be creative in deciding how they wish to argue for or against the topic. Jackson (2006) argues that people tend to be happier or more satisfied if they are able to be creative. In choosing a debate topic it is necessary to make sure that the chosen topic has clear opposing sides. Through preparation, discussion, and critical reflection it is possible for students to investigate and develop the nuances of individual arguments.

Case study

This debate was an un-assessed exercise as part of a third year undergraduate degree module entitled: 'Excluded Peoples? Migrants and refugees'. This is a 24 week unit in which the students have contact time of 2 hours a week. This module is open to students studying Single and Combined Honours Geography, and Combined Honours International Development Studies. The preparation and the debate ran over 2 consecutive teaching sessions (4 hours) beginning around 5 weeks into the course. The moral purpose in this exercise was the right of asylum seekers to work in the UK. An asylum seeker is someone who seeks recognition as a refugee. Refugees are defined as people

"who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [or her]self of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (United Nations 1951, 16, Article 1.2).

The majority of the students on the module were studying geography and had little, if any, past formal tuition about asylum. Although some of the students doing International Development Studies would have had a brief introduction in the first year of their degree.

There is much media interest in the experiences of asylum seekers, particularly as a consequence of perceived abuses of the asylum system (Schuster, 2003). Many governments have sought to create increasingly restrictive policies towards asylum seekers resulting, for example, in the right for asylum seekers to work in the UK being withdrawn in 2002. The right of asylum seekers to work draws upon particularly geographical moral issues. Smith (1995, p.275) argues that geography is well placed to address 'moral issues':

"the most geographical of human practices may be to define a space or territory, whether by erecting fences or borders, or simply drawing lines on a map. In so doing, we may also be defining who belongs to a community or nation (e.g. who is a citizen)."

The findings discussed here are two years worth of data based on student reflective responses to a series of points before and after the debate had been conducted. The 2009 class consisted of 12 students (5 male, 7 female), the 2010 class consisted of 13 students (3 male, 10 female) all of the students were in their early to mid-20s. The majority of these students were present for the debate (11 in 2009 and 10 in 2010). In both cohorts, all

except one student participated in the reflection pieces before the debate; however, those who did not attend the debate itself did not complete a second reflection.

Pre-debate views

Having established ways of thinking about exclusion and inclusion over the first few weeks, the students on the course were asked to reflect on and write down their initial views towards the following three points:

1. Do you think asylum seekers should be able to work in the UK?

2. Why do you think asylum seekers should or should not be able to work in the UK?

3. Comment on your views of the way asylum seekers are treated in the UK.

This exercise helped the students to clarify their initial views before being influenced by the positions put forward in the resource pack of academic and grey literature on the subject. This helped students to focus on their personal position in relation to the topic. When students take personally the issues they study, they draw these ideas into their everyday lives (Angus *et al.*, 2001).

This debate was, in part, designed to teach for social transformation. This is "teaching that aims to promote knowledge, skills and values amongst all students that, through critical thinking, encourages social justice and equity" (Wellens *et al.*, 2006, p.118). The tutor had anticipated that with relatively little knowledge of the subject the students would believe that asylum seekers *should not* work in the UK. It was hoped that through the debate students would explore whether or not this was a socially just policy. However, of the reflections written prior to the first teaching session (9 out of 12 students 2009 cohort, 12 out of 13 students 2010 cohort participated in writing the reflections) the majority of the

students entered the debate believing that asylum seekers *should* be allowed to work in the UK. This is perhaps an unusual reaction when compared to general attitudes towards immigrants in the UK (Crawley, 2005). Students who choose to take a module about migrants and refugees may be predisposed to be more positive about the rights of such individuals than students who do not. However, the students' justifications for why asylum seekers should be allowed to work varied from a focus upon moral responsibility towards individuals in need, to only if it would benefit the broader society (Table 2 illustrates the different types of responses, all student names are pseudonyms). The majority of students justified their beliefs that asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the UK on the basis of the benefits this would have to the UK as a whole. Even those students who demonstrate a moral position supported this further through how this was good for the whole country. Only two students across both cohorts entered the debate preparation believing that asylum seekers should not be able to work in the UK.

