

# ACADEMIC CONTROVERSIES

Creating intellectual conflict (controversy) to improve academic learning is one of the most powerful and important instructional tools (Johnson & Johnson, 1995©). most powerful and important instructional tools (Johnson & Johnson, 1995c). Academic controversies require a cooperative context and are actually an advanced form of cooperative learning. The basic format for structuring academic controversies is as follows.

1. Choose a topic that has content manageable by the students and on which at least two well-documented positions (pro and con) can be prepared. Organize the instructional materials into pro and con packets. Students need to know what their position is and where to find relevant information so they can build the rationale underlying the pro or con position on the issue.
2. Assign students to groups of four. Divide each group into two pairs. Assign pro and con positions to the pairs. A good reader or researcher should be in each pair.
3. Assign each pair the *tasks* of (a) learning its position and the supporting arguments and information, (b) researching all information relevant to its position (giving the opposing pair any information found supporting the opposing position), (c) preparing a series of persuasive arguments to support its position, and (d) preparing a persuasive presentation to be given to the opposing pair. Give students the following instructions:

*"Plan with your partner how to advocate your position effectively. Read the materials supporting your position. Find more information in the library reference books to support your position. Plan a persuasive presentation. Make sure you and your partner master the information supporting your assigned position and present it in a persuasive and complete way so that the other group members will comprehend and learn the information."*

4. Highlight the **cooperative goals** of reaching a consensus on the issue, mastering all the information relevant to both sides of the issue (measure by a test taken individually), and writing a quality group report on which all members will be evaluated. Note that each group member will receive five bonus points if all members score 90 percent or better on the test covering both sides of the issue.
5. Having each pair present its position to the other. Presentations should involve more than one media and persuasively advocate the "best case" for the position. There is no arguing during this time. Students should listen carefully to the opposing position and take notes. You tell students:

*"As a pair, present your position forcefully and persuasively. Listen carefully and learn the opposing position. Take notes, and clarify anything you do not understand."*

6. Having students openly discuss the issue by freely exchanging their information and ideas. For higher-level reasoning and critical thinking to occur, it is necessary to probe and push each other's conclusions. Students ask for data to support each other's statements, clarify rationales, and show why their position is a rational one. Students evaluate critically the opposing position and its rationale, defend their own positions, and compare the strengths and weaknesses of the two positions. Students refute the claims being made by the opposing pair, and rebut the attacks on their own position. Students are to follow the specific rules for constructive controversy. Students should also take careful notes on and thoroughly learn the opposing position. Sometimes a "time-out" period needs to be provided so that pairs can caucus and prepare new arguments. Instructors encourage more spirited arguing, take sides when a pair is in trouble, play devil's advocate, ask one group to observe another group engaging in a spirited argument, and generally stir up the discussions.

*"Argue forcefully and persuasively for your position, presenting as many facts as you can to support your point of view. Listen critically to the opposing pair's position, asking them for the facts that support their viewpoint, and then present counter-arguments. Remember this is a complex issue, and you need to know both sides to write a good report."*

7. Have the pairs reverse perspectives and positions by presenting the opposing position as sincerely and forcefully as they can. It helps to have the pairs change chairs. They can use their own notes, but may not see the materials developed by the opposing pair. Students' instructions are:

*"Working as a pair, present the opposing pair's position as if you were they. Be as sincere and forceful as you can. Add any new facts you know. Elaborate their position by relating it to other information you have previously learned."*

8. Have the group members drop their advocacy and reach a decision by consensus. Then they:
  - a. Write a group report that includes their joint position and the supporting evidence and rationale. Often the resulting position is a third perspective or synthesis that is more rational than the two assigned. All group members sign the report indicating that they agree with it, can explain its content, and consider it ready to be evaluated.
  - b. Take a test on both positions individually. If all group members score above the preset criteria of excellence (90 percent), each receives five bonus points.