

## Why Should Students Reflect on the Purpose of Debate?

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### Abstract

Debate teachers at Rikkyo University present the rationale for learning how to debate on a slide show, or they read a paragraph from the syllabus to justify the course's requirement status. For the remaining lessons, they address questions concerning "what" and "how." For example, "What is a rebuttal?" and "How do you create a proposition?" In addition to addressing these types of questions, they also ask students to write self-reflections post-debate. Although essential for improving debate performance, these questions and self-reflection activities can fail to help students connect content and activities to the overall course goals and real-world contexts where they can use their debate skills. To make connections, students need tasks that treat debate as a means to an end. In this paper, I explain the rationale for facilitating student reflection on debate course goals based on Japanese cultural norms and cognitive learning theory. Second, I define the twin sins of course design by Wiggins and McTighe (2008) and maintain that teachers can avoid committing the twin sins by implementing activities that allow students to reflect upon debate course goals. Third, I define and explain practicing-connections hypothesis by Fries et al. (2020). After, I share classroom activities based on the hypothesis, and last, I discuss ideas for potential research studies.

*Keywords:* debate, practicing-connections, course design

### Japanese Cultural Norms and Debate Tactics

Reasons for learning how to debate might be less apparent to Japanese students than foreign teachers realize. In The Japan Times article titled, 'Ditch the debate tactics when it comes to persuading Japanese colleagues on a course of action,' Kopp (2019) explains that most Japanese students are not taught to debate in school, and in Japanese culture, debate tactics are seen as overly aggressive. Kopp advises foreign expatriates, who work for or work with Japanese companies, to write a report or create a slideshow with data and then let the data "do the talking" to persuade colleagues of a specific course of action. This method is implicit and indirect—qualities compatible with Japanese culture, language, and workplace. The method also has the additional benefit of acknowledging the agency of fellow colleagues as it respects their ability to interpret the data and arrive at conclusions for themselves. In Japanese culture, showing this level of respect especially to senior employers and colleagues is important for maintaining good relations.

In contrast to the method of allowing the data to speak for itself, one debate tactic called Label, Explain, Evidence, and Tieback (LEET) entails presenting and explaining the position, interpreting evidence for listeners, and discussing its importance (Saskatchewan Elocution and Debate Association, 2019). Debate tactics such as LEET are widely accepted in Western cultures; however, their explicit and direct nature makes them inappropriate for certain formal Japanese situations (e.g., presentations with senior colleagues). Additionally, debate tactics' structured and organized nature can make them awkward for informal contexts (e.g., dinner table conversations with family). Students might realize that there are aspects of debate that they cannot transfer outside of the classroom without the consequence of being ostracized by their colleagues or being given awkward side glances from their family members. Consequently, they might wonder why they are learning such debate tactics as some students do not envision themselves living or working abroad for an international

company. So, they answer “Why LEET?” by replying, “The other team can understand my ideas more clearly” or they say, “I can get a higher debate score.” These answers are correct, but they fail to connect to the course goals or to real-world use cases outside of the debate classroom.

The Japanese cultural disposition for implicitness and indirectness stems in part from the concept of saving face (*mentsu wo tamotsu*) and losing face (*mentsu wo ushinau*). Matsumoto (2018) writes that the term “face” most closely translates to the consideration for the feelings of other people. To save face means to avoid words or actions in public that might cause humiliation or embarrassment to others. For instance, disagreeing with or criticizing others publicly can cause embarrassment, which in turn, causes a loss of face. An example that Kopp (2006) provides is an American employee working for a Japanese company who challenges her boss in front of other colleagues when she disagrees with him. For another example, Kopp (2006) writes that in business situations, Japanese expatriates working overseas often “avoid criticizing the parent company even when, in the eyes of American employees, such criticism is clearly deserved.” The concepts of saving face and losing face are difficult for westerners to understand because the feelings of others are not considered a priority in western business culture (Matsumoto, 2018). Japanese people are concerned with the feelings of others (*omoiyari*) whereas western business culture instead prioritizes truth and facts (Matsumoto, 2018).