Table 2: Examples of students' initial views on the topic

Focus of view point	Examples of student comments
Moral right of the individual	"From a personal and moral perspective I feel that the Asylum seekers should be allowed to work. From the limited knowledge I have learnt so far, asylum seekers live in terrible conditions not only in their country of origin, but also in the UK. They may spent years waiting for their application to be accepted in the meantime they have no money, little support and they have to cope with cultural differences, language barriers and so much more! From the video I realized how much asylum seekers want to work and support themselves. … I believe that asylum seekers should be given the chance and right to work but also to pay taxes and contribute to society" (*Sarah*, 2009). "I absolutely think that asylum seekers should be able to work in the UK, it seems illogical for them to not ... Excluding them from work just re-enforces the 'us and them' attitude portrayed by the media and creates an even bigger divide" (*Lisa*, 2009).
For the good of broader society	"I believe that asylum seekers should have the right to work in the UK, as surely it's more beneficial for them to provide towards taxes than to claim benefits" (*Susan*, 2009). "Yes I think that asylum seekers should be able to work particularly as it has not been proved that they cause unemployment for British citizens across the UK. If asylum seekers were given the opportunity to work, this

	would enable them to pay for food and accommodation themselves and by not sleeping on the streets this could also reduce crime rates. In employment they would also be paying National Insurance and Tax. As the UK is becoming less attractive due to the recession, major UK skills problems are being caused therefore allowing asylum seekers to work would 'fill these gaps' and employers would not have to spend the extra time and money training other people" (*Larissa*, 2010). "An asylum seeker who is able to work after obtaining key skills before entering the workplace can only be beneficial to themselves and the UK, wages for themselves and taxes for the government to cover any costs an asylum seeker may cause whilst in the UK" (*Adam*, 2009). "They should be allowed to work as they then won't be living off benefits and will be contributing to the UK through tax and national insurance. It will then stop them working illegally and earning a wage that still getting benefits" (*Ella*, 2010). Asylum seekers should be able to work in the UK "because if they came to our country they should be able to give something back to the country" (*Dominic*, 2010).
As long as it does not negatively affect broader society	"They need to be able to earn money so that they can independently support themselves. However, letting all asylum seekers work may attract a large amount of asylum seekers that could lead to many asylum seekers and not enough jobs" (*Beth*, 2010). "I do think that asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the UK, providing there isn't a shortage of jobs for people within the UK. They deserve to be given the right to work and contribute to the UK's economy if they have be given no option but to move here" (*Sadie*, 2009).
Against as it will affect broader society	"We already have a high unemployment rate in the UK at the moment, I think it's important to get citizens working. When granted asylum they should be able to work" (*Rebecca*, D 2010). "It would be bad for the economy if every asylum seeker was allowed to work in the country" (*Carter*, 2010).

At the teaching session the students listened to a talk about the asylum system in the UK and the rationale behind the change in policy withdrawing of the right to work in 2002. After this brief introduction to the topic the groups were divided into two opposing teams (in 2009 this was done randomly, in 2010 the division was more strategic to separate individuals whose attendance had been variable at the teaching sessions). Each team was provided with the same pack of information containing material from both sides of the debate, alongside details of the debate format. One student commented how he was excited about the teaching method as it was different from his past experience, describing it as "a new way to learn" (*David*, 2009). They were given two hours in teaching time and two

weeks between the introduction of the topic and the debate itself to prepare. The debate was then run as a panel debate.

The panel debate chosen was highly structured (see Appendix One for debate structure). Each of the teams chose to allocate members a specific role within the debate. These roles coincided with different stages within the debate, so that individuals could prepare the opening argument, a specific argument or cross examination as part of the main debate, or the closing argument in advance. Each section of the debate then had a set time in which they could make their point before the opposing team would be able to challenge their position.

Post-debate reflection

Immediately after the debate the students were given feedback from the tutor on the points each team made. The points made were to the entire team rather than to individuals within the team. This discussion emphasised the quality of the argument, alongside the use of evidence to support points. As part of the learning process it is necessary for the students themselves to reflect on what happened in the debate (Crone, 1997; Toohey, 1999). Through this reflection the students were able to engage with the strongest arguments from each side – those which had been evidenced and argued well by each team. Light & Cox (2001, p.80) argue that "evaluations should not ... simply reflect what participants liked and disliked but how they felt it affected them." Consequently, after the debate the students were asked to reflect upon and make notes in relation to how they now felt about the question – should asylum seekers be allowed to work in the UK? And what they thought of the debate method of learning about the issue.[1]

The students' second reflective pieces illustrated how learning about the topic in this way has given some of the students a different perspective. The opportunity to engage with one issue affecting a particularly marginalised group in the UK offered the opportunity for students to recognise more general points about asylum seeker's daily lives.

