

Debating Course



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Background to course concept

The course concept arose from a perceived need to include further spoken elements into distance and Internet courses on academic proficiency (such as ‘academic writing’ and ‘composition classes’). We also wanted to give the students a chance to use their English skills in an authentic setting where they would be communicating with peers who did not speak their native tongue. The course trials thus constituted telecollaborations between different universities under the Avalon framework, resulting in mixed student groups from different academic and national backgrounds. The course addresses two distinct types of professional discourse:

1. The discourse of collaboration where the students have to negotiate their ideas and come up with a common end product.
2. The discourse of public, formal presentation of academic content.

For more details and notes from the course reiterations see:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/Debating-Course>

Overview/Summary

This course constitutes a collaborative exercise based on the principle of the competitive public debate. The idea is that the students should learn the basic principles of rhetoric and public speaking, while at the same time partaking in an engaging activity. In our trials, we have brought students from different language backgrounds together in Second Life, where they have grouped themselves into mixed teams in order to prepare their debates for or against a particular topic. The course consists of four distinct phases:

1. Social initiation where the students get to know each other and group themselves into mixed nationality groups;
2. A theoretical background phase during which the students are introduced to some of the basic principles of public speaking;
3. A collaborative phase where students work in smaller groups in order to prepare their arguments for or against a particular topic;
4. A public presentation phase, where the students partake in a public competitive debate and where they are judged by their peers.

Requirements and Recommendations

Language Level: B2-C1

Prior Knowledge of Virtual Worlds: The students require no prior knowledge. The teacher should have intermediate skills (communication and movement etc) but does not need building skills.

Recommended size of group: 16 or smaller

Target audience: Typically university students with an interest in academic presentation or academic writing

Number of lessons: 6-8

SL environment requirements: An open environment with plenty of space so that students can group themselves and be outside the hearing range of others is recommended for the initial phases of the course. For the final debate, some form of auditorium is needed where the students making their presentations can face the audience and where there is also access to a white board for displaying pictures.

Recommended spaces:

Avalon Island <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/AVALON%20Learning/9/236/58>

Kamimo Island <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Kamimo%20Island/127/148/25>

SL objects needed:

- **A Youtube streamer** (but can also be worked around by students watching the videos outside SL)
- **An SL white board** where pictures (JPEG format for example) can be uploaded during the final debate
- **A polling tool** allowing the students to vote for the teams anonymously. This can be worked around by getting the students to send the teacher their votes in private IMs

SL tools used by students during the course: Basic movements, voice, chat, IM, friendship tools, teleport.

Course Management tools:

Some form of 2D online space where the course description and course information can be communicated. In trial 1, a blog was used to communicate with the course participants on a continual basis. In trial 2, we used an LMS (WebCT) for this purpose.

Skype is also needed as an initial point of contact before the students gain access to SL.

Learning Goals

- **Social:** To get to know friends from other countries and being able to collaborate with them in an online environment towards a common goal.
- **Technical/tools:** Learning to use virtual worlds for learning, both as a tool for communication and a source of information.
- **Academic:** The focus here is on presenting ideas in a convincing manner, looking at issues such as structure, cohesion, presentation techniques etc.

Storyboard

The idea is that teams of debaters prepare arguments for or against a particular motion and then present these at a public debate where they compete against an opposing team. For example, a motion may constitute a statement such as “*Nuclear power is the best solution for a carbon free energy alternative*”, and one team would then argue in favour of the statement, while the other team argues against. Apart from the presenting of arguments, the debate also contains a question session where each team member has the chance to present a question or a comment to the opposing team. The winner of the debate is either coined by the audience or by a panel of judges.

Public competitive debate is a popular activity in many colleges and schools and has been dramatized in films such as the *Great Debaters*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co2FzGDYSc4&feature=fvsvr>

Reward Models

If successful, the reward of winning the debate can work as a factor of motivation for the students. Obviously one can designate prizes to the winning team in form of SL objects or more concrete prizes (a book for example). It is important to emphasise the group aspect here. No one individual should really be pointed out, but it is rather the group effort that is judged. If you are running the concept for a longer time with a greater number of students it is also possible to make the competitive element into a knock-out league where you can, for example, have quarterfinals, semifinals and a grand final, for example. This would, however, require far more lesson slots than the course format described below. Also note that although the competitive element may add a fun touch to the course, it is the learning goals that are central.

Technical initiation

Students are contacted individually via e-mail and are given instructional material (see <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/Introductory-Multimedia-kit-for-learners>). A time is then set when they can to meet an instructor or technician in SL in order to check that sound, chat and basic movements function as they should. In those cases students had problems in creating their SL accounts and/or entering SL, the instructor can contact the student via Skype in order to give real time support. The technical initiation can take anything from a few minutes to 30 minutes depending of the difficulties encountered. Also note that students who are already experienced SL users may not need to go through this phase. Also note that the model described above applies to distance students who are not physically present on campus. Where students are present face-to-face, a pre-course workshop is also a good way of getting started.

Lesson 1 – Introductory meeting

Suggested virtual world environment:

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A large open space is recommended for the initial meeting. Beginners in SL often have problems moving through doors and passages and a large open space also means that it is less likely that avatars will get lost. The welcome area of Avalon alternatively that of Kamimo Island both work well.

