

The Outsiders Debate Project

The culminating, summative assessment activity for *The Outsiders* was The Outsiders' Debate Project, based in large part on David and Roger Johnson's' work using creative conflict and academic controversy to promote student learning.

Once students had read the book, debate sides were determined randomly by having students count off by twos (the first student was 1, the second was 2, the third was 1, the fourth was 2, etc.) Students who were number one were assigned the Greaser position, while students who were number two were assigned the Social position. Students with the same number were partnered up. That is, students on the Greaser side were paired, as were students on the Social side. These debate partners were formed in a more structured way with me assigning the pairs based, in large part, on student ability. Students with higher abilities were paired with those of lower abilities. Gender was also a factor in determining partners as I wanted to have as many male/female debate partners as possible.

Debate partners were given six debate points that had to be defended, regardless of one's own personal opinion or feeling. Debate points were in opposition to one another. For example, the first debate point had to do with the killing of a gang member. The Greaser position had to argue the killing was justified, while the Social position had to argue it was not. All arguments had to be supported by specific, explicit information or indirect, implicit information coming from the book.

A scoring rubric with a range of 1-4 was distributed to each debate pair so they could see the things they had to do and what the criteria for each would be when grading time came. The scoring rubric included the following areas of student responsibility listed below. Please refer to the learning experience to see the performance indicators that were fulfilled.

- **Note taking** - debate pairs were expected to work together to develop a complete set of research notes, with page numbers, to support each of their debate points.
- **Position Paper** - each student had to write a formal Position Paper arguing for and supporting each assigned debate point. The writing for the Position Paper was guided by a General Writing Rubric as well as The Outsiders Debate Project Rubric (see Assessment section) previously mentioned.
- **Debate** - each student was expected to participate in the debate, presenting his/her arguments clearly and supporting them with specific explicit or implicit information from the book.
- **Reflective Piece** - once the debate ended, each student wrote a reflective piece about what they learned from debate project.

Debate partners worked together to gather notes, discuss their debate positions, and develop debate strategies. When writing their formal position papers, they generally worked alone. Students were expected to write a rough draft position paper from their notes, and then a final copy position paper from the rough draft.

I monitored student activity throughout these activities, checking to make sure students understood the nature of the tasks, answering any and all questions relative to the activities, and refocusing students when and if they moved off task. Whole class discussions were also held before and after class and on the spot mini lessons were conducted as necessary.

On the day of the debate, I evaluated each student's costume using the debate scoring rubric. Debate pairs were then assigned their debate opposition. A Greaser debate pair was matched up with a Social debate pair. The two pairs were given "territory" (a part of the room) and squared into a group of four. In a class of 28 students, for example there would be 7 debates groups, each having a pair of Greasers and a pair of Socials.

Once all Greaser and Social debate pairs were formed, debate instructions were given as follows:

- The six Debate Points would be debated one point at a time.
- Each side would have two minutes to present their initial arguments. During that time, the other side could not talk. However, they could take notes to help them rebut any arguments made.
- Once the initial arguments were made, each side would have an additional two minutes to rebut.
- Notes and Position Papers could be used during the debate to support arguments.
- Name calling or criticism of a person or ad hominem attacks would not be allowed. Only ideas or arguments could be criticized.

Once the debate began, I walked around listening to the arguments and counter arguments the students made and noted the quality and frequency of participation of each student. Debate groups were specifically arranged so that I was easily and quickly able to move from one debate to another.

Since a number of debates were occurring simultaneously, it was necessary for me to continuously circle the classroom so that I could gauge the quality of each student's contributions. This was not as difficult as it sounds. My students work in cooperative groups frequently, so I've gotten quite good in my monitoring of groups. Additionally, monitoring all student preparation before the debate gave me an excellent sense of what strategies and arguments each would employ. This made it easier for me to assess comments during the debate as not only was I aware of what debate pairs intended to say, but I could easily recognize their arguments, and their quality, as they made them.

The fact that the debate was structured help my monitoring. I kept time and announced when it was necessary to have debates pairs switch presentations. At the end of the debate, I asked debate group members to shake hands and evaluate the arguments and counter arguments made by each debate pair. I then asked students to refer to the debate scoring rubric and evaluate their own individual debate performance.

For homework, I asked each student to individually complete a personal reflective statement that focused on some part of The Outsiders' Debate Project. Responses could include any aspect of the debate process, but emphasis was placed upon what they learned from the process and what they might do differently had they the opportunity to participate in a similar debate again. Students shared their reflective statements with their debate partners the next day, and volunteers and selected students shared the statements with the whole class.