> "[The debate] opened my eyes more to the lose-lose situation which asylum seekers are currently in due to the stigma they have" (*David*, 2009).

> "British citizens require a good education [about] asylum seekers and the difficulty they are under" (*Adam*, 2009).

David and *Adam* both illustrate how a lack of understanding - their own, or the general public - are factors which influence the experiences of asylum seekers. In contrast to her original perspective (see Table 2), at the time of reflection *Rebecca* believed that asylum seekers should be able to work on moral grounds.

> "I think they should be given the option of working, and it depends on the person and their background as to whether they want to work, it's a human right" (*Rebecca*, 2010).

This student moved from being against asylum seekers working in the UK, to believing that on moral grounds it is a 'human right' that individuals be allowed to work. This was the most extreme change in view point, for the majority critical engagement with the issue led to more nuanced opinions.

> "Definitely should be able to work, but maybe not automatically" (*Lisa*, 2009).

> "In the current system asylum seekers shouldn't work as it is not set up for them to work. However, I think in a new system, and with regulations they should be able to work" (*Ella*, 2010).

Both of these students were pro-asylum seekers working initially. Whilst their viewpoints have not changed entirely, they continue to believe that asylum seekers should work in the UK, their critical insight into the issue has led them to believe that the current system is

inadequate and it would be inappropriate for asylum seekers to be working in the UK under such conditions. Although in general the students who wrote their reflections had similar perspectives when it came to asylum seekers working, their reasons for this had developed through the course of the debate. It is their justifications, and critical understanding which has been challenged through debate and discussion.

Barnett & Coate (2005, p.124) argue that it is important for students to "develop powers of self-reflection and so heighten their sense of self as emotional as well as intellectual beings." After the debates the team opposing asylum seekers working in the UK were asked how they really felt about the issue, given that the majority of students had noted in their original views that they thought asylum seekers should be able to work in the UK. In the 2009 cohort each of the six members said that they still believed asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the UK. It is important to note here that these six students were therefore arguing against their own beliefs. Whilst none of the students commented on this in their reflection notes after the debate, it is likely to have influenced their learning through the debate process by forcing them to challenge their own position and identify the most convincing arguments against their personal viewpoint. In the 2010 cohort, arguing against asylum seekers working in the UK pushed Jo's opinion, from one who was very certain that asylum seekers should be able to work to a much more critically reflective position:

> "It's a very complex problem. Theoretically, yes [asylum seekers should be allowed to work], but the [current] technicalities [prevent this] i.e. ensuring support is automatic … [support] needs to be targeted towards individuals. The system needs reform" (*Jo*, 2010).
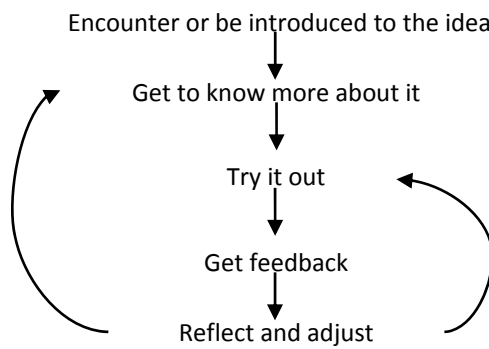
Both groups on either side of the debate examined the arguments on both sides. However the detailed learning required by the opposing group, where the position they were arguing

went against their personal beliefs, may have led to a deeper level of learning. Through investigating arguments which are in opposition to their own, and then presenting that position as a stronger argument than their personal beliefs led these students through three stages. Firstly, they had to be prepared to challenge their initial perceptions; secondly, they had to work through the opposing views and look for appropriate arguments; and thirdly, they needed to reflect upon and consolidate the arguments supporting their own perspectives in order for them to continue to believe that asylum seekers should be able to work in the UK. The critical insight and more nuanced responses from the students was in contrast to some of the debate literature which found that debates shaped learner's attitudes, often away from their original perspectives (Green & Klug, 1990; Omelicheva & Avedeyeva, 2008; Kennedy, 2009). Here the majority of students still maintained their original views, but were more tempered in their statements, and nuanced in their reasoning.

