

Public Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to test different ways of teaching students to argue using a web-based learning environment to see whether any particular way was best.

Why do students need to learn to argue? In many career fields, jobs require professionals to solve problems that don't always have a single, correct solution. To address a problem like that, a successful professional will understand how to examine all of the evidence about the problem and potentially conflicting perspectives among the stakeholders and use that information to make a decision. The next task is to convince the stakeholders, including those with different opinions, why that decision is the right one.

In this study, we gave students in an introductory sociology course scenarios that described one type of problem with which professional sociologists grapple in practice. The scenarios included multiple characters with different perspectives and a variety of evidence for a set of choices in which there was no one right answer. We then asked the students to choose the best renter for a house, the best candidate for a job, and the best student for admission to a University. We asked one group of students to make a decision and taught them how to build their argument step-by-step to justify it. We asked another group to simply identify and summarize the evidence and perspectives on multiple sides of the argument. We gave a third group of students an example essay to argue against. All three groups completed the same final assignment with the same instructions: to review the admissions scenario, choose the best candidate, and write an essay justifying their choice.

None of the groups got better overall scores on the final essay than the others, but there were differences in the amount of effort they took to get to those scores. The students who were taught how to build an argument spent more time on the website that contained the scenario and they also revised their essays more often than the other groups. The students who were taught to argue against a model essay had the lowest number of revisions and spent the least amount of time on the website compared to the other groups.

These results suggest that students may have learned most efficiently when they were provided with a model of what an argument should look like and asked to argue against it. However, a good follow-up study would plan to test the students again after some time elapsed following the last assignment. Since the students who were taught to build their arguments in a more step-by-step manner spent more time and effort on the task, there is a possibility that they learned more deeply and that they might remember what they learned for a longer time.