

On That Point! An investigation into the use of debating and oracy to teach evaluation skills



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CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

- Head of Religious Studies at an independent school in Derbyshire with c. 650 on roll, approximately 80% of whom are boarders
- Debating experience as a university student – did not have the opportunity at school
- Managed a debating summer camp for EAL students since 2015
- Students at my school have access to two debating sessions a week – one for beginners and one for competition preparation – as well as regular competitions throughout the year
- Active and thriving schools debating circuit – runs on staff enthusiasm, caffeine and fumes!
- ‘Anecdotal’ suggests ‘debaters write better essays’ - but is that true? And if it is, can we give those skills to everyone?

STEPS TO RUNNING A DEBATE

1. Decide on your motion – this study used the statements from AQA GCSE essays
2. Assign teams – 3 students per side
3. Involve the rest of the class:
Judges – come up with a list of key points they would expect to see (like a mark scheme), and provide feedback based on points raised
Research assistants – help the speakers come up with arguments
Floor speeches – assign a specific perspective to come up with a question or point from (e.g. a Quaker pacifist for a war debate)
4. Debate – starting with a proposition speaker, then opposition and so on until all students have delivered their speeches
Timing – 3 minutes is a good starting point, but you can adjust up or down depending on age, confidence level, etc.
Audience members make notes using conclusion sheet (see resources)
You can introduce ‘points of information’ from the other team and audience in the middle 2 minutes if you think your class would be receptive
5. Staff (and student judges if used) deliver feedback



PROVISIONAL DATA



- Reasons students debate/want to debate:
- Discuss ideas they don't in other contexts
 - Build logical arguments
 - Become more confident
 - Healthy competition



- Reasons students don't want to debate:
- Nerves/shyness – challenge to overcome
 - Time – how to bring those skills into the classroom?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

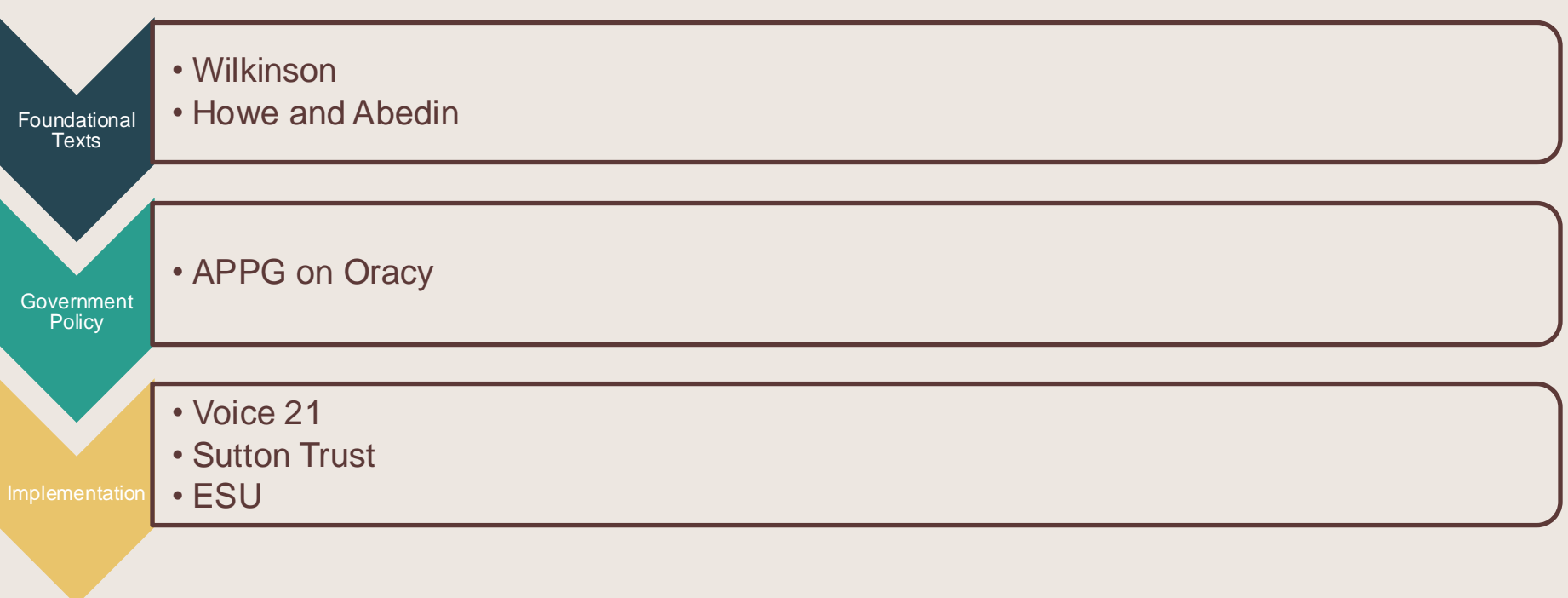
What is ‘oracy’ and how can it be taught?

What are the perceived benefits (to staff and students) of debate and oracy?

How is oracy implemented across the curriculum?

KEY LITERATURE

- All Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy
First registered in 2018, possibly defunct as of May 2024. What does it say that this important work (in collaboration with Voice 21) may not continue?
- Cullinane and Montacute – Sutton Trust: Life Lessons (2017)
Study examining the provision of ‘life skills’ education in the state sector, with several examples from schools with a strong tradition in debate and oracy.
- English-Speaking Union – Why Oracy Matters (2023)
Overview of the evidence for oracy being at the heart of the curriculum in all subjects, rather than limited to an extra-curricular or the teaching of English.
- Howe and Abedin – Classroom Dialogue: a systematic review across four decades of research (2013)
Overview of 225 studies published from 1972-2011.
- Voice 21 Impact Report 2016-2021
Building on the work of School 21 and the Voice 21 Framework for teaching oracy skills across the curriculum
- Wilkinson – The Concept of Oracy (1965)
Foundational work which first emphasised the need for attention to be paid to the skill of spoken English – “the ability to put one word of one’s own next to another of one’s own in speech, to create rather than to repeat... has not been regarded as worthy of serious attention”.



RESOURCES

1. Essay Rebuttal Sheet
Build skill of directly responding to points made
Move away from ‘evaluation by juxtaposition’ in essays
2. Conclusion Sheet
Involve whole class in a debate
Ensure proper notes are kept, and write a conclusion based on the debate had
3. Essay Planning Sheet
Planning an essay using the skills developed in the SOW

REFERENCES

- Cullinane and Montacute (2017). Life Lessons: improving essential skills for young people. The Sutton Trust
- Doherty (2023). Why oracy matters: evidence base for positioning oracy at the heart of the school curriculum. English Speaking Union
- Howe and Abedin (2013). Classroom dialogue: a systematic review across four decades of research. Cambridge Journal of Education, 43:3, 325-356
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