

DEBATE WITHOUT OPINIONS

Argumentation exercise

Kristof Van Rossem

www.socraticdialogue.be



INTRODUCTION

In this exercise, a group learns to debate an issue in a skillful way. Because of the steady structure, this exercise is suitable to discuss 'hot topics'. The exercise shows how a discussion can be led without losing a grip on the differences of opinions that are uttered.

OBJECTIVES

The following objectives can be achieved:

The participants :

- practise arguing a point of view
- consider other arguments than their own
- are creative in finding arguments
- can formulate arguments clearly and concisely, in a full sentence
- Can decide something together
- Concentrate on the quality of arguments
- Can suspend their judgment
- Practice convincing someone in a skillful way

STEPS

STEP 1

The group formulates and chooses a question. This can be first in small groups and then list them and choose from them. Or it can be decided together. The criteria for the question are :

- as short as possible. Around 10 words maximum.
- open: it should not contain a hidden answer or your own opinion about it. So no rhetorical or suggestive question (eg "Don't you think young people play too many games?")
- it should have a Yes or No - character
- controversial / sensitive
- conceptual: you should not find the answer by providing information, but by discussing the meaning of a concept in the question. It should be 'debatable'

STEP 2

The participants are divided in subgroups of 4 or 5. They are invited to formulate as many arguments pro and contra as possible with a minimum of five arguments for each alternative of the dilemma. It's not important that they agree or disagree with that argument, it's just a brainstorming session. After being back in the plenary session, participants write these arguments on flipchart papers, on the blackboards or if it's online, on the google document.

It's important that they write the arguments in full sentences so that is clear to others. So not just a few words!

Example :

Is it OK to take revenge using social media?

YES, BECAUSE - NO BECAUSE

When all arguments are written down, the facilitator gives all arguments a number. Depending on the amount of participants, it can go from 1 to 30 f.i.

STEP 3

(Plenary) The facilitator asks the participants whether everything is clear. The substantive debate is currently avoided, it is only a matter of clarifying the proposed arguments.

STEP 4

(Plenary) The facilitator asks whether, according to the participants, there are arguments that are the same as other arguments. A participant may make a proposal and substantiate this.

Then (s)he asks the group to agree whether it is the same argument or not. Once it is agreed, the facilitator eliminates one of the two arguments. The participants must also agree on this. If the participants believe that the arguments are not the same, they are asked to argue why.

This exercise continues until, according to the participants, there are no more arguments on the flaps that are the same.

It's important here that the facilitator problematizes all differences. You can do this f.i. by asking for examples.

Example :

One argument says : "No because it can harm people". Another argument says: "No because it can emotionally damage people". Most participants find this the same argument. The facilitator can ask : "Can you imagine a situation in which somebody is emotionally damaged but not harmed or the other way around?" If not, we accept they are the same as an argument.

Again, whether you agree or not with the argument is not important here.

STEP 5

Back in (other) groups of 3 or 4 people. This time the task is to study the quality of the arguments together. More specifically, the facilitator asks to choose the best (or the two best) arguments from the pro list and from the counter list and explain why they are the best. Next, the groups must choose the (two) worst argument(s) from both lists and explain the choice.

STEP 6

(Plenary) The group gives their choices. We engage in a "classic" debate in a style adapted to the situation. We go into more detail on why a particular argument is better than another and why they agree or disagree with those arguments. The same with the worst arguments. If there are different proposals, the facilitator should not steer to agree but rather enlarge the differences by problematizing them: Why is argument 4 worse than argument 7 f.i.? Here the facilitator can ask for a concept that tells why argument X is stronger/weaker than argument Y. For instance : X is less clear/ too particular / Too large etc.

STEP 7

You can end the exercise with an actual debate on the content of the controversy. But it is not necessary. You can also evaluate about what they learned about logic and argumentation.

So some evaluation questions can be :

On the level of the content :

- do we either go for yes or for no now and why?
- What was the argument that convinced you?
- What are the strongest arguments that you had to think about?
- What did we learn about this problem?
- What question do you still have about this exercise?

On the level of logic:

- Which features in general define a strong argument? And a weak argument?
- What did you learn about your own way of thinking?
- What did you notice about how others think?
- What should be the quality of a good debate?
- What is there to be improved in the structure of this workshop?

GOOD LUCK!