Japanese students might associate certain debate tasks with feelings of discomfort or apprehension as their own cultural values of saving face and losing face can create conflict between caring for their classmates’ feelings and fulfilling their debate course obligations. Debate teams openly state opposing arguments (i.e., disagree), and summarize weaknesses of the other team’s argument (i.e., criticize), and ask cross examination questions (i.e., challenge). Students might privately question why they need these tasks for the future as they seem disconnected from realities of Japanese etiquette. Some debate teachers might counter that their students can reflect on the questions of “why openly disagree with others” or “why directly challenge others” by themselves. These teachers might conclude that students are speaking in English so they should become accustomed to Western cultural norms of explicitness and directness, and therefore, debate tactics do not require any additional justification than the justification given at the beginning of the course. As such, the “what” and “how” of debate are covered more extensively than the “why.” In defense of this approach, addressing “what” and “how” questions do improve students’ debate performances and exposes them to western cultural norms, but addressing “why” questions can shift students’ perspectives from viewing debate as the end goal to viewing debate as a tool that enables the manifestation of their teamwork, critical thinking, and research skills, which are relevant to real-world contexts in Japan. Teachers can design activities and content that helps students make this perspective shift.

### **Twin Sins of Design**

Wiggins and McTighe (2008) state that the twin sins of course design are activity-focused teaching and coverage-focused teaching. For activity-focused teaching, teachers give too many activities and for coverage-focused teaching, teachers cover too much content. Both teaching focuses commit sin because they fail to make big picture ideas explicit to students (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). In other words, teachers tend to have what Wiggins and McTighe (2008) refer to as expert blind spots, and so they assume that students can connect the many discrete activities and lectures (i.e., content) to the main ideas. To build a defense against expert blind spots and thus, the twin sins

of course design, teachers can help students to connect activities and content to debate course goals. To do so, teachers should encourage students to (a) reflect on the three core debate skills of critical thinking, research, and team-building, (b) connect these three core debate skills to debate preparation stages and debate performance stages, and lastly, (c) identify real-world contexts where students need to use the three core skills. Teachers can determine the extent to which students have achieved a level of expertise in critical thinking, research, and team-building when students have not only performed well in debate, but have also made explicit connections between (a) – (c).

### **Practicing-Connections Hypothesis**

To help student transfer knowledge, they must make connections between core domain concepts, key representations, and real-world contexts (Fries et al., 2020). Fries et al. (2020) state that core domain concepts are important skills or ideas that are central to the domain (e.g., in terms of debate, these are critical thinking, research, and team- building). Debate Committee (2020) cites the goal of the debate course as the development of these three skills. Fries et al. (2020) write that key representations refer to relational domain structures (e.g., stages of debate preparation and debate performance). Lastly, real-world contexts are situations that students can use the core domain concepts (Fries et al., 2020). Students can make explicit connections between core domain concepts, key representations and real-world contexts to deepen their understanding, and by doing so, the belief is that their knowledge becomes flexible and transferable (Fries, et al., 2020). Transferring knowledge from one context to another similar, but different context, entails the ability to use knowledge “creatively, flexibly, fluently in different settings or problems” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008).

For example, students can answer the question, “Why use LEET?” by explaining LEET’s connection to critical thinking and research skills. They can also answer, “Why openly disagree with others?” or “Why openly challenge others?” by explaining their relationship to course goals. As debate tactics in Japan are rarely found outside of the classroom, teachers who use these practicing-connection activities help students to transfer the three core debate skills to other contexts in Japan that do require use of such skills. For instance, many professions require varying degrees of the debate course goals so students can investigate the roles and responsibilities of a career that interests them to determine the extent to which these skills are necessary. In short, this hypothesis implies that debate performance, and self-reflection of debate performance, might not provide teachers with sufficient evidence of students’ ability to transfer their critical thinking, research, and team-building to other contexts because these skills are contextualized throughout the course in relation to debate, but debate is not such a common activity outside the classroom so teachers are assuming that students can transfer these skills to other contexts without the need for assistance or guidance.