Student views on debate as a teaching method

Having highlighted the critical thinking potential of a particular debate, this section focuses upon the student responses to the debate method. This highlights the more general skills and knowledge, which the students highlighted as beneficial from the debate, and the views they had about the debate structure and format. These views are situated within Toohey's (1999) broader model of the learning process, illustrating how debate addresses different aspects of learning (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A simple model of the learning process

Encounter or be introduced to the idea

↓

Get to know more about it

↓

Try it out

↓

Get feedback

↓

Reflect and adjust

Source: Toohey (1999, p154)

Skills and knowledge

After the debate the students were asked to note down what they thought of the debate method of teaching. All of the students who participated in the debate found it to be a useful exercise:

"I enjoyed it - learnt more" (*Sophia*, 2010).

"The debate was really good as a different way of learning!! Really fun ☺" (*Larissa*, 2010).

A common theme in response to the debate was that students felt that they had learnt more than they would have done had the subject been taught as a lecture. Despite some of the students anticipating that the debate might be a nerve racking experience, they were surprised to find it to be an enjoyable way of learning.

"Yes, was nervous at first but was different and fun, different way of learning and would like to do it again" (*Rebecca*, 2010).

"Very good, [and] not too scary"(*William*, 2010).

The initial fears about uncertainty, and managing to respond to potentially unexpected arguments had led to some anxiety for the students, but for these students the process itself, had been enjoyable.

Further comments on the debate link to features of critical thinking, defined earlier as reflective, analytical, interpretation, inference, explanation, and evaluation skills (Facione, 2000). *Dillon* comments:

> "I thought the debate format worked well. It is an interesting technique of learning - you end up learning things without really trying" (*Dillon*, 2009).

For Dillon, the debate was a more effective form of learning than listening to a lecture. The debate offered him the opportunity to develop his interpretation and understanding of the topic without having to exert the same amount of effort which he would have in a lecture.

Using Toohey's (1999, p.154) model of the circular learning process it is possible to illustrate the ways in which debate may support learning of a topic (Table 3). Further students illustrated the analytical and evaluative skills they had the opportunity to employ:

> The debate "worked well for critically evaluating points" (*Ella*, 2010).
>
> The "method of debate was useful to hear everybody's opinion yet have the opportunity to counteract and cross examine what the opposing team said" (*Fiona*, 2009).

The dialogue between opposing sides offered students the chance to evaluate and analyse different arguments and forming counter points. Through this interchange students were able to reflect upon all of the arguments on either side of the topic.

> "The debate is a good method of getting a full viewpoint and the arguments surrounding them" (*Beth*, 2010).
>
> "... a debate is a good way to voice your opinion and to listen to that of others" (*Susan*, 2009).

Such reflection and inference enabled students to develop their own opinions through the course of the preparation and the debate itself.

Table 3: Interpreting Toohey's Model of the learning process in relation to the debate method

The process of learning though debate	Explanation
1. *Engage with the student's current knowledge and awareness of an idea or issue.*	In the introductory stage educators should engage with what students already know and check for misconceptions, if their previous learning contradicts or undermines what they are hearing in the classroom (such as media reports on asylum seekers), students "are more likely to cling to their previous conceptions unless they are pushed to confront inconsistencies" (Toohey, 1999, p.154).
2. *Students are given opportunities to explore new ideas, potentially challenging their original views.*	Students are given the opportunity to get to know more about the topic. They are able to investigate the issue making the content of the topic meaningful and comprehensible to them. They begin to take ownership of the topic.
3. *Students are given the opportunity to take ownership of the idea through an independent task allowing them to potentially discover the unexpected.*	Students are given the opportunity to try out their knowledge. The student is given space in which to develop, "to come into herself and to feel a proper ownership of what she thinks and does" (Barnett & Coate, 2005, p.125). In this case the class debate challenges each others' perspectives on the topic.
4. *Through the debate itself and discussion with peers and the tutor, students gain feedback on their views and development of their understanding.*	Students are given formative feedback to help develop their understanding of the topic.
5. *Through reflection students may recognise some alteration in their original perspective as ideas become more embedded.*	Reflecting on their experience takes account of the feedback and deciding how one's performance may be adapted on the next occasion. Reflection is a useful opportunity for students to clarify their focus and understanding of the topic.

Alongside this, the debate offered more practical skills in terms of constructing and orally presenting an argument in response to the point under discussion in the debate:

"Helps you to learn to think on your feet - good skills in life" (*Caroline*, 2010).

