

# From Edutainment Toward Critical Engagement: Transforming Class Debates into Active and Analytical Experiences for All Students

Or, How “Coffee Talk”  
Saved My Class Debates



# The Problem

- My old debate format *seemed* to pass SoTL muster, but it only worked for good students. That is, it didn't work.
- “Scaffolded” assignment required synthesis of prior work and preparation for later work
  - textbook knowledge
  - primary sources
  - analytical journals about debate topic
  - preparation for 4-5 page paper
- “Backward-designed” questions with students encouraged to formulate their own, nuanced theses (Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 1998)
- “Significant Learning” (L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, Jossey-Bass, 2003)
  - impact on understanding the past and present
  - payoff of formal paper in mind
  - element of team competition

# The Solution: Two Seemingly Minor Changes to Debate Format

- 1) “Structured Controversy”: Teams were given specific, problematic, and diametrically opposed theses (pro and con positions responses to a “Coffee Talk” Thesis).\*

Pedagogical wager: Paradoxically, good scholarly habits can develop through reflectively practicing bad habits.

\*I am indebted to Holly Swyers at Lake Forest College for suggesting “structured controversy” and sharing her flowcharts.

# The Solution: Two Seemingly Minor Changes to Debate Format

2) Students kept structured flowchart of the debate during class  
(taken up at end of class)

Pedagogical wager (a safe one): detailed and structured  
notetaking is conducive to analysis, esp. if the notes might be  
graded as a quiz

# Profile of Augustana Students

- Augustana College is a small (2500 students), selective, private liberal arts school
- Most students from Midwest (predominantly from Illinois and Iowa)
- 98% of students are 17-21 years old
- ACT average for middle 50% is 23-29 (2006)

# Profile of My Students

- Small sections (capped at 30 students, often smaller in practice)
- Most students were inexperienced first-years (74.6%). The largest group of students (42.7%) reported they took the course to satisfy a general education requirement or, as they often put it, to “get rid of a requirement.” 47.8% had declared no major. 27.5% were History and History Education majors.
- 53.6% reported no significant debate experience in other classes.
- Class met 3 times per week, 75 minutes per meeting, for 10 weeks

# Parameters of Debate

- Each student was on a debate team during the term
- 2 student teams of 2-4 students
- Team A had 10 minutes to give the case for its thesis, Team B had 5 minutes to rebut it.
- 1-minute period for audience to write a question for Team A, unless they signed a confession to being brain dead
- Team B had 10 minutes to give the case for its thesis, Team A had 5 minutes to rebut it.
- 1-minute period for audience to write a question for Team B, unless they signed a confession to being brain dead
- Remainder of the class: a “hostile” audience peppered both teams with questions and comments

# How did debates fit with the units covered in the course?

## 3 Course Goals

- 1) Factual knowledge (“coverage” of historical narrative)
- 2) “Uncoverage”\* of how historians “do” history, with stress on constructed and contingent nature of historical knowledge
- 3) Familiarity with some historiographical controversies

\*Calder, Lendol, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 92, no. 4 (March 2006), 1358-1370.

## Means of Assessing Student Learning

- Tests and quizzes (20% of course grade)
- 3-4 analytical essays based on primary documents (60%)
- Leadership (15%)
- Analytical journals to prep for debates (5%)
- Debate (5%)

# How did debates fit with each unit covered?

## Typical Unit

- Part I: “Coverage” of historical facts, with attention to the “guiding question(s)” for the unit (1 day)
- Part II: Analysis of primary sources (1-2 days)
  - 10-20 sources assigned
  - Focus on 3-4 aspects of the “guiding question(s)” for the week
- Attentiveness to skills of historical thinking
  - Question → Thesis
  - Connecting
  - Inferencing/Evidentiary Support
  - Sourcing/Contextualization of Evidence
  - Multiple Perspectives/Alternate Interpretations of Evidence
  - Circumspection/Self-Criticism of Own Argument
  - Prose Style
- Part III: Team Debate (1 day)
  - Analytical journals on historians’ differing interpretations due *before* debate
  - 4-6 page paper due *after* debate

# Sample Debate Prompts

## Unstructured (control group)

- Discussion question: “What was the relationship of Napoleon to the French Revolution?”
- Discussion question: “What effect did the Industrial Revolution have on material conditions in England?”
- Discussion question: “To what extent was race an important factor in causing New Imperialism?”

