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*Corresponding author: Caroline Mellgren, Department of Criminology, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden
E-mail: Caroline.mellgren@mah.se

Reviewing editor:
Sandro Serpa, University of the Azores, Portugal

Additional information is available at the end of the article

CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Criminal policy debate as an active learning strategy

Caroline Mellgren^{1*} and Anna-Karin Ivert¹

Abstract: One of the biggest challenges for criminal justice educators is to deal with the strongly held opinions and preconceived notions about criminal justice issues among students. It often takes the form of students being reluctant to accept certain premises that does not comply with their own experience of the issue. The general tendency to reject information that does not confirm your own view of the world and to accept information that does confirm what you believe to be true is called confirmation bias. This paper proposes the criminal policy debate format as an active learning strategy. Based on the application in an introductory course that is part of a three-year bachelor program in criminology, findings show that the debate format facilitates learning by encouraging students to formulate arguments for and against criminal policy questions.

Subjects: Criminology and Criminal Justice; Education - Social Sciences; Social Sciences

Keywords: active learning; debate; critical thinking; criminal justice education

1. Introduction

One of the major goals for educators is to facilitate students' development of critical thinking and achieve deeper learning. Also, one of the challenges for criminal justice educators is to deal with the strongly held opinions and preconceived notions about criminal justice issues among students. It often takes the form of students being reluctant to accept certain premises that does not comply with their own experience of the issue.

Key to achieve deep and not surface learning is to get the students actively involved and interested in the assignment at hand. Engaged students are more likely to understand the course

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Caroline Mellgren is a senior lecturer in criminology at the department of criminology, Malmö University. Her current research interests include fear of crime, violence risk assessment, domestic violence, hate crime and methods of teaching criminology.

Anna-Karin Ivert received her PhD from Malmö University and is currently a senior lecturer in criminology. Her research interests include child and adolescent psychiatry, fear of crime, and neighborhood effects.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

One of the major goals for educators is to facilitate students' development of critical thinking and achieve deeper learning. At the same time, the dominant form of instruction is traditional lectures, which may in fact hinder the development of critical thinking. In this paper, we examine the use of a criminal policy debate as an active learning strategy from a student perspective and evaluate if a criminal policy debate can be used as an active learning strategy to facilitate learning, critical thinking and challenge preconceptions by encouraging students to formulate arguments for and against criminal policy questions. Criminal justice professionals will deal with sensitive issues on a daily basis and therefore the development of critical thinking skills is crucial.

material and to connect different key concepts and relate these to other pieces of literature as well as their own experiences. Using mainly traditional lectures in a class, sorting the information for the students, and deciding what is most important, may in fact hinder the development of critical thinking (Espeland & Shanta, 2001).

In order to achieve deep learning and critical thinking among the students, it has been suggested that classes should employ a variety of learning strategies (e.g. Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Such a complementary way of teaching is employing different active learning techniques. One example of such a technique is the classic debate. The debate is not a novel idea but can be traced back to the Egyptians 4,000 years ago, as a learning strategy it has been employed for about 2,400 years (Kennedy, 2009) and today, it is employed in a variety of subject areas to assist students in learning the course content as well as more generic skills such as oral communication and information-seeking skills. Apart from this the debate also facilitates the development of critical thinking and challenges “what they all know” (Rockell, 2009) by forcing students to debate, in some cases from a position that is the opposite of their personal opinion. A key element of the debate is that arguments should be knowledge-based and that scientific studies and evaluations should be transformed into arguments for or against the question at hand. The debate has been used as an education tool in a wide array of disciplines, e.g. in teaching psychology (Elliot, 1993), social work (Gregory & Holloway, 2005), sociology (Crone, 1997), business (Combs & Bourne, 1994), and in teaching controversial and sensitive issues (Berdine, 1987) such as drug issues (Gibson, 2004).