In addition, the core domain concepts of debate are complex skills as they comprise multiple sub-skills. Practicing-connection activities deconstruct the core debate skills to help students connect their different aspects to relevant key representations and real-world contexts. In other words, these practicing-connection activities deconstruct the core debate skills to help students connect their different aspects to relevant key representations and real-world contexts. In other words, these practicing-connections activities do not assume that students already know what good research, critical thinking, and team building skills entail nor do they assume that students will, on their own accord, connect all three skills, or relevant sub-skills, to their post-debate performance reflections. From my experience, without these activities, students forget to reflect on one or more of

the core domain skills post-debate performances. They might reflect that they need to work with their teammates by communicating more often and do more research on the topic, but they do not mention critical thinking skills. To avoid this issue, practicing-connections activities can help students intentionally make explicit connections from their debate preparation and performance to all three core domain skills by having students first reflect on the core debate use.

### Practicing-Connections Activities' Descriptions

The following activities below are based on the practicing-connections hypothesis. In this section, I give a short description of each of the following practicing-connections activities presented. For Activity I, students circle true or false about key assumptions of the debate course. In the next activity, they match the debate skills (i.e., core domain concepts) to their definitions. Explicit definitions of the three core debate skills can help students to connect the concepts to key representations and real-world contexts. For Activities III, IV, and V students reflect on the qualities of good teamwork, then connect the qualities to their debate experiences (i.e., key representations) and real-world contexts. The concept of teamwork is deconstructed into its sub-skills, so that students learn about different aspects that entail good teamwork. For Activities VI, VII, and VIII, students reflect on the qualities and characteristics of good research skills, then connect them to debate stages and activities (i.e., key representations) as well as real-world contexts<sup>1</sup> These activities help students to deconstruct core domain concepts to have students connect their different aspects to their corresponding key debate representations and real-world contexts.

For Activities IX, X, and XI, students read a list of qualities, abilities, and knowledge that business owners want from university graduates from a 2018 study by the *Keidanren*, a Japanese business association (i.e., real-world context). Students circle the ones that relate to debate, and then discuss their rationale with a partner. After, they connect these to the core domain concepts of debate. These activities relate to real-world contexts as many students plan to work after graduation. For Activities XII and XIII, students connect core domain concepts and key representations to their career aspirations (i.e., real-world contexts). I give an example by Mintzberg (1973) regarding a possible career as a manager. For Activities XIV, XV, XVI, and XVII, students complete these activities after a debate performance. They rank the debate skills according to their difficulty, discuss why the skills they list are challenging, then search the debate textbook for activities that are designed to develop these skills (i.e., key representations). Students write a plan to help them to improve their weak points, and in the last activity, they think of real-world contexts that they can use these skills (i.e., real-world contexts). Teachers can decide which lessons to give these types of activities. Some activities might be more appropriate at the beginning of the course whereas others are more appropriate after their mid-term debate.

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1 Here is the link for the critical thinking activities not included in this paper. Research and team-building activities have also been included: [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1qi62lkA9DDo9d3EWnf0A4hfPsJhnPFz9u2s6dU5om\\_4/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1qi62lkA9DDo9d3EWnf0A4hfPsJhnPFz9u2s6dU5om_4/edit?usp=sharing)

## Practicing-Connections Activities

### I. Read the sentence and circle true or false.<sup>2</sup>

1. The purpose of this course is to develop the skills of critical thinking, research, and team-building. T / F
2. People usually participate in formal debates outside of the classroom. T / F
3. People can use the skills of critical thinking, research, and team-building in many real-world situations. T / F
4. “Up for Debate” textbook activities by Mishima et al., (2021) are designed to develop skills of critical thinking, research, and team-building.<sup>3</sup> T / F

### II. Match the debate skills to the correct definition.<sup>4</sup>

- |                             |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Research</b>          | a. To work effectively with group of people to reach a shared goal                  |
| 2. <b>Critical thinking</b> | b. To search for, find, obtain, arrange, assess, and use relevant information       |
| 3. <b>Team-building</b>     | c. To analyze, evaluate, synthesize, interpret, infer, question, and solve problems |