## Structured

- Resolved: “Napoleon saved rather than betrayed the revolution.”
- Resolved: “The Industrial Revolution in Britain worsened material conditions for most of the population”
- Resolved: “Racial considerations outweigh any other single factor in explaining what caused ‘New Imperialism’”

# Data Pool

- 13 debates (3 unstructured, 10 structured)
- 257 student responses, drawn from 3 courses
  - Group A: 6 structured debates from HIST 113-01, Fall 2007, 27 students
  - Group B: 4 structured debates from HIST 112-02, Spring 2008, 26 students
  - Group C: 3 unstructured debates from HIST 112-01, Spring 2008, 25 students
- Standard Likert-scale responses for all groups, with supplemental questions for Groups B and C (gender, major, number of previous history courses, etc.)

# Flow Chart of Debate Kept by Students

Debate Evaluation Worksheet (devised by Holly Swyers)

Team A's thesis: Yes

Team B's thesis: No

The PRO team used the following arguments FOR the proposition:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Did the CON team argue AGAINST each argument?  
Who won the point?

- |        |    |      |
|--------|----|------|
| 1) Yes | No | How? |
| 2) Yes | No | How? |
| 3) Yes | No | How? |

The CON team used the following arguments AGAINST the proposition:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Did the PRO team argue AGAINST each argument?  
Who won the point?

- |        |    |      |
|--------|----|------|
| 1) Yes | No | How? |
| 2) Yes | No | How? |
| 3) Yes | No | How? |

**WHO WON?** \_\_\_\_\_ Explain why  
(remember, your OPINION on the topic is IRRELEVANT. You are judging the POINTS of the DEBATE)

# Industrial Revolution

## HI 112.2008 Spring - Debate Evaluation Worksheet (to be completed in class)

Team A's thesis: **Yes**  
 Team B's thesis: **No**

Question: How do impacts of industrialization compare to those of the agricultural revolution?

The PRO team used the following arguments FOR the proposition:	Did the CON team argue AGAINST each argument?	At the end of the debate, who won each point?
1) Rising disease and crime, and lowering sanitation levels were a significant factor; people's living conditions were so bad, they might decrease.	1) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? Rising disease and crime was a result of overpopulation, people didn't know that it would be in the program.	1) <b>Pro</b> Con WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.
2) There is evidence that rural farming wages were higher than urban workers' wages, even if money wages were increasing, living conditions were not necessarily getting better.	2) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? - In Latin America and other countries, people didn't know that it would be in the program. - Some people would make up the rural wage. - For those that were in the program, they were not necessarily getting better.	2) <b>Con</b> WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.
3) Conditions were incredibly bad - child labor and slave-like conditions everywhere. Also, slavery is important - slaves like the event, it was necessary for progress.	3) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? Conditions were bad, but at least they should not be completely getting worse in bad conditions.	3) <b>Con</b> WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.

The CON team used the following arguments AGAINST the proposition:	Did the PRO team argue AGAINST each argument?	At the end of the debate, who won each point?
1) The Agricultural Revolution made people wealthier, family and more to the city to find jobs, where new technology had created jobs for people.	1) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? Agr. Rev. pushed ppl to cities, but more jobs were created (mechanics, more and more skilled trades and all kinds of workers).	1) <b>Pro</b> Con WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.
2) Products like coal and cotton became important, as well as the steam engine. They led to mass production and rising productivity along with the rising wages.	2) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? Wages were increased, but strength of early demand was probably massive.	2) <b>Pro</b> Con WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.
3) The rising utility of the working class helped to create a class conscious and led to unions. Many reforms were passed, which also led to improvements in conditions.	3) <b>Yes</b> No HOW? The utility of the working class was not high, conditions were not good. Reforms were passed because conditions were so bad.	3) <b>Pro</b> Con WHY? PRO argued that because the crime & disease happened at the same time, it was a result of the industrial revolution.

Also, how do conditions in Britain compare to those in China?

WHO WON? **Team B** explains why (remember, your OPINION on the topic is IRRELEVANT. You are judging the POINTS of the DEBATE).  
 The evidence given was very persuasive (the amount and type), and notably the authors also added insight on biases. Also, much of the evidence given by Team B seemed pertinent (like how quality of life in Britain is better than in China). Team A's points (esp. #2 + #3) were also very persuasive, and Team A gave good rebuttal points (esp. #1 + #2).