In this paper, we present the results from an exploratory study of the use of a criminal policy debate as an active learning strategy. Based on the application of the debate in an introductory course that is part of a three-year bachelor program in criminology, we describe how the debate format may facilitate learning, critical thinking, and challenging preconceptions by encouraging students to formulate arguments for and against criminal policy questions. Studies on the application of active learning techniques in the area of criminology has concluded that it can be successfully employed within the discipline, both in Western and non-Western contexts (Li & Wu, 2015). The debate format was also used as a means of getting students to read scientific literature, seeking and gathering information, getting engaged, and collaborating with other students. These are issues that might be challenging for both students and teachers.

2. Active learning and critical thinking

Active learning refers to different models of teaching and learning that focus on student activity and participation, and the purpose is to foster deeper learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Results from a vast number of studies support the use of active learning to excel student performance (e.g. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Experiences from different subject areas have shown that students that engage actively perform better and develop more critical thinking skills compared with students who passively “are handed” knowledge, mainly in form of traditional lectures (Bransford et al., 1999; Misale, Gillette, & delMas, 1996). Another advantage of active learning strategies is increased attendance of classes that employ such strategies (Curry & Makoul, 1996) and students’ report that active learning strategies make classes more fun (Lawson, 1995). This does not mean that lectures are not valuable, but that different models of teaching should be combined in order to enhance learning. Previous studies have found experiential learning opportunities such as internships, field trips, service-learning, and research projects to be beneficial for criminal justice students (George, Lim, Schannae, & Meadows, 2015; see also Smith, 2013). Tucker and Brewster (2015) evaluated team-based learning as a teaching method in criminal justice and found that it had several positive outcomes but there were no significant improvements in student performance compared with students who were only given the standard lecture. Other recent studies have evaluated experimental and active learning techniques that include using popular music to teach criminological theory (Lamphere, Shumpert, & Clevenger, 2015), problem-based learning for police academy students (Vander Kooi & Palmer, 2014), classroom games to encourage students’ creativity (Hemenway & Solnick, 2013), to mention a few.

Student activity is closely related to developing critical thinking skills. Critical thinking, one of many generic skills that University students shall acquire, has been defined as “Students’ abilities to identify issues and assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions.” (Tsui, 2002). Critical thinking skills are important not only to evaluate the content taught in a university class, but generic skills that students will make use of no matter which career they end up having. Therefore, critical thinking is an overall goal of all higher education. Ennis (1993) has suggested 10 things that a critical thinker should be able to do and that may form the basis of assessing critical thinking:

- (1) Judge the credibility of sources.
- (2) Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions.
- (3) Judge the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidence.
- (4) Develop and defend a position on an issue.
- (5) Ask appropriate clarifying questions.
- (6) Plan experiments and judge experimental designs.
- (7) Define terms in a way appropriate for the context.
- (8) Be open-minded.
- (9) Try to be well informed.
- (10) Draw conclusions when warranted, but with caution.

However, different cognitive biases are significant obstacles to critical thinking. When interpreting the world humans apply different mental shortcuts, called heuristics. These heuristics simplify the experience but when they simplify too much it turns into a cognitive bias (Cuddy, 2013; Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). Criminology classes are popular and content often includes controversial issues. Therefore, one of the challenges for a criminal justice educator, as pointed out by for example Rogers (1986) and Rockell (2009), is to deal with the strongly held opinions and preconceived notions about criminal justice issues among students. Preconceived notions about a subject may be an obstacle to both teaching and learning. It often takes the form of students being reluctant to accept certain premises that does not comply with their own experience of the issue. The general tendency to reject information that does not confirm your own view of the world and to accept information that does confirm what you believe to be true is called confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998).