3D objects used: Differently coloured T-shirts, one colour per team handed out to the avatars once the groups have been decided upon.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): A summary of the participants and time and place for meeting.

Course management tools: The basic information about the meeting can be communicated via e-mail but a course blog or an LMS will do equally well. Since participants are located in different institutional settings a course LMS is not always practical. We used a course blog, which was then linked into the students' respective LMS systems.

Aims: The aim of this session is to introduce the members of the course to each other and to divide the class into mixed groups opposing or defending the motion. Each group is also allocated a headquarter on the island.

Summary of Activities:

- Gathering
- Sound check
- Introducing each other
- Dividing into groups and allocating group headquarters
- Further socializing in smaller groups
- Final end gathering for summing up and reflections

Lesson 2 – Theoretical session on rhetoric

Suggested virtual world environment:

A virtual world environment with a YouTube player is needed for this session. Preferably also a space where the avatars can sit down while watching the films.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Youtube videos on rhetoric:

On kinds of appeal in speech: Logos, pathos and ethos:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOHvNuWp2p4&feature=related>

On openings of a speech:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoczX-soerE>

On closings in a speech:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkhE1CCLrzo&feature=Playlist&p=AD7oBBB8D9EAoo62&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=3

Examples:

A short speech by Obama

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONM7148cTyc&feature=channel>

Thatcher responding to critique.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okHGCz6xxiw>

Course management tools: Course blog

Aims: This session constitutes the theoretical part of the course. The aim is to give a very brief basic introduction of the principles of rhetoric. This can obviously be complemented with material in a learning management system. The second aim of the lesson is to try to observe real examples of presentations and to discuss how the principles of rhetoric discussed previously are applied.

Summary of Activities:

- Gathering and sound checking
- Brief introduction to basic principles of rhetoric
- Watching videos on the basic principles of rhetoric
- Watching examples of speeches and trying to pick out examples of the concepts
- Group discussions at headquarters
- Final gathering for reflections and summing up

Lesson 3 – Working in groups

Suggested virtual world environment:

The same virtual world environment as was used in lesson 1, where the students have their headquarters.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): List of resources on their respective topics. See example below:

http://dooku.miun.se/mats.deutschmann/Avalon/Debating%20in%20SL/page_o8.htm

Course management tools: Course blog

Aims: The aim of this meeting is for the students to work in groups at their respective headquarters in order to work out the content and the structure of their speeches.:

Summary of Activities:

- Gathering and sound checking
- Working in groups
- Final gathering for reflections and summing up

Lessons 4-5 – Working in groups

The students are asked to meet for more sessions in order to organize their speeches. Here, however, it is up to the students to organize time and place for themselves. The idea is that they work autonomously here and leave organizational matters to the students themselves. They can obviously meet as many times as they need to and in whatever environment that suits them best (not necessarily in a virtual world environment)

Lesson 6 – Final Debate

Suggested virtual world environment:

An open virtual world environment with a white boards where images can be displayed and preferably an auditorium-like environment where the audience can sit facing the speaker is needed for this lesson.

3D objects used: Poll tool: Can purchased from Education Island

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Student slides which have been sent to the teachers prior to the lesson and uploaded in the virtual world.

Course management tools: Course blog

Aims: This session constitutes the grand finale of the course: the actual debate. The aim is that each team debate against their opponents and that a winner of the debate is coined through anonymous voting using the poll tool (private IMs to the teacher works equally well)

Summary of Activities:

- Gathering and sound checking
- Going through procedures
- Debating
- Team question time (Opposing teams asking each member one question)
- General question time (Audience asking a limited number of questions)
- Anonymous Voting

- Evaluating and reflecting

Examination

Most obviously, the performance in final debate can be part of the examination but it is important to clarify exactly what is looked at. This should include content as well as structure and performance. Important, however is that not only the end product is examined. A very important part of the course is the collaboration between the students in producing the final speech and this is more difficult to examine. A reflective portfolio documenting the process can however be used for this purpose.

Examination also depends on the specific course aims of the individual student groups. In our trials, for example, the students partook in the Debating course as an activity of very different course frameworks including online teacher training, academic writing, composition classes and academic proficiency courses. Each group was thus examined differently depending on the general learning goals of program they were attending.

Overall Reflections

One of the biggest challenges with this type of telecollaborative project is finding a framework that is relevant to each of the participating student groups. In our trials, for example, we tried to come up with topics that would be of relevance to all the groups' specific interests. We also had to acknowledge the fact that the debating activity had to fit into different course frameworks and thus had to be examined differently depending on the student group. For example, the teacher trainees were encouraged to write a reflective paper on the learning experience as such, while the students attending the academic writing course were asked to produce a paper summarizing the different points made for or against the motions in the form of a discursive essay.

Another important point to be aware of here is that students from different cultural/institutional settings may have different academic/learning cultures. This may pose a challenge in the mixed groups performing the collaborative activity.

Adaptations

The course concept can easily be adapted for more limited or extended course frameworks. In one reiteration, for example, we adapted the course to a much more limited time span in what we called a Speaker's corner event. Here students simply met for one event and presented their speeches on an individual basis to a mixed audience who also evaluated their performances on a graded scale (private IMs sent to the teacher). Questions and comments were still posed by the audience but the main collaborative element was lost in this short version of the course. For longer course structures, one could envisage running a debating league, with several debates by each team. One could also expand the concept to include competitions between a number of different institutes.