

Evidence submitted by Noisy Classroom, a organisation that promotes and supports debate and critical oracy in schools.
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1. Value and Impact

The following benefits of debate and critical oracy are an edited version of P9-20 in Noisy Classroom: Developing debate and critical oracy in the classroom, D Newman (Routledge 2019).

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative research over the years have found the following skills can be developed through formal debating:

Structured thought
Analysis/reasoning
Critical listening
Use of evidence
Self-Confidence
Persuasive speaking skills
Teamwork
Research
Thinking on your feet, under pressure
Ability to see two sides of an issue
Ability to argue in a constructive, non-personal way
Ability to detect bias
Use of formal vocabulary
Use of standard English

1.1 Academic understanding and achievement

Taking part in critical oracy activities builds students' critical thinking skills, allows them to explore a subject in depth, interrogate knowledge and build understanding.

A number of studies have linked debating to increased academic attainment:

- Researchers from Virginia University found that Chicago students who participate in academic debate programs are twice as likely to attain the ACT college-readiness benchmark in English and 70% more likely to attain the ACT college-readiness benchmark in reading as comparable peers who did participate in academic debate in high school.¹
- The CFBT report commissioned by the English-Speaking Union found evidence for debating leading to improved attainment in biology, art, history, reading and critical thinking and cited research in the USA conducted by the Urban Debate League showing that debaters in urban high schools were 25% more likely to complete school than non-debaters²

1.2. Skills for the workplace

¹ Accessed at <http://argumentcenterededucation.com/impact/research-basis/>

²Akerman, R. and Neale, I. (2011) Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions CFBT.

Time and time again we hear from businesses that they need their employees to have better communication skills. A 2014 report by the British Chamber of Commerce (BCC), which surveyed over 3,000 firms, found that 57% of respondents thought young people lacked the basic soft skills, of communication and team working.³ The 2016 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey found that 50% of businesses were not satisfied with the communication skills of school and college leavers.⁴ Working in teams, interacting with clients and customers, selling, managing, conflict resolution, pitching, presenting and many other parts of day to day working life involve communication. With an increasing focus on a post-automation workforce, communication only becomes more important in the toolbox of employability skills. A current focus on “twenty-first century skills” often includes critical thinking, collaboration and communication⁵ all of which we develop through debate..

There is then the fact that to get a job in the first place, one must usually have an oral interview, so lack of verbal communication skills can form a barrier to employment from the start. Furthermore, Project Oxygen, Google’s effort to determine what qualities are important in their top employees, lists “possessing insights into others (including other’s different values and points of views)” and “being a good critical thinker and problem solver”, alongside “communicating and listening well”.⁶ These skills are especially linked to debating and oracy activities which encourage different views to be aired.

1.3. Preparation for university

The confidence and skill to express oneself verbally is crucial to thriving at university in many subjects. Seminar teaching expects the ability to articulate your thoughts within a wider academic dialogue. To critically engage with material, assess evidence and to compare different interpretations and approaches is at the heart of much of the study of the humanities, arts and social sciences. If a student’s prior experience of this is limited they are ill prepared for the rigour of higher level academic practice. Of all home students in the UK starting full-time degree courses for the first time in 2015-16, more than one in 10 were expected to leave higher education without a qualification.⁷ Research in America shows that debating and discussion in the curriculum can lead to higher college matriculation and retention among at-risk students.⁸ Could we see similar effects with a debate-led curriculum in the UK?

1.4. Social mobility

³ British Chamber of Commerce, Annual Workforce Survey 2014

⁴ CBI, 2016. The Right Combination: CBI/Pearson Education and skills survey 2016, CBI

⁵ <http://www.p21.org>

⁶ Harrel, I M. and Barbato, L. *Great managers still matter: the evolution of Google’s Project Oxygen* Rework, February 2018,

[https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/the-evolution-of-project-oxygen/Project Oxygen - google](https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/the-evolution-of-project-oxygen/Project%20Oxygen%20-%20google)

⁷ Weale, S in the Guardian on 8 March 2018 *University drop-out rates in UK rise for third successive year*

⁸ “Deborah Meier in New York found that a curriculum that places debate and discussion at the core can improve college matriculation and retention by as much as 80% among Title I and at-risk students” Cited by Argument centred Education at <http://argumentcenterededucation.com/impact/research-basis/>

The independent sector has always had a strong tradition of public speaking and debating, seen as a training ground for professions such as the law, media and politics. But these skills can and should be taught in the state school system. When people refer to the sense of entitlement that privately educated students exude, this can be put down to their sense that they have a right to speak and be listened to. What a wonderful gift to try to give to all of the students coming through our state education system: the belief that their voice matters.