If one were to attempt to identify a single problematic aspect of human reasoning that deserves attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration ... it appears to be sufficiently strong and pervasive that one is led to wonder whether the bias, by itself, might account for a significant fraction of the disputes, altercations, and misunderstandings that occur among individuals, groups, and nations. (Nickerson, 1998, p. 175)

According to Nickerson, then, methods to challenge students’ preconceptions should be a standard of every course in higher education. When hindering the development of critical thinking, it also poses a threat to the learning objectives of university education. The goal of higher education to develop students’ critical thinking skills and their ability to assess arguments and evidence as objectively as possible is counteracted by confirmation bias if newly acquired knowledge only reinforces one’s existing beliefs. Thus, reducing confirmation bias, finding a way to teach through it, should be one of the main tasks for college educators in general and maybe in particular for educators who teach topics that involve sensitive and controversial issues of which students often have personal experiences, such as crime and victimization.

Deeper learning has been defined as “a set of competencies students must master in order to develop a keen understanding of academic content and apply their knowledge to problems in the classroom and on the job” (William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2013, p. 1). Through deeper learning a student learns how to apply knowledge gained in one situation to another situation (National Research Council, 2012). For example, if a student learns how to evaluate research and prepare arguments for a criminal policy debate, deeper learning makes the student capable of transferring these skills to new situations such as debating other issues or preparing a knowledge base for a future employer.

A key to achieve deeper learning is to get students engaged in the subject and the accompanying assignment. This is crucial since interested students are more likely to engage in understanding the course material, to connect different concepts, and relate these to the literature and their own experiences. In addition, it has been shown that students in active and cooperative learning environments learn more effectively (Bransford et al., 1999). Many consider deeper learning fundamental for students to be able to understand core course content and that actively employing knowledge and testing it in new situations is crucial (Sutherland, Shin, & Krajcik, 2010).

The debate has been described as “an introduction to the social sciences” (Robinson, 1956 as cited in Bellon, 2000, p. 5) and a number of positive outcomes have been associated with the debate as an active learning strategy. These positive outcomes are not limited to the classroom but also have implications for students’ future careers (Bellon, 2000). For example, students who participate in debates develop both interpersonal communication skills and become competent public speakers, become better at evaluating information, and most importantly become critical thinkers (Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Semlak & Shields, 1977). The debate is per se based on controversy. As such, it is a perfect match for a criminology course in which often controversial issues are discussed.

The debate format has the potential to combine teaching course content, developing critical thinking skills and foster deep learning among the students by getting them actively involved and interested in the task. The criminal policy debate also involves the key elements necessary for deeper learning as described by Gibbs (1992): the student has to be actively involved; motivated; interact with others; and have a sound knowledge base. By getting students to apply what they learn through course materials by constructing arguments for or against a contemporary issue further fosters deeper learning. This is in line with Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 3) who argued, “Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.” In addition, the debate has been identified as a “mechanism of empowerment” (Dauber, 1989, p. 206.) and thus has the potential to achieve confident students.

There is however one significant obstacle to learning related to group work: the problem of free-riders (Hall & Buzwell, 2013). Free-riding, or social loafing, as the behavior has also been called (Seltzer, 2016) has been identified as a usual problem in group work and can be defined as “... the possibility for some students to lean on the effort of their co-students and let the others do the work” (Ruël, Nauta, & Bastiaans, 2003, pp. 1–2). Receiving the same grade as other members of the group, without doing the same amount of work, causes a lot of frustration among students (Hall & Buzwell, 2013) and may influence both individual and group performance negatively. The type of task, size of the groups, and how individual contribution is assessed influence the likelihood of free-riding. According to Ruël et al. (2003) groups should be small, preferably less than seven members per group, and the task should be designed so as individual performance is easy to identify and that the groups’ performance depend on individual performances as well.

3. Methodology

The debate was introduced as a course assignment to students taking part in an introductory course that is part of a three-year bachelor program in criminology at Malmö University, Sweden. Located

in southern Sweden, and founded in 1998, the University is a young institution with about 24,000 students. About one-third of the first year students have an international background representing about 100 countries, more women than men are enrolled, and Malmö University has the outspoken goal of widening participation from students with different backgrounds. The student composition at Malmö University in general is similar to the composition of students enrolled in the bachelor program in criminology.