# Statements all students responded to

1 = Strongly Agree; 5= Strongly Disagree

- The debate made me more *interested* in today's material.
- The debate improved my *understanding* of today's material.
- The debate made me more *interested* in the other material assigned for the *unit*.
- The debate improved my *understanding* of the other material assigned for the *unit*.
- I think *historical knowledge can change*.
- I think knowledge is something produced through an exchange of scholarly views and through criticism.
- I now have a more *complex answer* to the guiding question(s) for the week than I had at the start of the unit.
- I have a good sense of how information from today *fit* with information discussed in earlier classes.
- Because I had already written a journal entry, I showed up to class having already thought carefully about the material that was debated.
- On the whole, students connected to each other in a productive way today.
- Today's class meeting was driven by *students' analysis*.
- Most of the audience consisted of *active rather than passive listeners*.
- I am more *curious* about the question than when I first encountered it.
- I think *other perspectives* are valuable in understanding history.
- Studying this unit has made me more aware of the strangeness of the past.

# Statements only debate team members responded to

## Structured and Unstructured

- I feel that I have improved my *public speaking skills* today.
- There was a healthy sense of *competition* between the debate teams.
- Today's debate made me more critical of the position my team advocated in the debate.
- *Being an audience member in previous classes helped to prepare me* to be a critical and active as part of today's debate team.
- My experience as a debater today makes me more likely to *participate actively in this course*.
- My experience as a debater today makes me more likely to *participate actively in other courses*.

# Statements only audience members responded to

## Structured

- The flow charts made me a more *active and critical audience participant*.
- I was an *active rather than a passive listener*.
- **The *flow charts* helped me develop good questions and/or criticisms for the debate team**
- I felt a sense of *connection and community among audience members*.
- I would say that the experience of having been a debate team member in a previous class made *me a more critical and active member of the audience today*.
- My experience as an audience member today makes me more likely to participate actively in other courses.

## Unstructured (control group)

- Taking notes made me a more *active and critical audience participant*.
- I was an *active rather than a passive listener*.
- **Taking notes helped me develop good questions and/or criticisms for the debate team**
- I felt a sense of *connection and community among audience members*.
- I would say that the experience of having been a debate team member in a previous class made *me a more critical and active member of the audience today*.
- My experience as an audience member today makes me more likely to participate actively in other courses.

# What did we find?

- At least in terms of student perceptions, the debates worked.
- The structured debate offers a significant improvement over unstructured debates.
- Adding structure to the debates worked better for some students more than others.

# The debates were perceived as relatively effective.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
• Debate made me more interested in today's material	1.94	.99
• Debate improved my understanding of today's material		2.02
1.11		
• Debate made me more interested in unit material	2.11	.93
• Debate improved my understanding of unit material	2.15	1.00
• I think historical knowledge can change	1.80	.99
• I think knowledge is something produced through an exchange of scholarly views and through criticism	1.81	1.14
• I now have a more complex answer to the guiding question for the week than I had before the unit	1.93	1.03

*Scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree)*

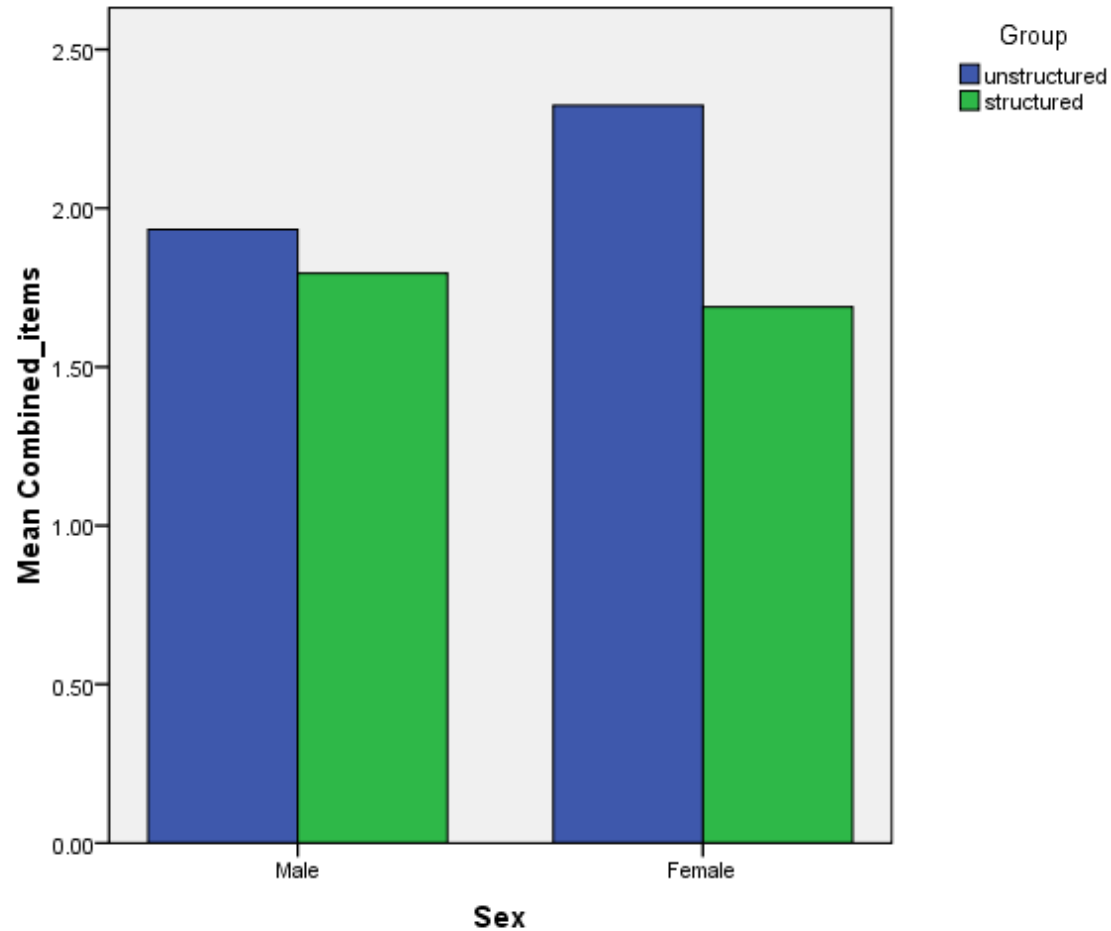
# The debates were perceived as relatively effective.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
• I have a good sense of how information from today fit with information discussed in earlier classes	2.06	.99		
• Because I had written a journal, I showed up to class having already thought carefully about the material debated	1.85	1.01		
• On the whole, students connected to each other in a productive way today	1.97	1.00		
• Today's class meeting was driven by student's analysis	1.79	.99		
• Most of the audience consisted of active rather than passive listeners		2.24	1.07	
• I am more curious about the question than when I first encountered	1.99	.99		
• I think other perspectives are valuable in understanding history	1.58	.90		
• Studying this unit has made me more aware of the strangeness of the past	1.84	.96		

# Creation of a scale

- The items were strongly correlated; we used factor analysis to confirm we were dealing with a single factor.
- This factor consists of all items except “historical knowledge can change.”
- Reliability of the resulting 14-item scale is good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.94$ ).

# Analysis of debate type (structured vs. unstructured) and student sex



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- The debate structure made a difference.