As *Caroline* points out the skills students are developing through debate are broader than just the academic topic under discussion. The decision to utilise a panel debate format also offers the opportunity to develop team work skills. However, not all students felt that this was entirely successful. As *Sadie* comments:

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"It would of worked better if worked more together" (*Sadie*, 2009).

As an un-assessed exercise, it is inevitable that not everyone put the same level of effort in, particularly when it came to working together and organising themselves in advance of the debate. In the 2010 cohort, two students did not get involved in the preparation, or show up for the debate itself. In the previous weeks, these students' engagement had been variable, and consequently in organising the groups, it was made sure that they were not in the same group. Overall, the response to the debate, however was highly positive. Having had the opportunity to experience learning through debate, the student representatives for the module formally commented at both Staff Student Liaison Committees in 2009 and 2010 that they found the debate enjoyable and useful, and would like to have more opportunities to learn in this way.

Format

After the 2009 debate a couple of students requested that in future they had more time to cross examine the opposing team, having found that they ran out of time in the structured debate format.

"I really liked the debate format, however, [I] would have liked more time to cross examine" (*Lisa*, 2009).

The timings in this structure allowed double the amount of time for students to present their arguments (6 minutes) in comparison to the opportunity for cross examination (3 minutes). For the 2010 cohort the timings were changed to allow equal time for cross examination as for presenting the argument (Appendix One). Once again the students requested that they had more time for cross-examination of one another's ideas. This is indicative of the developing abilities of some of the students to critique the opposing team's

arguments, and the desire to do a more thorough questioning of the arguments presented. Although not everyone was as comfortable with oral communication or with developing rebuttals spontaneously as part of the flow of the debate, as part of a panel debate method, the students could work collaboratively and include the strengths of different individuals in the group with the different tasks required in debate preparation and execution. The more reserved members of the class may participate to a lesser extent in the cross examination of arguments, however the preparation of arguments enabled students with different styles of learning to engage with the material in a variety of different ways.

Broader applicability

The previous two sections have highlighted the potential for debate in terms of teaching for critical thinking, alongside the positive response from this group of students to learning in this way. This section considers the broader applicability of such teaching by firstly briefly discussing how debate might be appropriate in different contexts and secondly the potential of debate for teaching for social transformations.

Debate in different contexts

The appropriateness of debate in different contexts predominantly relates to the format of the debate. Different variations of a debate relate to different topics and classes, and the purpose of the debate. As already mentioned, many controversial subjects characterise the present study of geography. Whether it is the most appropriate way to address climate change, what is a sustainable way of living, or why particular people experience exclusion, there are many different opinions and arguments to be had. In terms of establishing a successful debate it is necessary to focus the topic around a key question or issue which has

distinct positions which the students may be able to draw upon. The preparation may then focus upon clear differences in perspectives, with more able students illustrating the more nuanced and complex points as part of their argument in the debate itself. If the different perspectives are too closely related it may make it difficult to start off with a broad enough distinction between positions for the students to critically analyse the material focusing on the complexities of the discussion. The example illustrated here has been within a particular context and may not be an appropriate format for other classes. The way in which this debate was structured worked with a relatively small number of students, but would be more challenging in a larger class. It may be possible to divide a larger class into tutorial groups and run the debate with smaller numbers; where this is not possible Table 4 illustrates some different types of debates and how these might be used in different contexts. The table illustrates a range of different formats in which a debate may take place, and the potential points at which critical thinking may occur within them. Readers may use this table to stimulate ideas on the most appropriate way to adjust the use of this teaching method to local circumstances. These examples are not mutually exclusive categories; for example, it is possible to have a structured and graded debate or a role play, instructor debate. The different debates below offer variable levels of tutor control. For readers who are less comfortable with the unexpected, the options with greater structure may be less disconcerting.