When we started planning the criminal policy debate, we were aware of some of the main obstacles identified by Bonwell and Eison (1991) that may prevent faculty from employing active learning strategies instead of lectures: they are time-consuming and thus you cannot cover as much course content; takes time to prepare; difficult in large classes; students prefer lectures. We solved the time-consuming obstacle by applying for and being granted a grant for pedagogical development. We divided the class into smaller groups and set aside two full days for debating. The most crucial aspect, as we saw it, was to get students involved in the task and less resistant towards non-lecturing methods of teaching. We therefore spent time carefully explaining to students why this approach to learning was chosen and gave a thorough description of how to actively participate.

The assignment was presented to the students approximately three weeks before the date of the debate. Three criminal policy relevant questions were to be debated. The topics had to be current and controversial, but not too controversial so that the opposing teams were too polarized (Tumposky, 2004). One of the criticisms towards the debate is that it may lead to hostility and confrontation among students, which may not be beneficial to all students across cultures and genders (Tumposky, 2004). Prior to the debate, we therefore discussed general rules of conduct and the importance of treating everyone with respect.

The students were presented with two of the questions and got to suggest the third question themselves. Choosing the third question involved voting on options suggested by the students. The debate facilitates motivation by allowing the students to come up with interesting and current questions to research and debate. Student involvement, collaboration, and student influence is thus achieved from the beginning by letting them take active part in formulating the task.

The students and teachers agreed on the following debate questions:

- (1) More police officers will lead to lower crime rate and enhanced sense of security in the population.
- (2) Crime is on the rise—time to get tough on crime.
- (3) Cannabis should be legalized (year 1) and bullying should be criminalized (year 2).

Crucial for the success of the debate is the preparation for the event. Students working in groups to prepare for the debate by doing research and practicing arguments are actively involved in their own learning, which further enhances learning (Bransford et al., 1999).

The students were divided into self-selected groups of four or five students and assigned to be affirmative or negative. Each group was instructed to read up on and prepare arguments for all three questions but on the day of the debate they would argue for or against only one of the questions. Which question the groups would debate was settled by chance. The number of actively debating students was limited to two students per team. The students were encouraged to have different members of the group prepare to debate different questions so that, depending on which questions was up for debate, everyone would have to be prepared to debate. This was done to limit the risk of free-riding. Following Elliot (1993), we also sought to address this potential problem by grading the students based on an individual written summary of the arguments formulated to one of the debated questions, rather than solely on performance as a debater and part of a group.

Table 1. Debate format

| Debate format | Time |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Debate starts—question is revealed | |
| Opening statement team A | 5 min |
| Opening statement team B | 5 min |
| Reply team A | 1–3 min |
| Reply team B | 1–3 min |
| Reply team A | 1–3 min |
| Reply team B | 1–3 min |
| Teams reply | |
| Questions from the audience | Approx 5 min |

The debate followed a traditional debate format (see Table 1), beginning with an opening speech in which main arguments and points of departures were presented for each of the opposing teams. After that the teams took turns presenting their arguments. The debates, which lasted between 30 and 45 min ended with a closing argument. After each debate, the audience (the other students) had the opportunity to ask questions to the debaters.

To investigate whether the criminal policy debate enhanced active learning and potentially may work as a method for increasing critical thinking and reducing cognitive bias, we distributed a questionnaire to each of the participating students. We gathered data from two classes on two separate occasions, in 2011 and 2012. In total, 95 students (54 students in the class of 2011 and 41 students in the class of 2012) participated in the debate and filled in the questionnaire. There were no changes made to the assignment between year one and year two, and we therefore treat both classes as one sample.

