

**TEAM DEBATES AS VEHICLES OF LEARNING
IN INTRODUCTORY LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY COURSES
Some Initial Findings**

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During the last academic year, in collaboration with David Ellis (History), I began collecting data that may shed light on the extent to which team debates can help students learn course content, historical thinking skills and conventions, and “the game” of academic discourse. The purpose of this essay is to describe the assignment and to briefly outline some of the initial results from data collected thus far.

The Assignment. Students enrolled in History 120 (Colonial Latin America) engage in four formal debates through the course of the term. In the first two weeks of the class, students select (via a Moodle activity) a debate theme from the following four options: the military conquests, religious conversion, race and economics, or gender. Each of these themes corresponds to guiding questions for the course. Course readings and activities intentionally offer varied approaches to the themes and, thus, also offer multiple answers to the guiding questions.

After students have made their theme selection, I divide each theme’s list of students into two teams, A and B. The team’s letter corresponds with the position they must take in the debate (positions are noted in the course schedule). In the first debate of the term, for example, the team positions are as follows:

Team A: The actions of the conquistadors were justified.

Team B: The actions of the conquistadors were not justified.

The positions are intentionally broad and facile. Each team’s task is to define the parameters of their argument, synthesize course content and extract specific evidentiary support for their position, and prepare their presentation (which also entails preparing for possible counterarguments).

On debate days, we flip a coin to determine which team begins. The first team (e.g., Team A) has ten minutes to make a case for their position; Team B then has five minutes to critique and rebut Team A’s answer. Team A then has five minutes to respond. Then the roles are switched: Team B has ten minutes to make a case for their position; Team A has five minutes to critique and rebut Team B’s answer; and Team B then has five minutes to respond to the rebuttal. At the end of the formal debate period, each team fields questions from the rest of the class.

During the debate, audience members take notes on the two team’s arguments, use of evidence, rebuttals, etc., using a worksheet that I provide (Appendix C). On this worksheet, students also explain who they believe won the debate and why. Following the debate, students opt to complete the questionnaire regarding the debate experience (Appendix D).

Goals of the assignment include practice in the following areas: answering problematic (historical) questions, weighing the merit of different sources and perspectives, synthesizing information from varied (and often contradictory) sources, argument, use of evidence, planned public speaking, extemporaneous speaking, and critical listening.

The data.² For this review, the total study size is 87 student respondents from winter term 2007-2008 and the first four weeks of fall term 2008-2008. Despite the disclaimer noted below, I believe the

¹I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Derek Walker in preparing the data for this review. Many of the assignment guidelines, along with the worksheet and questionnaire are “borrowed” from David Ellis.

data offers some initial insights into the utility of team debates as vehicles of learning in introductory Latin American History classes.

First, I am able to conclude that, on the most basic of levels, the debates at least do not cause damage. For all questions, average responses ranged from 1.59 to 2.88 (with 1 representing “strongly agree” and 5 representing “strongly disagree”). More specifically, the debates appear to make students more interested in course material -- both a specific day’s material (2.11) and, to a lesser extent, materials assigned for an entire unit (2.45).

Second, I am able to conclude that the debates increase student awareness of and appreciation for both historical-mindedness and academic exchange. Students tended to agree, for example, that “other perspectives are valuable in understanding history” (1.59); and that “historical knowledge can change” (2.15). On a more general level, students also felt that “knowledge is something produced through an exchange of scholarly views and through criticism” (2.05).

Third, the debates promote active and student-centered learning. On days in which debates took place, students felt that class meetings were driven by the students’ own analyses (1.93), and that students “connected to each other in a productive way” (2.19). At the same time, audience members tended to rate themselves higher on the scale of active listeners (2.02) than they rated their classmates (2.57).

Fourth, it appears that the debates begin to increase students’ own scholarly self-awareness and critique. For example, members of debate teams indicated that at the end of the debate they were, on average, more critical of the position they had been asked to defend in the debate (2.13).

Next Steps

Completely setting aside the obvious fact that I need to devise more effective data analysis strategies, there are a number of ways that I plan to build upon what I have here. One of the first steps will be to combine my data with data collected by David Ellis (and perhaps others) for broader, longer-term and comparative analyses. Additional options include:

- continue to collect data on “informal” class debates in order to eventually compare the utility of informal versus formal debates
- adjust post-debate questionnaire to address additional learning goals specific to my courses
- devise pre-debate questionnaire/activities to administer at the start of the term and/or unit in order to better assess change over time

² Disclaimer: This is frighteningly unscientific. I make no claims to statistical accuracy. In fact, I hate numbers; I don’t even balance my own checkbook. Nonetheless, these numbers -- listed here as averages only -- allow me to make some general conclusions.

