

Debating as an Academic Tool: Fostering Holistic and Critical Thinking in Higher Education

Ryan Iskandar Amin¹, Aida Safiyah Abdul Aziz¹, Matthew Ernest Paul¹, Ahmad Firdhaus Arham², Nur Hasyareeda Hassan¹, Nurwina Akmal Anuar³, Mohd Suzeren Md. Jamil¹, Norinsan Kamil Othman¹, Mohd Fadhli Shah Khaidzir², Azlan Abdul Rahim² & Ahmad Rafizi Salleh²

¹Faculty of Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia, ²Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia, ³Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: benferdao@ukm.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email: A196306@siswa.ukm.edu.my,

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of structured debating as an academic tool in higher education, arguing that it fosters holistic and critical thinking skills essential for academic and professional success. Through a review of literature, case studies, and empirical evidence, the paper demonstrates how integrating debating into curricula provides a dynamic approach to student development. Debating requires students to engage deeply with complex issues, often exploring multiple perspectives to construct and defend arguments. This process develops critical thinking by pushing students to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and separate emotion from objective reasoning. Arguing both for and against a proposition, regardless of personal beliefs, further cultivates intellectual humility, allowing students to appreciate opposing viewpoints. Moreover, debating enhances holistic thinking by encouraging students to draw from diverse disciplines, preparing them for real-world problem-solving where multifaceted solutions are often required. Communication skills, both oral and written, also improve, as students learn to articulate ideas clearly and persuasively under time constraints, mirroring professional environments. In contrast to passive, lecture-based learning, debating promotes active engagement. Students not only retain knowledge better but also develop lifelong learning skills, becoming adept at research, analysis, and synthesis. This interactive approach fosters independent thinking and a questioning mindset, preparing students to navigate complex global challenges. Ultimately, this paper argues that incorporating debating into higher education curricula can create a more engaging, student-centered environment that equips students with 21st-century skills. As institutions seek innovative methods to enhance learning, debating stands out as a valuable pedagogical strategy for fostering holistic and critical thinking in higher education.

Keywords: Debating, Critical Thinking, Thinking, Higher Education Curriculum & Active Learning

Introduction

Higher education in Malaysia has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, evolving into a dynamic and multifaceted system aimed at fostering national development and global competitiveness. As of the latest developments, the landscape of higher education in Malaysia is characterized by both challenges and opportunities, shaped by government policies, institutional efforts, and global trends. From 2013 to 2025, Malaysia's education system, spanning from preschool to post-secondary levels, has been guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint. The blueprint outlines ten key developmental shifts required for all Malaysian students to achieve holistic growth, in alignment with the goals of access, quality, equity, and unity. One of the first shifts dictated by the blueprint is “producing graduates who are holistic, entrepreneurial, and well-rounded”.

Focusing on cultivating well-rounded graduates is essential in a time characterized by swift technological progress and global interdependence. As the workforce progresses, there is a growing demand for graduates who exhibit technical expertise and critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal abilities. Aligning higher education with these objectives is crucial for Malaysia's global competitiveness and for tackling urgent national issues including economic development, social cohesion, and innovation. Furthermore, the importance of promoting comprehensive development in pupils transcends academic boundaries. It fosters the development of well-rounded individuals who can make educated decisions, engage in civic life, and contribute significantly to society.

There is an increasing emphasis on research in Malaysian higher education, with universities concentrating on providing outputs that solve global concerns. This is reflected in the current developments in Malaysian higher education. Despite this, concerns regarding the quality and impact of such research have brought to light the necessity of adopting a more balanced approach to expanding academic institutions. In a similar vein, although, significantly, there are measures to improve graduate preparation through industrial training, many educational institutions continue to emphasize rote memorization and examination-centric assessments. The ability of students to think critically and adapt to the intricacies of the natural world is diminished as a result of this, leaving a vacuum in the preparation of students for the requirements of a constantly evolving workforce.

In light of these issues, an urgent need is to investigate novel educational techniques that encourage more profound engagement, critical thinking, and holistic development. Using discussion as a method of instruction is one approach to address the problem. Students are encouraged to engage thoroughly with complicated subjects, explore many views, and explain their thoughts clearly and convincingly when they participate in a debate, which is a structured and formalized type of discussion promoting analytical skills, creative abilities, and practical communication skills that are becoming increasingly necessary in today's world which provides a one-of-a-kind opportunity to solve limitations inherent in traditional learning models.

