

JANET RANKIN: The technique of debate is a really interesting and useful technique. I make sure to arbitrarily assign students the side that they'll be taking in the debate because it's pretty easy to debate something you feel passionate about. It's not so easy to debate something that you don't feel passionate about, or where you feel the other side is correct.

In terms of learning, I think it's a great exercise because it forces people to, at least superficially, understand the stated arguments for the side they're taking and then find a way to at least be semi convincing about those arguments.

And then I give them a period of time to prepare, to sort of prepare their arguments about how they're going to defend their positions. And then I have them voice their arguments for the particular side that they've been assigned.

So in crafting the arguments, pro if you're a con, you really have to start to understand what goes behind those arguments a little bit better, and so that's where the learning takes place I think.

The other thing is that the students get a little bit competitive, so they want to construct a good argument. They want to sound convincing. And so that extra little bit means that they really do put in the effort to construct a good argument and to make it believable.

If I were making recommendations to someone who had never used a debate before I would say that you should, first of all, don't pick anything that's really emotional to start out with. So people can have a pretty strong opinion about it, but it's not something that's really deep. So I would stay away from something too touchy.

The other thing is that it should be something where it's really not a slam dunk one way or the other. So you want to make sure that the topic that you choose really does have two reasonable positions. You don't want to give one team just a terrible thing to have to argue.

The other thing you want to make sure is that you give students enough time to craft their arguments and to debate the points. So that if you cut the debate short after three minutes, it's just not going to help. So you have to set aside a pretty good chunk of time.