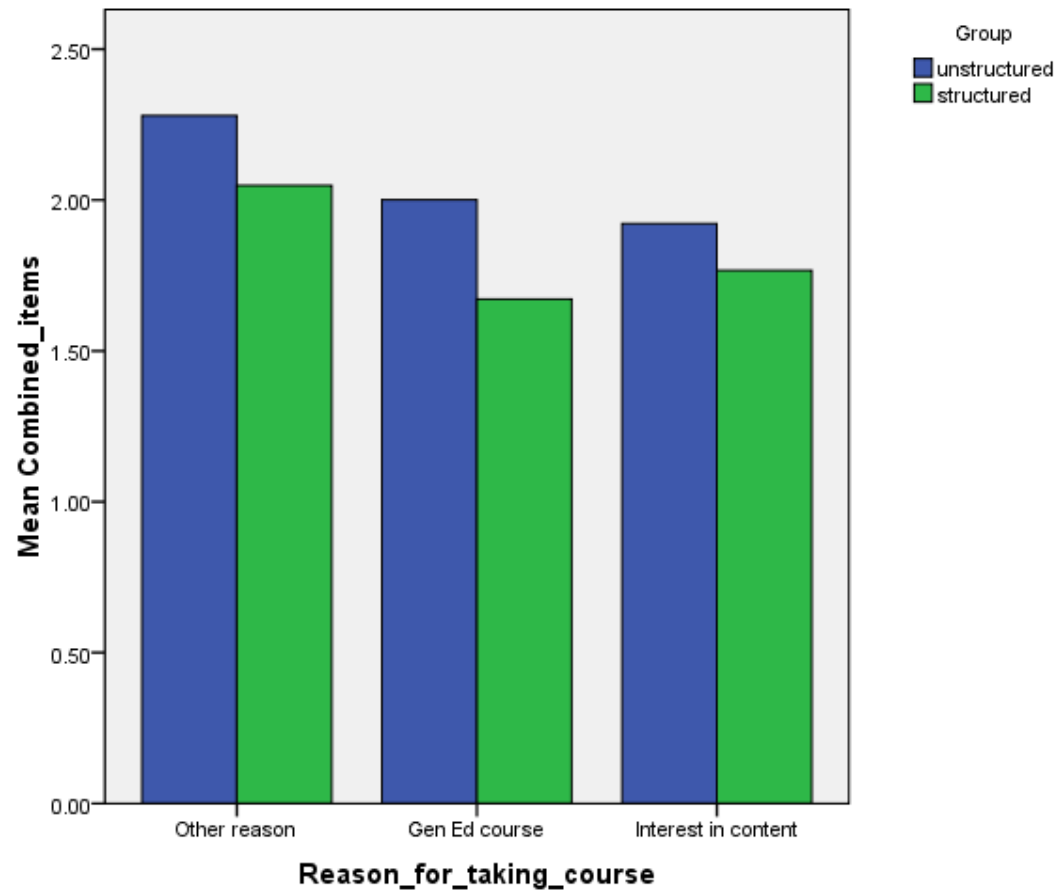
$F(1, 134)=11.90, p=.001, h_p^2=.082.$

- However, the debate affected males and females differently.

$F(1, 134)=4.91, p=.028, h_p^2=.035.$

- The debate structure only significantly affects female students (confirmed by simple main effects test).

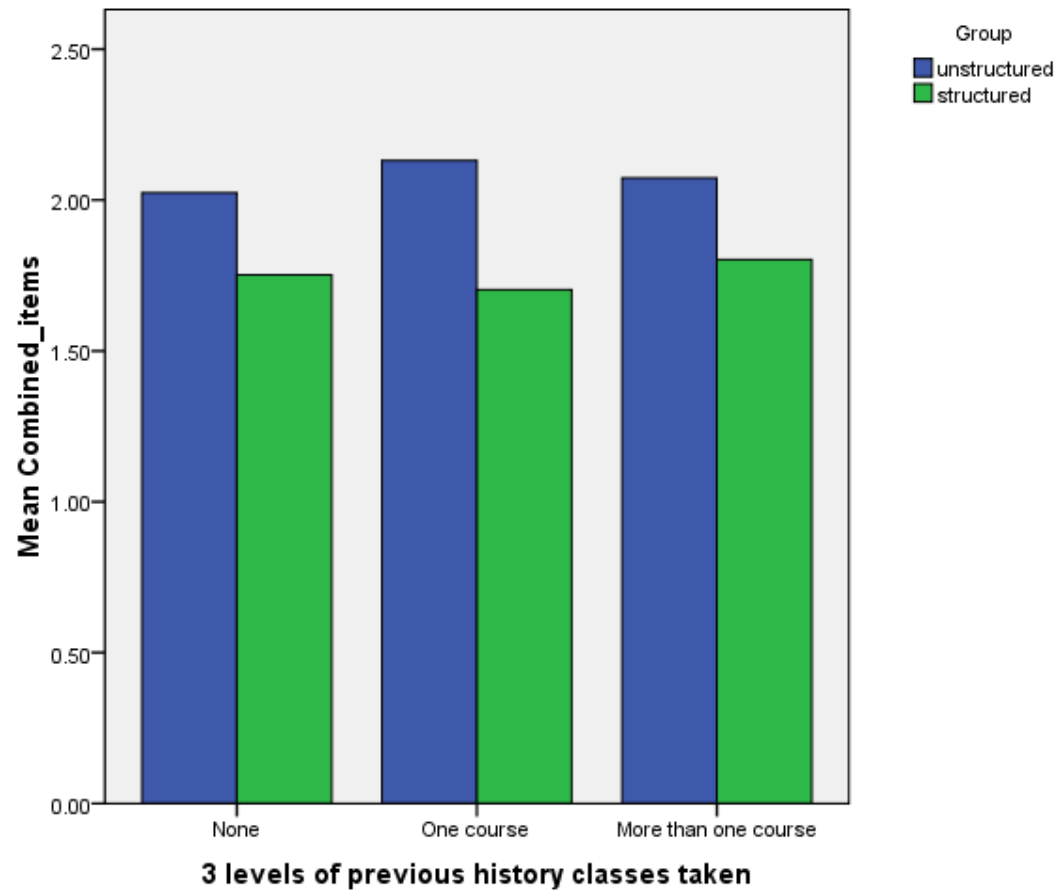
# Impact of reasons for taking the course



