# I've Looked at Life . . .

**Julie Todaro**

Whatever you call it—discourse, argument, give and take, parley, dialogue (or dialog), or debate, it appears that the public's appetite for public discourse—positive, negative, confrontative, combative—is insatiable. Face-offs, formal or informal exchanges, and the "he said, she said" approach draws crowds. Traditionally, groups have gathered to see:

- presidential or general candidate debates;
- competitions in professional programs (for example, law school moot court competition);
- speech class assignments/debates;
- *Saturday Night Live*'s Weekend Update with Jane Curtain and Dan Aykroyd; and
- talk shows with guests pitted against each other.

In addition, the technique of addressing both sides of an issue works well for teaching critical thinking in classroom assignments (as in the use of the *Opposing Viewpoints* series by Greenhouse Press) in general curriculum as well as in discipline-specific assignments, such as in Health Sciences curriculum.

## What Are the Characteristics of a Discourse or Debate?

Debates or discourses—in general—offer the opportunity for a public exchange of ideas, and this exchange typically represents varying or opposite opinions or presentations of facts on two completely different sides of an issue. The goal of the debate itself includes the exploration of a subject and—if appropriate—a decision on an issue or choice of a direction.

In a formal debate setting, the audience may be asked to prepare by reviewing content on both sides of an issue, or it may be given a set of questions to answer or research, or statements to review, and then form an opinion. The audience can also be preassessed to determine its feelings and opinions on the topic or issue and then will be assessed post-presentation to compare and contrast (possibly new) responses. Debaters may be asked to address a set of questions or something specific, such as debate two sides of an argument presented from research, opinions from an article, ideas presented from theory or practice, or—obviously—they may be present to debate their own beliefs with the expectation that their beliefs, values, and content are diametrically opposed. A formal debate may include a pre-presentation by a facilitator or a post- or summative presentation by the facilitator or a subject expert or pundit.

## Why Is the Debate Forum Making a Comeback in—for Example—Professional Development and Programming?

Although the concept of debates has never gone away, it—like so many other forms of entertainment, training, professional development and education in general—moves in and out of favor and in and out of vogue. In today's fast-paced print and e-learning world, however, there is an ever-present need for teaching and learning to focus on critical thinking skills for assessing information and issues. When matching teaching and learning styles and techniques to the debate or discourse format, the debate format offers educators, trainers and presenters opportunities to:

- develop alternatives ways of thinking about issues;
- seek and compare different points of view;
- provide opportunities to discuss the most basic and fundamental questions and issues;
- articulate multiple solutions and weigh the consequences of each solution;
- recognize and learn to deal with bias;
- model good thinking processes in discussing issues;
- illustrate using valid and reliable research and data to support discussion of issues and deciding on alternatives;
- distinguish—in data presented—among fact, opinion, interpretation, and judgment;
- illustrate in one lesson all aspects of competencies, including knowledge, skills and abilities, and attitudes and values;

**Julie Todaro** (jtodaro@austincc.edu) is Dean of Library Services, Austin Community College, Texas, and a frequent presenter of LAMA regional institutes.

- build upon audience competencies and experiences;
- teach "strong sense" rather than "weak sense" critical thinking ("weak sense" critical thinkers are people who have the abilities necessary for quality critical thinking, but these abilities are only used to their own advantage or for their own purposes; "strong sense" critical thinkers are people who have the abilities necessary for critical thinking and use their abilities to identify the most accurate and fair positions regardless of their own particular interests or desires); and
- present issues and ethical approaches to solving issues.

Clearly the debate format offers a wide variety of opportunities for presenting content for maximum critical thinkin" lesson. *But* . . .

