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It's Debatable: Tracking Changes in Student Opinions on Drug Policies after Classroom Debate

Carolyn Schubert

James Madison University, schubecf@jmu.edu

Lara Sapp

James Madison University, sapple@jmu.edu

Elizabeth Howley

James Madison University, howleyeg@jmu.edu

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It's Debatable

Tracking Changes in Student Opinions on Drug Policies after Classroom Debate



Introduction

Learning how to effectively debate during pre-professional education helps students to develop problem solving and critical thinking skills¹. In 2013, James Madison University launched the *Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action* program to begin addressing ethics across the campus². The Madison Collaborative developed a framework of 8 key categories to prompt ethical reasoning.



Fairness
Outcomes
Responsibilities
Character

Liberty
Empathy
Authority
Rights

In response to the addition of critical analysis and reasoning questions to the MCAT, Health Sciences faculty were exploring ways to incorporate critical thinking into the curriculum³. The course instructor collaborated with the Health Sciences and Nursing Librarian and the JMU Debate Team coaches to design a debate assignment centered on drug policies topics, building upon Debate Across the Curriculum outlines and rubrics⁴.



Methods

The semester-long assignment included:

- Pre and post surveys on student opinions for topics
- Tailored information literacy instruction and course guide
- Librarian and instructor evaluated annotated bibliographies
- In-class debates with peer evaluations

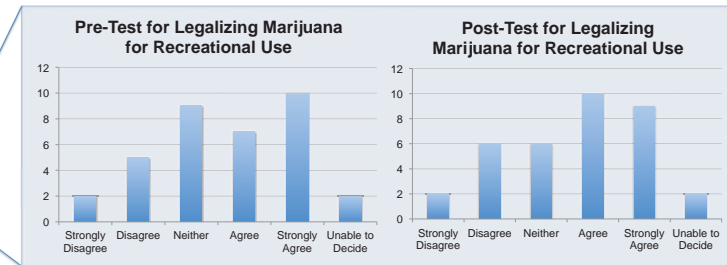
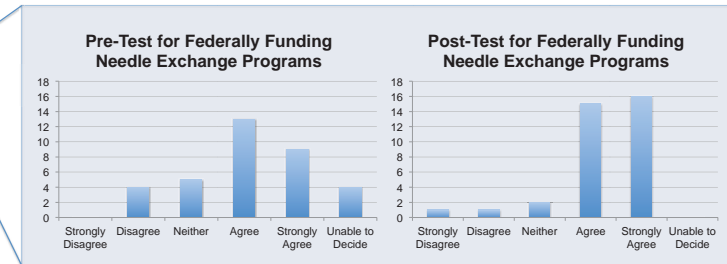
Previous information literacy instruction in the Health Sciences department targeted sophomores and seniors, so this collaboration provided an opportunity to fill the gap between those levels. The instructor chose 10 topics for students to debate in teams of 3 or 4. Teams researched together but divided positions among members.

Liz Howley, MS; Carolyn Schubert, MLIS; Lara Sapp, MLIS

Results

35 students participated in the study. Survey responses included separate sections for rating topics based on personal opinions, opinions based on societal importance, and identification of the most important issue. These results reflect just the personal opinions of participants on these topics.

Topic	Rate of Change
Needle Exchange Programs should be federally funded	26%
The legal drinking age should remain 21	23%
Drug users should be jailed	23%
Stimulants should not be used to treat children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	23%
Pharmaceutical companies should be allowed to advertise their products	20%
College campuses should be tobacco-free	17%
All health insurance plans should cover at least 90 days of drug rehabilitation programs	17%
The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should tighten the regulation of dietary supplements	14%
Marijuana should be legalized for recreational use	9%
Antibiotics should be allowed in the meat and poultry industry	6%



Conclusion

- Students are most opposed to jailing drug users
- Students are most supportive of needle exchange & regulation of dietary supplements
- Students reversed position to oppose drug ads
- Largest shift from Neither & Unable to Decide
- Most opinions changed towards the affirmative
- Media debates on legalizing marijuana influence rate of student opinion change

The project deepened the relationship of the Health Sciences and Nursing Librarian and the instructor. The ethical reasoning perspective created new spaces for the librarian to discuss scholarship as a conversation and ways to critically evaluate resources.

Further analysis of personal opinions against opinions for society will provide additional insight into how perspective affects ethical reasoning decisions. Also, another step for this project will involve qualitative analysis of student writing to code expressions of ethical understanding.

References

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