It is essential to investigate the function of discussion in more advanced educational settings for several reasons. In the first place, it aligns with the national objective of creating well-rounded graduates who are sufficiently prepared to make a meaningful contribution to society. Furthermore, it fulfils a significant requirement within the educational system by offering a practical and scalable strategy for moving away from memorization. Thirdly, it can benefit various stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, and students, by strengthening teaching practices, providing information for policy creation, and increasing student outcomes. Last but not least, the debate is an effective educational tool that helps cultivate a culture of intellectual curiosity and resiliency, making it an essential component of the curriculum of higher education institutions.

This study will examine the function of debate in higher education, analyzing its value and effectiveness in strengthening students' abilities to think holistically and critically. This study aims to emphasize why incorporating debate is essential and necessary for the future of higher education in Malaysia. This will be accomplished by analyzing the principles and practices of debate, as well as its potential benefits and problems.

Literature Review

Debating has often been seen as a crucial tool in academia especially among students at higher education institutes. It has been used as a pedagogical tool that enables and promotes enhanced communication skills, critical thinking as well as allowing students to develop crucial understandings of critical issues. An early study conducted among university students to gauge their perspectives on debate-related activities being conducted in a classroom setting has reported that given the nature of debates itself that is often structured, this allows students to engage issues and topics from numerous perspectives, which serves as a key component in the enhancement of evaluative and analytical capabilities of students (Goodwin 2003).

Past studies in this discipline also solidified the role of debating as a potentially powerful learning and teaching tool to be used in higher education. Activities and study plans built around debating has been key in promoting active learning, that is allowing students to not only listen and absorb knowledge but to also play their own part in making and breaking down arguments and information (Kennedy 2007). This allows for a more holistic approach to teaching and learning as students are no longer simply recipients but also can take part in these forms of interactive lesson plans, allowing for better understanding and learning. Holistic learning is also necessary in a globalized educational setting as there is a need to know and respect the many different cultures that exist and given debating offers students the unique chance to vocalise different perspectives and viewpoints other than their own, this will also undoubtedly contribute to the growth of holistic learning in education (Hansen 2011 and Deardorff 2006).

The art of debating has also greatly evolved in line with the global era. During the Covid-19 pandemic era, there has been a surge in online debating activities as the world was forced into the virtual world almost completely. A study by Alwi and Duffy in 2021 found that debating done online were just as effective in promoting critical thinking and enhanced communicative skills just as physical debates are known to do. This also enabled online classes to be more dynamic, where students are given the chance to engage and interact rather than mundanely sitting and listening to lectures without being able to actively participate in any

manner. The rise in online debating is certainly compatible with the similar trend of online education since the pandemic era and these platforms can only further enhance accessibility and flexibility as time goes by.

In an era where it is increasingly difficult to keep students engaged and interested in lesson plans, debating could potentially offer a solution to this problem. Given the nature of debates that require active engagement and involvements, this means that debates could potentially be an effective idea in increasing student engagements especially in higher educational. A study conducted has discovered that students who participated in debate-related activities are more likely to attend classes on a regular basis and to participate in discussions more actively (Omae, Gachahi & Maina 2019). This is certainly beneficial to both students as well as educators in ensuring that lesson plans are engaged with better and more effectively. However, careful considerations must be taken as well in implementing debates into education as the competitive nature of debates could also potentially create a skewed win-lose system that is counterproductive to actual learning (Mitchell 1998).

All in all, debating incorporated into higher learning education is a proven tool in not only creating a more holistic learning environment but also sharpening skills and talents among students. However, no solution is without its own challenges and with this in mind, educators should be mindful when incorporating debates into lesson plans for classrooms in order to fully maximize the potential benefits in creating an inclusive, balanced and comprehensive environment fit for teaching and learning.

Background on Holistic and Critical Thinking

There have been many questions on how debaters possess the knowledge and information regarding a certain topic or motion 30 minutes before motions are released. It is also well known that debaters are not allowed to use any form of the Internet to search or request assistance online. Debating is a powerful pedagogical tool that significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities. By engaging in structured debates, students are required to not only understand a given topic but also to analyze it from multiple perspectives, assess the validity of different arguments, and develop coherent positions based on evidence rather than personal bias. This process inherently cultivates critical thinking, as students must rigorously question assumptions, evaluate the strength of evidence, and anticipate counterarguments.

One of the primary ways debating fosters critical thinking is through its demand for comprehensive research and evidence-based argumentation. According to Bellon (2000), debate participants must gather, evaluate, and synthesize information from a variety of sources to construct persuasive arguments. This process requires students to critically appraise the reliability and relevance of information, encouraging them to distinguish between credible evidence and unsupported assertions. By learning to evaluate sources and evidence, students develop the ability to think critically about the information they encounter both within and outside the academic environment.