### III. Read Eri’s self-reflection. Which debate skill should she practice?



*My last debate performance was bad. I prepared for the wrong section. I was supposed to prepare the cross-examination questions, but I prepared the summary, so my group did not have any questions. My teammate asked me for help with the affirmative speech, I said, “No way! Not my responsibility.” If any of the others ask me for help, I will just pretend that I do not know the answer. I do not want to do more work than I already do.*

<sup>2</sup> Answers are T, F, T, T

<sup>3</sup> All “Up to Debate” textbook references refer to: Mishima, M., Kita, S., Donnelly, M., Hartley, M., Iwai, K., & Vaughan, R. (2021). Up for Debate (2nd ed.). DTP Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> 4 Answers are 1 b, 2 c, 3 a

**IV. Read the qualities below of effective team players from Brady (2016). Which qualities should Eri (Activity III) practice?**

What does it mean to be a good team player?		
Reliable	Good communicator	Assesses team's strong points and weak points
Flexible	Good listener	Commits to team goals
Helpful	Willing to compromise	Solves problems

Note. From <https://www.totalteambuilding.com.au>

**V. Using the table above (Activity IV), answer the following questions with a partner:**

- Think of an experience in debate class where you showed good teamwork skills. Explain the experience to your partner.
- What steps will you take to improve these qualities?
- What situations outside of the debate classroom can you use teamwork skills?

**VI. Read Aki's self-reflection. Which debate skill should she practice?**



*My last debate performance was bad. When I searched for evidence for the affirmative speech, I could not find anything. I tried using keywords in Google; then I gave up. I was so frustrated. I could not think of what to do. So, I just decided to write my opinion without providing evidence because I feel like my idea is common sense, but then during the debate, the other team cited evidence from a study that contradicted my idea, so we lost the debate.*

**VII. Read the qualities below of good researchers from Study Lecture Notes (2013). Which qualities should Aki (Activity VI) practice?**

What does it mean to be a good researcher?		
Brainstorms relevant keywords	Articulates ideas	Open-minded to different viewpoints
Patient when searching for information	Evaluates sources of information for reliability	Avoids plagiarism by citing sources and paraphrasing
Searches for multiple sources of information	Attends to small details of research	Defines terminology to be clear to others

Note. From <http://studylecturenotes.com/qualities-of-a-good-researcher/>.

**VIII. Using the table above (Activity VII), answer the following questions with a partner:**

- Think of an experience in debate class where you showed good research skills. Explain the experience to your partner.
- Which qualities of a good researcher do you want to improve?
- What steps will you take to improve these qualities?
- What situations outside of the debate classroom can you use research skills?

**IX. In 2018, the Japanese Business Federation (*Keidanren*) surveyed 443 companies on the qualities, abilities, and knowledge that business owners expect from university students. Below are the most popular responses from business owners. Circle those qualities that you develop from learning how to debate.**

Initiative	Execution skills	Solve / Set problems	Teamwork
主体性	実行力	課題設定・解決能力	チームワーク
Social skills	Cultural understanding	Creativity	Ethics
社会性	異文化理解力	創造力	倫理観
Work ethic	Communication	Open-mindedness	Logical thinking
職業観	自分の意見を発信する力	他人の意見を聴く力	論理的思考力

**X. Discuss the reasons you circled these skills in Activity IX with a partner.**

**XI. List the qualities, abilities, and knowledge from Activity IX that relate to team-building, research, and critical thinking. You can use the same quality, ability, or knowledge more than once.**

Team-building	Research	Critical Thinking
<i>Teamwork</i>		

**XII. Read Rena’s career goal. Does Rena need the skills of research, critical thinking, or team-building for her career?**



*My career goal is to be a manager at a large company. I conducted research, and according to Mintzberg (1973), a business professor in Canada, there are three main managerial roles: **interpersonal**, **informational**, and **decisional**. For **interpersonal**, I need to have good communication skills to share information with employees. I need to teach others good teamwork skills to help others work cooperatively. For **informational**, I also need to do research and learn a lot so that I can help employees if they have any questions. For **decisional**, I need to solve problems and identify employees’ strengths and weaknesses to allocate work based on their abilities.*