Table 4: Examples of different types of debates

Type of debate	Example
Two students debating	The whole class is told to prepare for the debate, possibly asking them to focus on one side. The two participants are picked at random at the beginning of the debate class. The student audience could then be involved by, once again randomly, choosing people to ask questions of the two students debating. Although the students will all have been asked to prepare for the debate in advance, after randomly selecting the

	individuals it might be sensible to give them some time to reflect upon their notes before beginning the debate itself.
Panel debate	The students are organised into panel groups. When working in a team to prepare for a debate, students have the opportunity to learn effectively through comparative collaboration rather than working alone (Green & Klug, 1990). This can "foster a sense of camaraderie among students" (Dundes, 2001, p.242). Depending on numbers this might be done so that there are several groups on each side of the argument who are then randomly selected to participate in the debate.
Instructor debate	The whole class is asked to prepare the questions for a debate around a particular topic. Two tutors are then asked the questions and offered the opportunity to explain their position. This could be run in a similar way to Presidential election debates. The tutors could be chosen on the basis of their differing perspectives, or they could role play a particular position.
Role play debate	Students are given defined roles in a debate. This works well when there are different arguments to be made from several different stakeholders. The students have to identify their position on the basis of the role they have been given (Tyrell, 2010). In a large class it may be preferable not to run the debate in front of the whole class. Instead, students could be paired off, on the basis of the different positions they are role playing, and debate the issue with one another before feeding back the key ideas to the class. If the debate is run in front of the whole class people can again be put into pairs, with the audience asking questions of each person, or as a panel debate with people who are broadly for or against an issue putting forward their perspective.
Graded debate	A debate may be used as a teaching exercise or as an assessment. As a graded debate students may be given marks for when they 'win' a particular point (they present the strongest argument), the quality of their contributions overall, and who wins the debate overall. The features which are focused on will depend upon the class degree level and the aims of the assessment.
Structured debate	Like the one used in the example in this paper. A clear structure is in place where by each point to be presented in detail with the opportunity for follow up questions and comment from the opposing team (Tomlinson, 2009).
Unstructured debate	This is a less rigid structure than the model shown in the appendix, in which students are allowed to focus on discussion and in which overt competition is discouraged (Helenius *et al.*, 2006). It is likely that within this format the lines on either side may breakdown and there are no out-right winners as the groups challenge and discuss more, rather than concentrate on clearly defined points and rebuttals. This more open structure still requires some guidance, but is underlain by greater flexibility.
Online debate	An online synchronous discussion offers the opportunity to engage people at a distance, and perhaps appeal to students who are not as confident speaking in front of the class (Dengler, 2008). This could be established for a debate.

Each of these different forms of debate has the potential for engaging students in critical

thinking in the three stages of the debate:

1. Preparing for the debate: Critical thinking may occur through appraising, analysing and evaluating material in order to plan their arguments from different perspectives. When working with others they may reflect on and discuss their arguments.

2. During the debate: When students are participating in the debate critical thinking may occur when they are thinking on their feet and considering how to phrase their arguments. When they are listening to the debate critical thinking may occur as students gain an understanding of the different positions being put forward and appraise, evaluate and reflect upon the strength of the different arguments.

3. After the debate: Critical thinking may occur as they formulate questions of panellists and when they reflect upon tutor feedback.

Potential of debate for teaching for social transformations

Debates have the potential to be a method for teaching for social transformations. Robinson (1988) illustrates how teaching about social transformation can deconstruct students' initial hostility, sympathy or paternalism towards the 'other', moving towards accepting another person as equal, an understanding of the context within which the other person lives, and an acceptance that the other person's value system is a valid alternative to their own. Educating people about social transformation may lead to social transformation (Ilkkaracan & Ercevik Amado 2005). Yet defining the specific form of social transformation itself is likely to be different depending upon the perspective of the teacher or teachers involved. What is more common is the desire to challenge in multiple ways in which the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is played out (Cook 2000). This involves developing an understanding that "all identities are socially constructed … we are all members of many overlapping social entities which help to make up ourselves" (Rogers 2006: 134). Debate

offers an opportunity for students to explore different perspectives on an issue rather than just focus on the viewpoint they already have. This may challenge the multiple ways in which the 'other' may be explored in the issues under discussion. One way which may be particularly effective at pushing students to engage with an alternative perspective, is to have students who have clearly defined viewpoints on one side of a debate to prepare the arguments for the opposing view. The aim here is for them to develop greater awareness of the other perspectives. This may alter their initial beliefs or reconfirm them, either way they will be more informed opinions.

Conclusion

> "Students can come to look at the world differently and act in it differently" as a result of the things they learn (Barnett & Coate, 2005, p.145).