Moreover, debating requires students to engage with opposing viewpoints, which is a crucial aspect of critical thinking. Engaging with perspectives that challenge their own beliefs forces students to reconsider their initial positions, identify potential weaknesses in their arguments, and refine their reasoning. Kuhn (1991), suggests that this engagement with

alternative viewpoints is essential for developing metacognitive skills—students must think about their thinking, which deepens their understanding and sharpens their critical faculties. Through this process, students learn to appreciate the complexity of issues and become more adept at navigating ambiguity and uncertainty.

Another aspect of debating that enhances critical thinking is the emphasis on logical coherence and clarity of expression. As students construct and present their arguments, they must ensure that their reasoning is logical and that their conclusions follow from their premises. This practice reinforces the importance of logical consistency and helps students develop the ability to identify and avoid fallacies in their reasoning. As noted by Snider and Schnurer (2002), the process of debate teaches students to articulate their ideas clearly and persuasively, which is a vital component of critical thinking.

Finally, debating promotes an active learning environment, which has been shown to enhance critical thinking. Rather than passively absorbing information, students in debates must actively engage with the material, question assumptions, and defend their ideas. This active engagement fosters deeper understanding and encourages students to apply their critical thinking skills in real-world contexts (Halpern, 1998). In conclusion, debating is an effective educational tool for increasing students' critical thinking skills. By requiring students to research thoroughly, engage with opposing views, construct logical arguments, and actively participate in discussions, debates cultivate the analytical and evaluative skills essential for critical thinking.

How Debate Increases Holistic and Critical Thinking

Ronald Barnett described being critical as one of the most important outcomes of pursuing a higher education. Building on Barnett's ideas, critical thinking in higher education can be understood through six distinct yet interconnected dimensions: (1) core skills in argumentation, such as reasoning and inference-making; (2) the ability to make sound critical judgments; (3) fostering attitudes and dispositions conducive to critical thinking; (4) the practice of critical actions; (5) the development of critical social relationships; and (6) what some, including Burbules and Berk (1999), describe as "critical creativity" or "critical being." These dimensions are essential to a comprehensive model of critical thinking that operates on both individual and socio-cultural levels.

Debating, as an educational tool, directly addresses each of these dimensions, making it an effective method for cultivating critical thinking in students. There are several formats in varsity-level debating that are preferred in different parts of the world. These include the British parliamentary format, Asian parliamentary, and Australian parliamentary format. Whilst some components in these formats vary (ie., speech durations, teams' composition) the fundamental format is largely similar. That is, teams are allocated a side (proposition or opposition) via a draw, and the motion to be debated will only be known to the speakers 15-30 minutes before the debate. This period of time in which teams brainstorm and prepare for the debate is colloquially called the 'prep' time. After prep, the debate commences in which each different position in a team has their own role in advancing the team's arguments and rebutting the opponents' claims. Interjections in the form of corrections, questions, or callouts whilst someone is speaking are allowed and go by the name 'POI' or point of information.

Teams who perform well in the preliminary rounds—that is, winning the majority of the preliminaries—advance (or ‘break’) into the knock-out rounds.

The very nature of debating involves the active use of critical thinking before the debate even starts. First, teams must navigate complex issues or topics which they might have varied levels of familiarity with. For example, in a competition with four preliminary rounds, teams could be navigating motions centered around issues of immigration, energy transition, race and religion, and more. The prep time allotted to teams plays a crucial role in fostering holistic and critical thinking skills. During this period, teams not only construct their own arguments but also pre-empt potential points from their opponents, requiring a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand. The necessity to preemptively address opposing views cultivates strategic thinking, as teams must identify the strongest possible arguments and devise effective rebuttals. Furthermore, the limited time available intensifies the need for efficiency in organizing and prioritizing information, sharpening decision-making skills. This holistic approach—where teams must integrate knowledge, anticipate objections, and respond under time pressure—mirrors real-world problem-solving scenarios, making it a powerful exercise in developing critical thinking. By synthesizing information quickly and effectively, debaters learn to navigate complex issues with nuance and foresight, ultimately enhancing their capacity for strategic analysis and critical evaluation across diverse contexts.