**XIII. Think of a career that you would like to pursue post-graduation. How would developing debate skills of critical thinking, research, and team-building help you with your future career? You can do online research about the roles and responsibilities of a potential future career.**

**XIV. When reflecting on your last debate performance, rank the debate skills of research, critical thinking, and team-building from 1 the hardest for you to 3 the easiest for you.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**XV. With a partner, discuss the reasons for your answers to XIII, then write down pages in the textbook that can help you. Write the page number and activity name below.**

Debate Skills	Textbook Page / Activity Name
Research	<i>Example: page 20 / Where do we find sources?</i>
Critical thinking	
Team-building	



**XVI. Write your weak point, and then, create a plan to follow so that you can improve these skills.**

*Example: I need to work on research skills because my sources of evidence were too old and so, newer sources of information contradicted my evidence. This info is on Page 20 in the textbook. So, I should review the textbook; then, I also need to...*

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**XVII. List two real-world contexts that you will be able to use the improved skills.**

*Example: If I improve my research skills, I can write better papers for other classes because my sources of information will not be contradicted by more recent studies...*

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## Potential Research Studies

Researchers who are interested in the practicing-connections hypothesis can test assumptions. For example, they can collect students' self-reflections after debate performances to investigate the extent to which students connect core domain concepts, key representations, and real-world contexts. The study can compare debate students who have been given these types of practicing-connection activities to students who have not been given them. Students who have completed practicing-connections activities should show more evidence of treating debate as a means to an end. For example, they would cite the three core domain skills and real-world contexts more often than students who have not been given these types of activities. Researchers can also investigate the assumption that Japanese students feel uncomfortable with the aspects of debate that entail openly criticizing and disagreeing. They can create a survey that can determine to what extent students feel comfortable, then compare a pre-survey and post-survey results of students who have practiced connections and those who students who have not. The survey might show that students who have practiced connections might feel more comfortable with debate tactics than those who have not.

Alternatively, at the end of the semester, students can rate the effectiveness of classroom activities for developing the core debate skills and then recommend ways to improve the activities. Researchers can compare recommendations of students who have practiced connections to the recommendations of students who have not. The group who has practiced connections might be able to show evidence of using knowledge of core domain skills more creatively and flexibly with their recommendations than the group who has not by stating more real-world contexts and key representations in their recommendations. Additionally, researchers can collect student self-reflections throughout the semester on experiences using debate skills outside of the classroom. Students can share the real-world contexts that students find useful for these debate skills. Lastly, teachers of content-based language courses might contend that there should be two goals—content-based goals and language-based goals (e.g., use of present perfect tense). As this paper only discusses the treatment of content-based goals, teachers might want to investigate how to integrate and assess language-based goals.

## Conclusion

Some debate tactics are not appropriate for certain real-world contexts in Japan such as openly disagreeing and openly challenging, but learning to debate can develop students' critical thinking, research, and team-building skills as well as provide evidence of core debate skill development. On the other hand, if transfer is an important process, then teachers need more evidence than debate performance alone to assess students' core domain skills because debate is one context to assess such core domain concepts; yet, not such a popular or common activity outside of the classroom in Japan so debate performance should not be treated as an end in itself. One way to evaluate students' ability to transfer these core domain skills is to determine the extent to which students can make connections between core domain concepts, key representations, and real-world contexts. To do this, teachers can deconstruct core domain concepts into corresponding sub-skills to help students understand what being effective researchers, team players, and critical thinkers entail. Additionally, teachers can help students to make explicit connections from core debate concepts to aspects of debate preparation and performance stages. Lastly, they can help students to reflect on the core domain concept use in real-world contexts in relation to students' goals and aspirations. By doing so,

teachers can collect evidence of students' expertise as well as help students understand the justification for the debate course's requirement status, which might help some students feel more at ease with western debate tactics. During practicing-connection activities, teachers can address issues such as "why openly disagree" and "why openly challenge others" to help students understand how they connect to the overall course goals of improving their critical thinking, team-building, and research skills. I hope that teachers test Fries et al.'s (2020) hypothesis and consider creating similar tasks for other their courses.

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