APPENDIX A
THE ASSIGNMENT AS PRESENTED TO STUDENTS IN SYLLABUS

At the beginning of the term, you will sign up as part of a debate team. On scheduled days through the term (see schedule), we will have a debate in which two teams of students will compete to convince the class that their answer to a question we have examined in class is superior to the other team's answer. To help structure the controversy, I will provide each team with a thesis. Team A will have ten minutes to make a case for their answer, and Team B will then have five minutes to critique and rebut Team A's answer. Then Team B will have ten minutes to make a case for their answer, and Team A will have ten minutes to critique and rebut Team B's answer. At the end of the formal debate and rebuttal period, each team will field questions from the rest of the class, which is encouraged to act as a hostile jury, peppering the debaters with difficult questions. I reserve the right to "spike" the debate by asking students in the audience to try to achieve goals that I will give them, goals which are inimical to one team or both teams. During the debate, the rest of the class will take notes on the two team's arguments, use of evidence, rebuttals, etc., using a form that I will provide. Students will also explain who they believe won the debate. I will collect these notes at the end of class and tally students' results. I reserve the right to treat the notes taken on the debates as a quiz.

Why?

Through these debates, you will practice synthesizing through careful historical thought the information from the various sources we have studied. These debates will also encourage you to have the intellectual fun (and occasionally liminal experience) of trying to determine the merits of various answers to problematic historical questions. Moreover, through the debates (as both debater and audience member) you will hone your skills of planned public speaking, extemporaneous speaking, and critical listening.

How will it be evaluated?

Each of the debate teams will be assessed according to criteria outlined in a form that I will provide. Remember that because this endeavor is a team effort, it is definitely to your advantage to make sure your teammates are well prepared. Please also remember that the best argument for you to make is not necessarily the most emphatic one. Making concessions to some criticisms and limiting your claims is sometimes a more useful approach. As noted above, the class will indicate to me which team they felt gave the best supported and most persuasive argument. Each member of the team that "won" the debate (in my view, although I usually defer to the class vote) will get **extra credit** toward the Engagement, Collaboration and Leadership grade.

APPENDIX B: COURSE SCHEDULE

COURSE SCHEDULE, FALL 2008-2009				
WEEK	GUIDING QUESTIONS	MONDAY	WEDNESDAY	FRIDAY
PART I: FOUNDATIONS				
Week 1 (Aug 25-29) INTRODUCTION	What is history and why should we study it? How do we approach historical work? Why Latin America?	Course introduction	Syllabus & Handouts Rampolla: "Why study history" (1-5), "Reading Critically in History" (25-29), Chapter 6 (Plagiarism)	Deadline: Make Choice on Debate Topic [CW] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Power in the Story" from <u>Silencing the Past</u> [ER]
Week 2 (Sept 1-5) FIRST ENCOUNTERS	What are historical sources and how do we work with them? How do we approach reading and writing history? How did it come about that Europeans "discovered" Latin America? What were the first interactions like between Europeans and Natives?	NO CLASS (Labor Day)	Rampolla, Ch 2, "Working with Sources" (6-17) Eakin, Ch 4, "Moving Out across the Oceans" (49-59) Vespucci, excerpt from letters [ER] Mills, #7 and #10 (45-58, 78-83)	NO CLASS (exchange for 9/21 film viewing)
Week 3 (Sept 8-12) THE MILITARY CONQUESTS	What are historical arguments? What were European justifications for conquest and what factors were in their favor? How did Natives respond?	Rampolla, Ch 4, "Following Conventions in Writing in History" (43-68, esp. 43-52) Eakin, Ch 5, "The First Conquest" (60-79)	Documents: Military conquests [ER]	Rampolla, "Quoting and Documenting Sources" (96-105) Due: Debate Response Paper In class: Team Debate Team A: Actions of conquistadors were justified Team B: Actions of conquistadors were not justified
Week 4 (Sept 15-19) AN EMPIRE TAKES SHAPE	What did the New World look like as it shifted from an area of conquest to one of colonial power? How did interactions between Europeans and Natives change over time?	Essay #1 due [submit via turnitin; bring hard copy of essay & turnitin report to class] Eakin, Ch 8, "State & Empire" (107-122)	Rampolla, "Taking history exams" (38-42) Mills, #13 and #15 (93-103, 113-116)	Mid-term Exam