During the round itself, criticality is practiced in being careful listeners, aside from performing good argumentation skills. Teams must listen carefully to their opponents' speeches, discerning not only the content but also the underlying assumptions, logical structure, and rhetorical strategies used. This careful listening allows debaters to identify weaknesses, inconsistencies, or gaps in their opponents' arguments, which they can then exploit in their own responses. Moreover, effective listening enables debaters to accurately understand and interpret the nuances of their opponents' case, ensuring that their rebuttals are both relevant and precise. It also requires them to remain adaptable, as they must adjust their planned responses in real-time based on the evolving dynamics of the round as participants must construct and deconstruct arguments, reason through complex issues, and draw logical inferences to support their positions.

In terms of making critical judgments during the round, in a skill or method called ‘weighing’, debaters are required to evaluate and ‘weigh’ the strength of their arguments and those of their opponents, assessing the validity, relevance, and impact of the evidence presented by both. They present these comparisons to the floor, this skill for comparisons not only elucidates the arguments for the teams, but also for the adjudicators present. An empirical example of the efficacy of debate as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian higher education can be found in a study at International Medical University (IMU) Kuala Lumpur, where the use of debate in teaching health economics to dental students was found to be effective in enhancing their engagement, reinforcing their understanding, and improving their organizational thinking. The debate topic, “Private healthcare is better than its government counterpart,” was selected to address key learning objectives and stimulate critical analysis. By providing preparatory sessions and mock debates, students overcame initial challenges related to unfamiliarity and lack of confidence, ultimately fostering a deeper comprehension of health economics principles.

In the social dimension, debating inherently involves the development of critical openness that allows for more diverse social relationships. Debate competitions foster a mindset that values inquiry, skepticism, and openness to different perspectives, providing a unique platform for participants to engage with topics that might be considered taboo, controversial, or politically sensitive in other settings. In the structured and competitive environment of a debate, participants are encouraged to explore and defend positions on a widerange of issues, including those that are socially sensitive or politically charged. This exposure allows debaters to critically examine and articulate viewpoints they may not personally hold or that are rarely discussed openly, fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues. The emphasis on inquiry and skepticism in debate pushes participants to question established norms and challenge prevailing assumptions, while the competitive nature of the activity rewards those who can engage with opposing perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully. By grappling with controversial topics in a controlled, intellectual setting, debaters develop the skills to navigate and contribute to difficult conversations with nuance and confidence. This experience not only broadens their intellectual horizons but also prepares them to engage with the world's diverse and often contentious ideas with a balanced, open-minded approach.

Not only that, but international competitions like the World Universities also Debating Championship (WUDC), the United Asian Debating Championship (UADC), and the Australasian Intersarsity Debating Championships (Australis) bring together students from diverse nations, creating a global forum where these challenging topics can be discussed openly. In these arenas, debaters from various cultural and political backgrounds are encouraged to explore and defend positions on a wide range of issues, including those that may be socially sensitive or politically charged in their home countries. The international nature of these competitions offers a safe space for participants to critically examine and articulate viewpoints that might be met with hostility or censorship in their own countries.

Ultimately, debating whether in class or in competitions serves as a powerful educational tool for cultivating critical thinking skills across multiple topics. Through the structured format of debate, participants engage in rigorous argumentation, careful listening, and critical judgment, all within a time-constrained environment that mirrors real-world challenges. These activities promote not only the development of core analytical skills but also the fostering of open-mindedness and the ability to navigate complex, often controversial topics. International debate competitions such as WUDC, UADC, and Australis further enhance this experience by providing a global platform where students from diverse cultural and political backgrounds can safely engage in discussions that might be restricted or censored in their home countries. This global exchange of ideas not only broadens participants' intellectual horizons but also prepares them to thoughtfully and confidently engage with the world's most pressing and contentious issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, debating as an academic tool in higher education offers significant benefits in cultivating both holistic and critical thinking skills among students. By encouraging students to analyze complex issues, consider diverse perspectives, and construct coherent arguments, debates foster a deeper engagement with learning material, moving beyond rote memorization to active, analytical participation. The interdisciplinary nature of debates

mirrors real-world challenges, preparing students for professional environments that demand effective communication, problem-solving, and adaptability. Furthermore, integrating debating into the curriculum can promote lifelong learning and intellectual growth, ensuring students are well-equipped to navigate the uncertainties and complexities of the modern world.

As Malaysian higher education continues to evolve in response to national and global demands, the inclusion of debating as a pedagogical strategy aligns with the broader goals of producing well-rounded, critical thinkers who can contribute meaningfully to society. However, while the competitive nature of debates may enhance engagement, educators must remain mindful of fostering an inclusive and balanced learning environment. By thoughtfully incorporating debates, higher education institutions can create dynamic, student-centered experiences that develop critical faculties essential for both academic success and future leadership.

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