## What Are the Risks of the Debate and Discourse Approach?

As with any format of instruction, there are decisions that need to be made regarding choice of format for the best possible teaching and learning experience. Typically presenters need to ask (at the very least, of themselves if no one else is available!) the standard set of preparation questions including:

- What are the parameters of my presentation? Time allowed overall? Time for different elements or sections of the presentation? Room information as to size, seating, visibility? Equipment issues?
- Who are the audience members? Can I make assumptions about possible learning styles? Are handouts possible? Are they critical to the delivery of the content?
- What are the goals of the presentation? What are audience members expecting? What are others, such as managers of audience members, expecting if the audience is a group of staff, or what are the program coordinators expecting as to content goals? What are audience expectations on content outcomes?

Given the answers to the questions above, you are halfway to making a decision on whether to offer content through a debate or discourse format. Taking each set of questions with a quick "If yes" or "If no" approach . . .

What are the parameters of my presentation? Time allowed overall? Time for different elements or sections of the presentation? Room information as to size, seating, visibility? Equipment issues?

**Yes . . .** time is limited, but not so short that full information can't be given out *and* there is time for both individuals to speak fully and answer or respond to each other if warranted or needed as well as for audience questions. The room has theatre seating and isn't so big that presenters are tiny on a stage . . . or the room is huge but a big screen is available for projecting images. Equipment is available, but presentation or argument by either individual isn't dependent on presenting information visually.

**No . . .** there isn't enough time for two people to fully articulate their vision, belief, value *or* content, or there is time for two to speak but no time for rebuttal or discussion. The room is big and there isn't a screen for projecting images. Content is dependent on visual presentation by one or both speakers and there is no equipment.

Who are the audience members? Can I make assumptions about possible learning styles? Are handouts possible? Critical to the delivery of the content?

**Yes . . .** you have an idea about who might be in the audience and what their needs might be given the nature of the environment or setting (a business or library or a conference where the audience is predictable), or you don't know who is in the audience, but the coordinators have designed a well-controlled program with a good facilitator and audience questions taken on cards for the facilitator to read and ask.

**No . . .** you have no idea who is or might be attending. The program itself is wide open, with open mike question-and-answer time. There are too many projected to be in the audience to provide handouts, or only one speaker must have handouts and the other speaker feels that gives them an unfair advantage in persuading or presenting the case.

What are the goals of the presentation? What are audience members expecting? What are others, such as managers of audience members, expecting if the audience is a group of staff, or what are the program coordinators expecting as to content goals? What are audience expectations on content outcomes?

**Yes . . .** presentation goals and outcomes are clear, and the promotion for the program is clear in the delivery of information.

**No . . .** you're not sure what the audience wants or expects or what the program or event coordinators want debated or discussed. You feel that the promotion or advertising for the event is too brief or faulty in presenting program content or expectations. Too much is promised! You can't meet the goals or you can't make the outcomes.

Other reasons to "just say no" to a debate or discourse:

- **Speaker issues.** Your speakers are uneven . . . one is good . . . the other not so good. Your speakers are uneven in their abilities. The speakers have never debated an issue before, or are unclear about the need for presentation and for give and take. The speakers are dependent on visual content or handouts to make their point, and this may give an unfair advantage. One speaker feels uncomfortable in the role of dis-

agreeing with another person at all, or uncomfortable with the person he is to debate.

- **Too many alternatives.** Your topic has too many sides; that is, there aren't really two clear-cut sides, or the two sides have too many nuances for cogent discussion.
- **Poor research.** You are expecting a research- or data-based presentation, and there isn't enough research available or the research is uneven; for example, one speaker can give research and data, and the other only opinion, so the discussion is uneven or not really a debate.
- **Poor presentation.** The presentation skills (quality? consistency?) of the presenters are at low levels, or the quality is unknown of one or both.
- **Audience issues.** The audience (if a staff group from one organization, for example) is at a low level of morale and doesn't want to hear what it perceives as an argument, or it wants to hear an argument or debate but the reality is nothing can be done if the debate goes more one way than another. Finally, the debate could be more harmful than helpful if the point is made and the audience expectation is that no change is possible, so why bother?
- **Equipment or technology driven.** Only one presents content with technology, or one or more speakers plan to present and the technology doesn't work . . . therefore, the debate can't be completed. Or the room is too large for debate and the speakers appear to be too small in the distance. Or the content is dependent on technology, but poor or no technology is available.