PART II: THE NITTY GRITTY OF THE COLONIAL ORDERS				
<p>Week 5 (Sept 22-26)</p> <p>COLONIAL ORDERS I - RELIGION</p>	<p>What makes a strong historical review?</p> <p>What role did religion play in colonization? In Native resistance to colonization?</p>	<p><u>Sunday night - 9/21</u> Film viewing of <i>The Mission</i> (location and time TBA) Eakin, Ch 9, "Religion and Empire" (123-132) During film: take notes!</p> <p><u>Monday - 9/22</u> Rampolla, "Book and film reviews" (31-36) Make progress on readings for Wednesday</p>	<p>Saeger, "The Mission and Historical Missions..." from <i>The Americas</i> [JSTOR] Mills, #8, #9, #19, #41 (59-77, 134-143; 309-315)</p>	<p>Mills, #27 (173-184) Inga Clendennin, "Disciplining Indians: Franciscan Ideology and Missionary Violence in 16th Century Yucatan" from <i>Past & Present</i> [JSTOR]</p> <p><i>Due: Debate Response Paper</i></p> <p>In class: Team Debate Team A: The conversion of the "natives" was successful. Team B: The conversion of "natives" was not successful.</p>
<p>Week 6 (Sept 29-Oct 3)</p> <p>COLONIAL ORDERS II - ECONOMY, LABOR & SLAVERY</p>	<p>What role did economics play in the colonial order?</p>	<p>Eakin, Ch 7, "Land & Labor" (95-105) Mills, #6 and #33 (34-42, 213-233)</p>	<p>Kris Lane "Africans and Natives in the Mines of Spanish America" [ER] Mills, #51 (375-383) Examine images of slavery at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php>. Select at least 5 images from at least three different sections/folders that you feel best "teach" us about slavery in the Latin American context. Print & bring images to class. Be prepared to speak about why you chose these images.</p>	<p>Mills, #43 (320-327) Mary Karasch, "Zumbi of Palmares..." [ER]</p>
<p>Week 7 (Oct 6-10) COLONIAL ORDERS III - HIERARCHIES OF RACE & CLASS</p>	<p>What roles did race and class play in the colonial order?</p>	<p>Eakin, Ch 10, "Race, Culture, Society" (133-148) Lauderdale Graham, "Honor Among Slaves" in <i>Faces of Honor</i> (201-228)</p>	<p>Twinam, "The Negotiation of Honor" in <i>Faces of Honor</i> (68-102) In class: ECL self-assessment</p>	<p>Schwartz & Langfur, "Tapanhuns, Negros da Terra, and Curibocas..." [ER] <i>Due: Debate Response Paper</i> In class: Team Debate Team A: Race (not economics) was most important in the establishment and maintenance of the colonial order. Team B: Economics (not race) was most important...</p>
<p>Week 8 (Oct 13-17)</p> <p>COLONIAL ORDERS IV - GENDER &</p>	<p>What role did gender play in the colonial order?</p>	<p>Choose <i>one</i> of the following essays in <i>Faces of Honor</i>: (A) Johnson, "Dangerous Words, Provocative</p>	<p><i>Due: Essay #2 draft worksheet [bring hardcopy to class; no name -- w/ID number only]</i></p> <p>Document packet [ER]</p>	<p><i>Due: Debate Response Paper</i></p> <p>Readings TBA [ER]</p> <p>In class: Team Debate</p>

SEXUALITY		Gestures, and Violent Acts" (127-151) (B) Spurling, "Honor, Sexuality and the Colonial Church" (45-67) (C) Nazari, "An Urgent Need to Conceal" (103-126)	In class: indiv & group quiz using IFAT; peer review of essay draft worksheet	Team A: Women played a crucial role in establishing & maintaining the colonial orders. Team B: Women played a negligible role in establishing & maintaining the colonial orders. In class: return & comment on draft worksheets
PART III: UNRAVELINGS & LEGACIES				
Week 9 (Oct 20-24) THE UNRAVELING OF THE COLONIAL ORDERS	We know that the colonial period eventually ended and Latin America broke into many independent nations. So, how did this come about?	Eakin, Ch 11 & 12, "Reforms and Revolutions" and "The Onset of the Wars for Independence" (149-175)	Geggus, "The Sounds and Echoes of Freedom..." [ER]	Readings TBA [ER]
Week 10 (Oct 27-31) THE LEGACIES OF CONQUEST & COLONIALISM	What do Latin Americans today think about their "foundations"? How is the colonial period remembered?	<i>Portfolios due anytime this week</i> Readings TBA [ER]	<i>Portfolios due anytime this week</i> Readings TBA [ER]	<i>Deadline: Final portfolios Exam</i> No additional readings