The Social Mobility Commission identified soft skills as a barrier to social mobility and particularly highlight spoken communication skills. A report from the Commission in 2015 on barriers to entering the elite professions found that “elite firms define ‘talent’ according to a number of factors such as drive, resilience, strong communication skills and above all confidence and ‘polish’”.⁹ Allowing pupils to develop their fluency, formality and finesse through regular practise of critical oracy, will stand them in good stead for their future careers

Ultimately it is about making sure that no child’s life chances are narrowed because they do not have the language, the confidence or the skills to converse and present in a variety of situations.

1.5. Readiness for civic participation

The skills and confidence to articulate yourself, along with the belief that you have to have your voice heard, have always been important for civic participation. The prospective MP, town councillor, trades union leader or residents’ association rep will need to speak for the people they represent and many of the best will be able to do so powerfully and persuasively. But even those who do not wish to lead should not feel a barrier to participating. To attend a council town planning meeting and stand up and express yourself on proposed changes to your local community can be too daunting to many who have been given no training or opportunity to practice and have not been educated in a culture where their voice matters. To stand on the street and engage passersby with your petition or to knock on doors canvassing for your political party of choice require you to argue your case and defend it against, often hostile, challenge. To give all young people these skills is an act of enfranchisement.

Indeed, the twenty-first century poses civic challenges that have never been seen before and we must equip the next generation to deal with them. Whether it is to spot fake news, resist radicalisation or avoid trolling, good argumentation skills are an armour in today’s world. Avoid ad hominem attacks, show us your evidence and consider alternate views are useful approaches to start with. Critical faculties must be developed to interrogate the material that is put before us, especially on social media. A 2018 survey by the Literacy Trust found that only 2% of children had the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake.¹⁰ The next generation, given the right skills, can raise the standards of public discourse.

1.6. Character Education

Critical oracy helps develop the leadership skills to inspire, motivate and listen carefully to others; pupils must organise their time and material to prepare for the task, resilience is built by the practice

⁹Dr Louise Ashley, Professor Jo Duberley, Professor Hilary Sommerlad, Professor Dora Scholarios, *A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions*, June 2015 for the Social Mobility and child poverty commission

¹⁰ The National Literacy Trust, *Fake News and Critical Literacy: The final report of the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools*, June 2018

of being assertively challenged and learning to defend, or amend, ones views without taking the challenges personally; students must show initiative in these pupil-led activities; and of course communication skills are built through practise, and instruction in, talk-based tasks.

1.7. Mental health and well being

There have been many links made between mental health, well being and oracy. Over 75% of people with mental health disorders have communication difficulties¹¹ and of the 10% of children under the age of 16 known to have a clinically significant mental health illness, nearly half of these are likely to have Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN).¹² 60% of young offenders and two thirds of pupils at risk of exclusion from school have been found to have SLCN.¹³

1.8. Benefits for the teacher

- From a pragmatic perspective, the use of increased critical oracy can contribute to reduced teacher workload as marking is done on the spot, rather than in a stack of books later that night.
- Working with engaged and enthusiastic students, expressing themselves and arguing about the fundamentals of your subject is an energising and joyful experience. NC has met teachers who have said that they have changed their mind about leaving teaching due to their involvement in running debate clubs.

2. Provision and Access

2.1

Every school should embed debating and critical oracy in their curriculum and every school should also have a co-curricular debate club. The analogy is Physical Education. Most people agree that PE should be compulsory for all. Some students will love it, some will dread it, but all will benefit from the health and social skills it brings. Like physical activity can channel aggression, the ability to make yourself heard and understood can lessen frustration and provide a non-physical option to resolve conflict. And debating, like sports, can provide an alternative forum for students who find formal writing challenging, to excel.