Students were formally assessed on their performance in the debate but the focus here was on the students' self-assessment of their achievements and we did not employ a critical thinking assessment scale. Self-assessment has been defined as "identifying progress toward targeted performance" (McMillan & Hearn, 2008, p. 41). Students' self-assessment has been shown to be an important component of self-assessment, a process by which students learn how to judge their own work, and identify their own knowledge gaps to improve performance (McMillan & Hearn, 2008). Self-assessment has been shown to have a range of positive outcomes: "Students who are taught self-evaluation skills are more likely to persist on difficult tasks, be more confident about their ability, and take greater responsibility for their work."

The questionnaire consisted of 15 fixed-choice questions evaluating 4 main dimensions: *collaboration and individual performance, use of literature, learning and critical thinking*. At the end of the questionnaire, we included an open-ended question where the students were asked to make general comments on their experiences of the debate. These answers were used to inform the results from the fixed-choice questions. We did not collect data on gender, ethnic origin, or political ideology since these questions may be considered sensitive to some students and have negative influences on the learning experience. Therefore, we cannot draw any conclusions on differences in learning outcomes depending on for example gender.

3.1. Collaboration and individual performance

The questionnaire comprised five questions with the aim to measure the students' active involvement and their experiences of interaction within the group. To evaluate how much and in what way the groups collaborated, we asked them about on how many occasions they met and to what extent they communicated through other channels such as email and telephone. To measure how collaboration worked, students were asked to state how satisfied they were with how the group

collaborated, how the group performed, and whether the work was equally distributed between the members of the group. Individual performance was self-assessed by asking to what extent they thought that they had contributed to the group's achievement and how satisfied they were with their own performance.

3.2. Use of literature

To assess the use of literature, we asked the students to what extent they had read the main textbook and the other required texts. Response alternatives ranged from *completely* (5) to *not at all* (1). Students were also asked to assess to what extent they employed literature other than the course material, ranging from *to a very high extent* (5) to *very limited extent* (1).

3.3. Learning

The students were asked to assess how much the debate format contributed to their learning of the course content. Response alternatives ranged from *to a very high extent* (5) to *a very limited extent* (1). The last question covering this theme assessed to what extent the debate format increased their interest for criminal policy questions (response alternatives ranged from *to a very high extent* (5) to *a very limited extent* (1)).

Critical thinking was assessed with one question. Students self assessed to what extent they were more critical towards criminal policy and research results after the debate compared with prior to the debate. Response alternatives ranged from *to a very high extent* (5) to *a very limited extent* (1). The measure of critical thinking should be considered only as an indirect measure of one of many dimensions of critical thinking.

4. Findings

We categorized the results and organized the findings in four sections. In the first section, *collaboration and individual performance*, we report student evaluations of the frequency of meetings and interaction between the group members, as well as the students' evaluation of their own performance. The second category, *use of literature*, focuses on the extent to which the students read required literature and information seeking. The third section presents the results from the students' evaluations of their own *learning*. Lastly, students' *critical thinking skills* are discussed.

4.1. Use of literature

A textbook on the development of Swedish criminal policy was assigned as the main course literature along with a number of reports and scientific articles on specific topics. Given the very precise topics of the assignment, it was not surprising that few students reported having read the entire book, however a majority reported having read parts of or most of the main book (see Table 2). The same was true for the additional course literature consisting of reports and research articles. However, when asked about to what extent they applied other literature than the required reading more than 75% of the students reported doing this to a high or very high extent. The need to use additional literature was something that the students found interesting: "we found different articles that the group processed into arguments." But also challenging: "To search for and find relevant articles, [...] have time to read and process them, and to identify the core arguments was the hardest part and also took quite some time."

4.2. Collaboration and individual performance

About 50 percent of the groups met 3–4 times to discuss and prepare for the debate. A majority (87%) of the students reported that they to a high or very high extent communicated with the other group members by using phone or email.