APPENDIX C
WORKSHEET USED BY AUDIENCE DURING DEBATE

Question for the debate:

<p>Team A used the following arguments & evidence:</p> <p>1)</p> <p>2)</p> <p>3)</p>	<p>Did Team B argue AGAINST each argument?</p> <p>1) Yes / No HOW?</p> <p>2) Yes / No HOW?</p> <p>3) Yes / No HOW?</p>	<p>At the end of the debate, who won each point?</p> <p>1) Team A Team B WHY?</p> <p>2) Team A Team B WHY?</p> <p>3) Team A Team B WHY?</p>
<p>Team B used the following arguments & evidence:</p> <p>1)</p> <p>2)</p> <p>3)</p>	<p>Did Team A argue AGAINST each argument?</p> <p>1) Yes / No HOW?</p> <p>2) Yes / No HOW?</p> <p>3) Yes / No HOW?</p>	<p>At the end of the debate, who won each point?</p> <p>1) Team A Team B WHY?</p> <p>2) Team A Team B WHY?</p> <p>3) Team A Team B WHY?</p>

WHO WON? Team A / Team B On the back of this sheet, explain why you made this choice. Remember to place aside your personal opinion on the topic for this moment to focus on assessing the points of the debate – in particular, the teams’ arguments and evidence.

APPENDIX D
QUESTIONNAIRE COMPLETED BY STUDENTS FOLLOWING DEBATE

Please respond to the statements below using a five-point scale. **1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree ; 3 = neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree.** If there are any other comments you have on the debate or on this unit, please feel free to write them on the back of this sheet. **PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS PAPER!**

Statements for ALL STUDENTS to respond to:

	1 = SA; 5= SD
The debate made me more <i>interested</i> in today's material.	1 2 3 4 5
The debate improved my <i>understanding</i> of today's material.	1 2 3 4 5
The debate made me more <i>interested</i> in the other material assigned for the unit.	1 2 3 4 5
The debate improved my <i>understanding</i> of the other material assigned for the unit.	1 2 3 4 5
I think <i>historical knowledge can change</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
I think knowledge is something produced through an exchange of scholarly views and through criticism.	1 2 3 4 5
I now have a more <i>complex answer</i> to the guiding question(s) for the week than I had at the start of the unit.	1 2 3 4 5
I have a good sense of how information from today <i>fit</i> with information discussed in earlier classes.	1 2 3 4 5
Because I had already written a debate response paper, I showed up to class having already thought carefully about the material that was debated.	1 2 3 4 5
On the whole, students connected to each other in a productive way today.	1 2 3 4 5
Today's class meeting was driven by <i>students' analysis</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
Most of the audience consisted of <i>active rather than passive listeners</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
I am more <i>curious</i> about the question than when I first encountered it.	1 2 3 4 5
I think <i>other perspectives</i> are valuable in understanding history.	1 2 3 4 5
Studying this unit has made me more aware of the strangeness of the past.	1 2 3 4 5

Respond to these ONLY IF YOU WERE A MEMBER OF THE STUDENT AUDIENCE TODAY:

	1 = SA; 5= SD
The worksheet made me a more <i>active and critical audience participant</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
I was an <i>active rather than a passive listener</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
The worksheet helped me develop good questions and/or criticisms for the debate team	1 2 3 4 5
I felt a sense of <i>connection and community among audience members</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
I would say that the experience of having been a debate team member in a previous class made <i>me a more critical and active member of the audience today</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
My experience as an audience member today makes me more likely to participate actively in other courses.	1 2 3 4 5

Respond to these ONLY IF YOU WERE A MEMBER OF ONE OF TODAY'S DEBATE TEAMS:

	1 = SA; 5= SD
I feel that I have improved my <i>public speaking skills</i> today.	1 2 3 4 5
There was a healthy sense of <i>competition</i> between the debate teams.	1 2 3 4 5
<i>I am now more critical of the position</i> I was asked to defend in the debate than when I first encountered it.	1 2 3 4 5
<i>Being an audience member in previous classes helped to prepare me</i> to be a critical and active as part of today's debate team.	1 2 3 4 5
My experience as a debater today makes me more likely to <i>participate actively in this course</i> .	1 2 3 4 5
My experience as a debater today makes me more likely to <i>participate actively in other courses</i> .	1 2 3 4 5