## Why Is "Debate" Making a Comeback in the Library and Information Profession?

Librarians have always been aware and taken advantage of the debate process; however, there are certain characteristics of using debate as a teaching and learning tool that I think (and please note that this is my opinion) contribute to our focus on this technique at this point in time.

- **Being talked at.** I've heard a number of colleagues talking about how they have–for many years–felt talked to or talked at. Whether it's a politician telling them what they need, an upper-level umbrella administration talking globally without local content, a journalist generalizing, or a casual acquaintance or partygoer making "shhhh . . . " comments that went out with the turn of the century (not this last one, but the one before that!), many of us feel talked to without having the opportunity to present different or contrary information.
- **Much talk about an unknown field**. For many years we couldn't get any ink, as they say in the newspaper business. Libraries weren't consistently or even intermittently sexy, and, unless we offered cute pictures of neighborhood kids watching a puppet show, weren't newsworthy. For the past decade, however, we've been in the news, and whether it's about the Web (good or bad news,) or the new "e" or online world, we are relishing opportunities to hear issues *discussed* and *debated* because the debate provides opportunities to educate about the new and multifaceted, balancing the print and "e" act of the new world of library and information science.
- **Much data . . . but still hard to measure and hard to get the word out.** It wouldn't be fair to say that libraries don't measure or collect data. They do and they–in the past twenty years–have collected and measured in ever-increasing numbers and have made every attempt to use new styles and techniques of measurement. The issue with libraries is and always has been measuring and placing value on what we do is–on a good day–hard to do. Establishing worth, assessing outcomes, valuing services, and measuring e-resources is a never-ending struggle, then throw in measuring globally and locally, measuring across types of libraries, deciding which and what to measure electronically, and then attempting to determine the impact of providing and using resources . . . and you have a frustrating environment with much data but a wide variety of interpretations. Debates provide opportunities for both opinion–more typical–and research and data.

So . . . why would one–knowing the risks–recommend a discourse and debate forum? Given that I have been to

### How Can We Use the Debate Format?

Debates provide:

- models for public service staff and customer dialogue in designing training experiences in such areas as answering difficult services questions (establishing overdues, creating policies, and so on);
- design for professional development for presenting ethical and values-based discussion (filtering, fee vs. free, materials selection, and so on);
- content and participants for legislative initiatives;
- a foundation and the beginning of an internal dialogue for designing a new service or for ceasing existing services;
- a technique for introducing new content for professional association presentation;
- a process for defending practice for professional association presentation; and
- education for internal or external audience and participants for shifting paradigms for services, resources, or facilities.

two excellent debates in the last two years and have been asked to participate in three additional debates, I would say that the library and information field sees the debate forum as entertaining, informational, and educational. In general, debates and discourse make us think. They make it possible for us to explore an issue from more than just one aspect of research or one piece of data, and certainly to focus on more than just one opinion. They force us to—obviously—think critically and review the options. By osbserving the process we are encouraged to think broadly, weigh the facts, and then—if appropriate—thoroughly learn a topic, think differently, possibly change our mind (and other minds), and, maybe, make up our minds.

### Resources


Critical and Creative Thinking
www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/cels/el4.html
Important Elements of Critical Thinking
www.sc.maricopa.edu/assessment/Critical%20Thinking/ctelements.htm
Curriculum and Instruction Branch, Saskatchewan Education. "Critical and Creative Thinking" in Understanding the Common Essential Learning A Handbook for Teachers. Canada: Saskatchewan Education, 2005.
www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/cels/el4.html
Jacobs, Alan. Critical Thinking Today!: Important Elements of Critical Thinking. Scottsdale Community College: Scottsdale, AZ., March 2004.
www.sc.maricopa.edu/assessment/Critical%20Thinking/ctelements.htm