



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Teaching Idea: Cooperative Controversies

Working with instructors in various disciplines during the past year, we frequently heard that although students in discussion sections may not have difficulty stating their positions on issues, they often fail to voice their perspective when it contradicts someone else's. How do you encourage students to take a stand, teach them how to defend their position, and encourage them to work toward mutual understanding?

With *cooperative controversy* you can set up a situation which clearly draws two opposing sides of a controversial issue; learners placed on both sides of the issue cooperate to reach a consensus. Working in groups, students first define positive or negative responses to a controversial question: for instance, "Are both evolution and creation science scientifically valid?" After stating their positions, groups plan and present the stance opposite to that originally taken. For the detailed procedure, see Table 1 below. You can have each student then submit a position paper stating current thinking and an explanation of how and why it changed after the readings and the cooperative controversy. To have a successful cooperative controversy in a fifty-minute period, you need to structure the class carefully and willingly take a monitoring role as you release control of the content to the students.

(Adapted from David J. Bredehoft, "Cooperative Controversies in the Classroom," *College Teaching* 39, 3 (Summer, 1991): 122-25.