This paper has illustrated the potential for teaching controversial subjects in geography through debate. The skills developed from debate include the ability to construct and defend arguments in advance and in the moment of the debate; the ability to examine critically a variety of different sources of material; and enhanced communication skills. Alongside this, supporting other authors, this illustrative case found that students thought that it was a 'fun' way to learn. The students in both cohorts thoroughly enjoyed the debate, they were excited and engaged, alongside as seeing it as a valuable learning experience (Dundes, 2001; Helenius *et al.*, 2006). Significantly, and in contrast to some of the previous literature, this paper has found that these students rarely significantly altered their view from their original perspectives (Green & Klug, 1990; Omelicheva & Avedeyeva, 2008; Kennedy, 2009), rather the debate offered an opportunity to develop more nuanced and critical justifications in support of their original opinions. This may have been different

if the students in both cohorts had not been positively predisposed towards the topic. Instead the skills that the students developed through the activity, offered them greater critical insight into the issue rather than leading them to contrasting perspectives. Given the potential power of debate for teaching a whole range of skills, this paper calls for geographers to further experiment with this method of teaching and to share their experiences with the wider geographic community. We need to help students to value the critical thinking skills that they take away from such work, not just in relation to understanding a topic for an assignment, but the significance of how such skills help them to interpret and understand other issues in the world. We need to show "that 'critical' thinking can be every bit as useful and world-changing as more technical, vocationally-centred knowledge" (Castree, 2000, p.969).

[1] Throughout the debate the tutor remained neutral about her own views on the subject (Hitchings 2011 explores the challenges and potential issues of this choice in detail). However, in both cohorts the students clearly wanted to know what the tutor thought on the issue, and so after the second reflections had been completed, the tutor expressed her own position and discussed why she believed this was the right course of action.

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Appendix 1

Team Debate Format 2010

As part of the groups' preparation each student was allocated a consecutive number depending upon who was going to address which part of the debate. This model allows up to 12 students to participate.

Affirmative: For asylum seekers working (odd numbers before rebuttal, even numbers for rebuttal)
Negative: Against asylum seekers working (even numbers before rebuttal, odd numbers for rebuttal)

1. <u>First Affirmative Constructive</u> – 5 minutes
- A good introduction that attracts the audiences attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state the resolution
- Clearly state each of your contentions and support these with reason and evidence
- Conclude effectively

2. *Cross Examination of the Affirmative by one of the Negative – 5 minutes*
- You ask questions – have a strategy or at the very least a direction to your questioning
- Be courteous

3. <u>First Negative Constructive</u> – 5 minutes
- A good introduction that attracts the audience's attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state the Negative's position on the topic
- Clearly state the Negative's observations and support this with reason and evidence
- Attack and question the Affirmative's contentions/evidence
- Conclude effectively

4. *Cross Examination of the Negative by one of the Affirmative – 5 minutes*
- You ask questions – have a strategy or at the very least a direction to your questioning

5. <u>Second Affirmative Constructive</u> – 5 minutes
- A good introduction that attracts the audience's attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state each of your contentions - support with reason and evidence
- Respond to Negative arguments/attacks
- Conclude effectively

6. *Cross Examination of the Affirmative by the other Negative – 5 minutes*
- You ask questions – have a strategy or at the very least a direction to your questioning
- Be courteous

7. <u>Second Negative Constructive</u> – 5 minutes
- A good introduction that attracts the audiences attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state the Negative's observations – the second Negative can introduce additional observations - support with reason and evidence
- Attack and question the Affirmative's contentions/evidence
- Conclude effectively

8. *Cross Examination of the Negative by the other Affirmative – 5 minutes*
- You ask questions – have a strategy or at the very least a direction to your questioning

9. <u>First Negative Rebuttal</u> – 4 minutes
- Rebuild the Negative case
- Summarize how the Negative position is superior, and that the Affirmative has not carried the burden-of-proof
- Conclude effectively

10. <u>First Affirmative Rebuttal</u> – 4 minutes

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- Respond to the Negative arguments, rebuild the Affirmative case and contentions – extend arguments and give additional support for them
- Conclude effectively

11. <u>Second Negative Rebuttal</u> – 4 minutes
- Respond to latest Affirmative arguments
- Make your final case to the audience that the Negative position is superior to the Affirmative
- Try and convince the audience the Affirmative has failed to carry the burden of proof
- Summarize the debate and conclude effectively and ask for the audience to agree with the Negative position

12. <u>Second Affirmative Rebuttal</u> – 4 minutes
- Respond to final Negative arguments
- Summarize the debate and show the audience how the Affirmative position is superior – and the Affirmative has carried the burden of proof
- Conclude effectively.

Source: adapted from Tomlinson (2009)