Every student needs to benefit from some weekly oracy (see Value and Impact) but some will thrive on more. The football and netball teams, house swimming competitions and county athletics allow those with talent and enthusiasm to shine. Some pupils will love public speaking and debating. Given the chance, they will flourish as they present speeches in front of their peers and eventually in competition against other schools. For some, debating can be life-changing: providing the aspiration and motivation to achieve the top grades, apply for the top universities and enter competitive careers such as law. In her time as coach of the England Schools' Debating Team,

¹¹The All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2014

¹²<http://blog.ican.org.uk/2018/10/talking-about-mental-health-building-an-understanding-about-slc/>

¹³

https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/2612/communication_difficulties_-_facts_and_stats.pdf

Debbie Newman saw students whose lives were transformed through their experience of co-curricular debating. Currently national schools' competitions are dominated by independent schools and this needs to be addressed.

2.2

Examples of best practise in schools include:

- Secondary and primary schools where whole cohorts sit oracy qualifications (such as Sir William Burrough Primary School)
- Schools with an embedded debate educator, who teaches alongside curriculum teachers (such as Clapton Girls' Academy)
- Schools that teach debate and rhetoric as a discrete timetabled subject (such as the independent school Ibstock Place School)
- Schools that embed oracy throughout curriculum and the wider life of the school (such as Swakeley's School)
- Schools that have a debate champion in every faculty (such as Wensleydale School)
- Schools that have built a successful co-curricular debate programme from scratch (such as Hinchingsbroke School)
- Schools that raise the profile of debating through house competitions, lunchtime debate societies and staff v pupil debates (such as Westcliff High School for Boys)
- Independent schools that involve local state schools in their debate provision (such as Northampton High School)
- Schools where secondary pupils are involved with running workshops and competitions for local primary students (such as Dunraven School)
- Schools that act as a hub for debating for other secondary schools in their area (such as Welland Park School).

2.3

Examples of best practise for supporting schools

- The PiXL Club runs a national state school only debate programme called Up For Debate which provides resources for whole school debating, oracy training for teachers and a competition. They regularly provide debate and oracy training for subject teachers at their conferences. In addition they provide oracy resources for all of their school to be used in tutor time, which cover years 7-13.
- Northampton University used debating as part of its access programme to engage local schools
- Linklaters support debating in Hackney as part of their Community Investment programme
- Wandsworth Local Authority run a Model United Nations and debating programme for their primary schools which includes resources and teacher training.
- National Programmes such as the English Speaking Union Mace, the Jack Petchy Speak Out Challenge, the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters competition, the Mock Trial competition run by Young Citizens, the public speaking programme run by the Rotary Club, the debating competitions run by the Oxford and Cambridge Unions and many other together provide an outstanding offer to school for co-curricular debate and oracy.
- Youth groups such as Youth Net and Kings Gen run debating clubs with their students outside of schools

Businesses, charities, networks of schools, universities, independent schools, hub schools and youth groups all provide opportunities for oracy. All of these examples of best practice can be replicated

to extend the opportunities for high quality provision of debate and critical oracy inside and outside of the classroom.

3. Barriers

3.1 Some of the common barriers teachers report to us are:

“Isn't it very hard to control behaviour in an active, Noisy Classroom?”

“How can I show evidence of pupil learning if it isn't written in their books?”

“What about particularly quiet or introverted students?”

“Aren't activities like debating only for the most able pupils?”

“Oracy isn't relevant to my subject”

“Debating and public speaking are elitist activities for posh people”

“I don't have time in a crowded curriculum”

All of these can be easily overcome with some awareness raising, some training and, crucially, with the support of the senior management in the school. Teachers in schools where oracy is publicly valued and supported do not report these barriers in the same way. For example if managers understand the benefits of oracy then there is less fear of it not being written in books and of giving it time. If oracy is given parity with literacy then all teachers understand their responsibility in delivering opportunities for pupils. Individual teachers can do marvellous things in their classroom, but to embed oracy in the culture of a school takes commitment from the senior management.

3.2

Noisy Classroom also supports the reintroduction of speaking and listening back into GCSE English Language or the introduction of a new English Passport with an oracy component. If oracy features on a compulsory public examination, it is not possible for some schools to choose to ignore it completely.

3.3

Additional oracy qualifications, such as those offered by the English Speaking Board, also raise the profile of oracy within schools and allow pupils to evidence their effective communication skills when applying for jobs.

3.4

Additional time and/or funding to support staff with running co-curricular speech and debate programmes can help this culture thrive within a school

3.5

Teachers of all subjects should be trained to use some debate and critical oracy in the classroom during their initial teacher training and through school CPD.

3.6

The profile of oracy can be raised with parents by adding an oracy grade on to school reports, as they do at Swakeley's School.