The debate seems to have contributed to collaborative learning. As can be seen in Table 3 a majority (97%) of the students reported that they were (very) satisfied with the way their group performed in the debate. About 95% of the students also reported that they were satisfied with the way their groups collaborated in preparing the debate and a majority (85%) also reported that the division of

Table 2. Use of literature (%)

| | Completely | Most | Selected parts | Only a limited amount | Nothing |
|--|-------------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| How much of the main text-book have you read? | 13 | 35.2 | 35.2 | 13 | 3.7 |
| How much of the other assigned course literature have you read? | 7.4 | 46.3 | 38.9 | 7.4 | |
| | Very high | High | Neither nor | Low | Very low |
| To what extent have you used literature other than the assigned course literature? | 31.5 | 42.6 | 14.8 | 9.3 | 1.9 |

work within the group was equally distributed between the members. This indicates that, overall, the students had positive experiences of interaction with their fellow students in preparing and completing the assignment. These experiences were also confirmed in the answers to the open-ended question. One of the students wrote “Our group worked really well together, efforts were equally distributed and everyone took responsibility for their own work,” “I was lucky to be grouped together with devoted and inspiring people, this made it rather easy.” However, there were also students who pointed out some of the reoccurring/classical problems with group assignments: everyone is not equally involved, group members who don’t show up, and differences in ambition.

When asked to assess their individual performance, more than 90% of the students thought that they contributed to the group’s achievements to a high or very high extent. An equal amount of the students reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their own performance.

4.3. Learning

The students were asked to assess how much the debate format contributed to their learning and increased their interest for criminal policy as well as their own critical thinking (see Table 4). Overall, the students reported that the assignment contributed to an increased interest in criminal policy questions, 72% of the students reported that their interest in criminal policy had increased to a high or very high extent. About one-fourth of the students said that the level of interest in criminal policy questions was more or less the same as prior to the debate. According to a majority of the students, the debate assignment enabled learning of the course content. A majority (67%) experienced that the debate format improved their learning of the course content to a high or very high extent.

4.4. Critical thinking

Seventy-eight percent of the participants perceived that their critical thinking skills had improved as a result of working with the debate (see Table 4). The students reported being somewhat or much more critical of criminal policy and research findings in general after the debate compared with before the assignment, although this is based on the students own assessment of their critical thinking skills prior to the debate.

These patterns of positive experiences of the debate can also be seen in the answers to the open-ended question. One student said: “I am now more informed in criminal policy and I think that I will be more interested in criminal policy questions in the future,” and another one: “Exciting task, it was a great challenge to be forced to argue against your personal opinion.”

Table 3. Collaboration and individual performance (%)

| | Very satisfied | Satisfied | Neither nor | Not satisfied | Highly dissatisfied |
|--|------------------|-------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| How satisfied are you with the way your group performed in the debate? | 71.3 | 25.5 | 2.1 | 1.1 | - |
| How satisfied are you with the way your group collaborated? | 61.1 | 33.7 | 4.2 | 1.1 | - |
| | Very high | High | Neither nor | Low | Very low |
| To what extent do you think that the division of work was equally distributed in your group? | 56.8 | 28.4 | 9.5 | 4.2 | 1.1 |
| To what extent do you feel that you contributed to the groups' achievements? | 47.9 | 44.7 | 6.4 | 1.1 | - |
| To what extent are you satisfied with your own achievement? | 41.3 | 51.1 | 6.5 | 1.1 | - |

An important aspect of achieving deeper learning is enjoyment. A vast majority of the students, approximately 85%, reported that they enjoyed the assignment. This is also reflected in the students comments, "Difficult but worthwhile," "A fun way to learn" "Thumbs up! I would not say no to a debate." The enjoyment of the students probably contributed to the overall positive experience of the assignment.