# Impact of reasons for taking the course

- Both reason for taking course and type of debate had a marginally significant effect on student perceptions.
- However, the interaction between the two variables was not significant.

The structured debates worked well no matter how many other history courses the students had taken.



# Other analyses

We found no significant effects for the questions specific to audience members or debaters.

# Where does the project go from here?

- Collect more data
- Devise strategy to explain gender difference in debate's effects
- Refine questions about differential impact for debaters vs. audience members
- Fuller integration of other scholars' work on changes in debate format

# Citations

- Wiggins, Grant P., and Jay McTighe. 1998. *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Fink, L. Dee. 2003. *Creating significant learning experiences: an integrated approach to designing college courses*. Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.
- Calder, Lendol. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey." *Journal of American History*. Vol. 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358-1370.

# Appendix: Full Instructions for Students

## Team Debate

- At the beginning of the term, I will have you sign up as part of a two- or three-person debate team. On several days we will have debates in which two teams of students will compete to convince the class that their answer to a question we have examined that week is superior to the other team's answer. Each team should support its case by using the evidence we have read together, both from readings discussed earlier in the week and especially from readings assigned for the debate day. Debate team members (or other students, for that matter) should also feel free to seek out additional evidence, which might be distributed to the rest of the class to bolster their points, used as a "smoking gun" to surprise the other team, etc.
- To help structure the controversy, I will supply each team with a thesis. Team A will have ten minutes to make a case for their answer, and Team B will then have five minutes to critique and rebut Team A's answer. Then Team B will have ten minutes to make the case for their answer, and Team A will have ten minutes to critique and rebut Team B's answer. At the end of the formal debate and rebuttal period, each team will field questions from the rest of the class, which is encouraged to act as a hostile jury, peppering the debaters with difficult questions. During the debate the rest of the class will take notes on the two teams' arguments, use of evidence, rebuttals, etc. using a sheet I will give you, and students will explain which team "won" the debate in their view. I will collect these notes at the end of class and tally students' results. I reserve the right to treat the notes taken on the debate as a quiz.
- Each of the debate teams will be graded according a scoring guide I will give you. Please remember that because this endeavor is a team effort, it is definitely to your advantage to make sure your teammates are well prepared. Please also remember that the best argument for you to make is not necessarily the most emphatic one. Making concessions to some criticisms and limiting your claims is sometimes a more useful approach.
- At the end of the class period, I will ask the class which team gave the best supported and most persuasive argument. Each member of the team that "won" the debate (in my view, although I often defer to the class vote) will get five **bonus points** towards the class leadership grade. (I.e., if your class leadership grade would have been 85 course points it would become 90 course points). I reserve the right to "spike" the debate by asking students in the audience to try to achieve goals that I will give them, goals which are inimical to one team or both teams.
- The main reasons I have assigned these debates are to encourage you to synthesize through careful historical thought the information from the various sources we have studied, to have the intellectual fun (and occasionally liminal experience) of trying to determine the merits of various answers to problematic historical questions, and to hone your skills of planned public speaking, extemporaneous speaking, and critical listening.