Academic Controversy: The Essentials

Before you start: Students must be able to involve themselves in simpler group structures such as Think Pair Share, Place Mat and Three-Step Interview (see Chapters 6 and 7). Students must be able to demonstrate skill in the following Collaborative Skills:

- Taking Turns
- No Put Downs
- Suspending Judgement
- Actively Listening
- Paraphrasing
- Disagreeing in an Agreeable Way*
- Accepting and Extending the Ideas of Others*

(* see the end of chapter for sample lessons)

In addition, prior to doing Academic Controversy, students must have an understanding or experience with the topic being explored.

An Explanation of Academic Controversy

This strategy involves students sitting in small groups (usually four to six). Each group of four to six is then divided in half, with each half exploring opposite sides of an issue they have been studying. This process is similar to debating. As part of the process, they apply the social, communication, and critical thinking skills necessary to argue or present their case. Academic Controversy is one of the most complex of all cooperative small-group structures.

Importantly, students must first have the skills to work effectively in simple cooperative learning structures or they will not realize the benefit of these more complex group structures. From our experience with these two strategies, we would argue that Academic Controversy is a more complex process to implement than Team Analysis because the students must demonstrate a higher level of social, communication, and critical thinking skills. Team analysis lends itself to more subject areas and a wider variety of situations. In terms of research, Academic Controversy has an extensive literature and research base (see Johnson and Johnsons' 1992 book *Creative Controversy: Intellectual Challenge in the Classroom*). This strategy should be a precursor to student involvement in debating. You might consider beginning with Team Analysis as a skills development process for Academic Controversy—of course this all depends on your students and your relationship with them.

On the following page is a description of the eight steps of Academic Controversy.

Academic Controversy: A Description of the 8 Steps

1. Identify the Controversy

This is stated in the positive. For example, "Be it resolved that all vehicles should be RED." Note: when students first begin to play with this strategy, they are often disappointed that they cannot take the side that they are currently more excited about defending. You may want to explain that they will be exploring both sides of the issue so they don't have to worry about what side they are on initially.

2. Groups of 4 or 6 – Letter the Students AA/BB and assign PRO/CON Positions

Place students into groups of 4 or 6 and have them letter off. The A's sit on one side, the B's on the other. A's are PRO first; B's are CON first.

Be wise regarding who you place in the groups. Allowing friends to work together, especially if they have limited experience working in groups, is not wise. We also recommend that you then have the students number off as A1, A2, and B1, B2 (use of Numbered Heads). This allows you to increase accountability and participation. You can tell them during their planning phase that they must all be prepared to share; that you will call out "A1" or "B2" to start the discussion.

3. Time to Plan

The time given to plan is up to you. This depends on the complexity of the material. When doing the first controversy, do a simple one such as: "Be it resolved that all restaurants can serve only health food." This keeps planning to about 5 minutes.

4. Time for Each Group to Share

Again, the time you give depends on the material and the skill level of the students. We suggest you keep this time period short and be strict. The result is that students learn to present their ideas quickly and clearly. We often allow 60 to 90 seconds for each group, and we time them. Note, that the other group should be taking notes and demonstrating active listening skills. No one should be interrupting. When selecting who starts, Numbered Heads assists in increasing accountability.

5. Plan the Rebuttal

Students now push back and discuss what they consider are the flaws in the other group's presentation. This implies that they actively listened when the other group presented.

6. Present the Rebuttal

In this step, B's begin, then A's. Employ Numbered Heads to decide who speaks first. The time for this is usually around 60 to 90 seconds. Again, this depends on the complexity of the material and the skill level of the students.

7. Now Flip and Repeat Steps 3 to 6

We suggest that you have the students stand up and change seats.

8. End with a Round Robin

Here they discuss where they stand on the issue.

On the next page is a simpler version you can copy for students.

Academic Controversy: Students' COPY

1. *Groups of 4 or 6*
2. *Letter off AA(A) and BB(B)*
3. *Plan Opening Points*
4. *Present Opening Points*
5. *Exchange and Plan Disagreements*
6. *Present Disagreements Agreeably*
7. *Change Sides*
8. *Plan Opening Points (New Ideas or Extending Previous Ideas)*
9. *Present Opening Points*
10. *Exchange and Plan Disagreements*
11. *Present Disagreements Agreeably*
12. *Round Robin on Your Position*
13. *Attempt Consensus*
14. *Share Group's Thinking*

General Comments on Academic Controversy

If your students have not worked extensively in groups, then this may not be the wisest place to start (unless you have a great class and you have few classroom management problems). We suggest you ensure the students are skilled in a number of simpler Cooperative Learning tactics such as Think Pair Share, Place Mat, Four Corners, etc., prior to moving to Academic Controversy—one of the most complex of all Cooperative Learning approaches.

Note that just before starting the Controversy you can begin with a simpler cooperative approach such as a Value Line. We often put a piece of tape across the room to represent the two extreme positions. The students are then provided with time to think and then they move and stand on the tape related to their position on the issue being discussed. (See the elementary lesson that follows.) Students can sign their name on the tape, and discuss with their nearest peer why they chose that spot. Next they move into the debate, and after the Round Robin in Step 8, they return to the tape and sign their name. They can then "measure" how far they moved from their initial position. This can be connected to math—graphing, averages, data management, etc.

Note: instead of employing Value Lines, you can use Four Corners. Here the issue is presented to the students and the students then move to one of four corners:
1. Strongly Agree
2. Somewhat Agree
3. Somewhat Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree

They discuss with a partner why they chose this position, then return for the controversy.

We have found that treating Academic Controversy as if you are in a court of law (like a simulation) makes the process more manageable. The teacher is the judge who controls the time and process. The students are lawyers who listen intently to every word shared by the other side. This increases the chances that they do not get carried away during their time to present and to listen.

Connecting this to social theory and the research on Cooperative Learning (especially the work of David and Roger Johnson) we strongly encourage you to process the communication skills of active listening, accepting and extending the ideas of others, and disagreeing in an agreeable way. The more the students realize the importance of these skills, and become competent in applying them, the more they will benefit from the process.

You can see how this strategy allows for the intersection of the affective, macro and micro critical thinking skills presented later in this chapter. Without powerful strategies such as Academic Controversy, it becomes more difficult to meaningfully apply critical thinking skills.

On the next page is a sample sheet to record students points for the controversy. That page is followed by a Team Assessment form (p. 316) which is followed by a sample lesson.

Academic Controversy: Recording Sheet

NAMES: _____

CONTROVERSY: Be it resolved _____

PRO POINTS:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

CON POINTS: _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

CONSENSUS: _____

Team Assessment

Complete the following questions as a team.

	Low				High
1. Did all of the members of our group contribute ideas?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Did all of the members of our group listen carefully to the ideas of other group members?	1	2	3	4	5
3. Did all of the members of our group encourage other members to contribute their thoughts and opinions?	1	2	3	4	5

4. Three ways that we helped each other learn the material:

_____

_____

_____

5. a) One difficulty our group had was (explain fully):

_____

_____

_____

b) To resolve the difficulty we could:

_____

_____

_____

Group signatures: _____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Bennett, B., Rolheiser, C.(2006).*Beyond Monet.* Toronto:Bookation Inc.