5. Discussion

We set out in this study to test whether the criminal policy debate format could be an active learning strategy, which could contribute to enhance students' critical thinking skills and to facilitate deeper learning. We argue that the debate format has many advantages when it comes to increase students' critical thinking skills and challenge preconceptions about issues relating to in criminal justice, skills that can be applied throughout their whole academic education as well as in their professional life. In addition, as many other studies have shown, this type of assignment is an innovative way to encourage students to seek out relevant literature and read and apply scientific literature that can be transformed into arguments to support ones standpoint.

The students' reactions to the debate were overall positive and they described a gain in competence in several areas. The anticipated resistance towards non-lecture approaches seems to have been overcome by preparing the students for the assignment and informing them about the active learning approach. Students reported high levels of activity, collaboration, and satisfaction with their own and the groups' performances, fulfilling some of the requirements for deeper learning. There were indications of some free-riders but the vast majority of students were satisfied with the way the group worked. Research has shown that group work and the problem with free-riding associated with it, may cause high-performing students to under-achieve instead of benefitting from working together with other students (Ruël et al., 2003). Having free-riders in a group may cause decreased motivation for some students, who, as a consequence reduces their efforts. The debate seems to have overcome this problem as more than 90% of students reported being satisfied with the group's and their own individual performance.

Table 4. Learning and critical thinking (%)

| | Very high | High | Neither nor | Low | Very low |
|--|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| To what extent did the debate facilitate your learning? | 7.8 | 58.9 | 30 | 2.2 | 1.1 |
| To what extent did the debate increase your interest in criminal policy? | 14.7 | 56.8 | 25.3 | - | 3.2 |
| | Much more | A little bit more | Neither nor | Little less | Much less |
| Do you consider yourself to be more critical in relation to criminal policy and research after the debate? | 35.1 | 42.6 | 21.3 | - | 1.1 |

When it comes to self-assessment of their capabilities, a majority experienced that the debate facilitated learning and that the debate had made them more critical in relation to criminal policy, indicating that it also might be a method for developing critical thinking skills and teaching through the confirmation bias. Other positive outcomes were that the students actively sought out literature other than the required course reading to inform their argumentation. Students also reported that taking part in the debate greatly enhanced their interest in criminal policy questions in general.

Overall, the results were in line with previous literature describing the debate as a key strategy to enhance student learning, critical thinking skills, and challenging cognitive biases (e.g. Bellon, 2000). Pedagogical research suggests that the traditional lecture should be combined with tasks that actively involve the students in their own learning, especially when dealing with controversial issues, as is often the case in criminology. This study thus adds to the studies confirming its applicability in criminal justice education.

Although this was an exploratory study, the sample employed was rather small. Also, the evaluation relied on students' own assessments of their learning and the groups and the individuals' performances. The measure of critical thinking should be considered as an indirect measure of one dimension of critical thinking. But, remembering Ennis (1993) list of skills that characterize a critical thinker, they are all part of the design of the assignment. Thus, to succeed in the debate students have to have developed some of the skills of a critical thinker. Critical thinking is difficult to measure as it is an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. Therefore, future studies should aim at evaluating students' critical thinking skills longitudinally.

In determining whether the criminal policy as an active learning strategy actually works the way we intended we need to consider the broad range of possible outcomes: factual knowledge, active and interested students who develop critical thinking and challenge their preconceptions about criminal policy. The available data make comprehensive assessment of these outcomes difficult. The results should be interpreted in light of data constraints and only be considered as indirect evidence of the gained competences. Other learning outcomes, such as student retention in the educational program, were not possible to assess. However, judging from our experiences as teachers the criminal policy debate was one of the most joyous and interesting student interactions we have experienced. The students showed up well prepared and engaged in discussions like never before. We encourage criminal justice educators to employ the debate to enhance student learning and suggest they consider some of the studies limitations.

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Author details

Caroline Mellgren¹
E-mail: Caroline.mellgren@mah.se
Anna-Karin Ivert¹
E-mail: anna-karin.iver@mah.se

¹ Department of Criminology, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden.

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