

First Things First (and Last): Formulating Debatable Issues (Pt. 1)

'Framing the debate' is a phrase that doesn't mean what at first you would think it means. Instead of denoting the way that a topic for argument is defined, it has actually absorbed some of the nefarious overtones of law and order 'framing' (i.e., 'setting up,' 'deceptively imputing guilt'). Cognitive linguist George Lakoff, in his highly influential 2004 book [*Don't Think of an Elephant!*](#), and books in its wake such as Jeffrey Feldman's [*Framing the Debate*](#), have shifted the way the phrase is understood to something like 'commanding the language of the debate so as to slant it in your favor.' So, for example, when conservatives are able to put the term 'tax relief' in common circulation, they have a significant edge in the debate over levels of taxation and governmental services, since 'relief' already embeds the implication of a 'comforting' and 'healthy' and countering an extreme.

Lakoff et al have an important insight about the significance of controlling descriptions and metaphors in an argumentative clash, and the fact that communication style (often a form of Aristotelean pathos) can at times overtake logic and facts in debate. What cannot get lost, though, for purposes of academic argumentation is the prior and primary importance of framing – or, to avoid the linguistic overlap – *formulating* the debatable issue or topic to be addressed in a unit of classroom study.

Argument-Centered Education prefers the term 'debatable issue' – the formulation of which guides and directs learning and argument – though it is largely tantamount to any of the set of 'question' terms: 'guiding,' 'driving,' 'central,' or 'essential.' EQs are perhaps closest to what we mean by 'debatable issues,' and it is instructive to look at the similarities and a few of the possible differences. According to the late, great Grant Wiggins (co-author of *Understanding by Design* and author of *Educative Assessment*), EQs generate [*sustained and on-going inquiry*](#); they're not susceptible to definitive closure. In this way they are like debatable issues, but [*they also can be end-goals*](#), helping students become better questioners; whereas debatable issues are used instrumentally, fostering students' generation of analytical inquiry and leading to the formation of arguments that give at least provisional but always evidence-based viewpoints. Wiggins has [*summed up an EQ*](#) in these elements:

- Generates inquiry
- Has depth



- Prompts argument
- Stimulates re-thinking
- Connects to the personal
- Is natural

Formulating debatable issues – mostly similar, though not identical, to creating essential questions – should be guided by the following criteria, in our view, in order to effectively guide and produce rigorous classroom argumentation.

- **Openness**

Debatable issues have to allow for more than one credible, defensible position. They can be deep and timeless (‘Individual freedom should be valued more highly than community security’) or more local and contingent (‘Cornstarch mixed with water has more properties of a liquid than of a solid’), but they must be based on an open question rather than a closed question, one for which there are available facts that can support differing viewpoints rather than a definitive and sealed-off answer.

Meeting criterion: The Europeans’ expansion across North America amounted to an act of genocide against Native Americans and should never have happened.

Not meeting criterion: The Europeans’ expansion across North America resulted in the deaths of a majority of the Native Americans living on the land at that time.

The second example is a matter of factual, historical research, and though it is an important question it is closed-ended question and not likely subject to sustained dispute. The first example is certainly open to multiple defensible positions and is an on-going matter of disagreement and controversy.

- **Balance**

Debatable issues must allow for two or more positions that are roughly equal in their defensibility, based on available or provided evidence usable to support argumentative claims. This criterion is deceptively difficult, but like the others, it is essential. It implies the need – important for this criterion, and for others – for the teacher to think through and list out in preparation for the unit solid, defensible arguments on both (or all) sides of the issue.

Meeting criterion: Is the title character in Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* a hero?



Not meeting criterion: Is Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* an environmentalist story?

The Seuss classic is obviously a pro-environment allegory. Seuss said as much, and the evidence is on every page. But whether the title character is heroic in fighting environmental depredation is by no means open-and-shut. Notice, though, that debatable issues can be phrased either as propositions (e.g., the examples under ‘Openness’) or as questions, as with these Seussian examples.

- **Focus**

Debatable issues must, like argumentative claims themselves, be focused on a single idea or question. They should not be formulated to include over-complexity. The arguments that they generate will add the complexity; they should, like the *Lorax* example, be as direct as possible, without being superficial.

Meeting criterion: Is mathematics natural or man-made?

Not meeting criterion: Is mathematics natural and simple or man-made and complex?

Math could be both natural (i.e., present in nature, not created by civilization) and complex (many things in nature are complex), or it could be man-made and simple, like a haiku, for instance). Note, however, that ‘focus’ is not synonymous with ‘binary.’ Debatable issues can have multiple sides or positions – e.g., ‘Which response would be most effective in reducing youth violence in Chicago: innovative policing, community-based programs, tougher gun control, or youth employment opportunities?’ A debatable issue can certainly be focused on identifying multiple argumentative positions or options.

- **Authenticity**

Debatable issues should be authentic: meaning, they should be rooted in controversies or on-going dialogues that people actually have, that are taking place in society somewhere. ‘Authenticity’ can be a proxy for some level of academic dispute about the issue, within the discipline, though it doesn’t have to be. There can be another site of clash, but the issue should not be something manufactured for the unit or assignment. Authenticity is important because (a) it ensures that evidence is out there and available on the issue, and (b) it places the issue in a larger, real-world context, as argument should be placed generally.



Meeting criterion: Who is most responsible for Macbeth’s tragic demise: Macbeth himself, Lady Macbeth, or the Witches?

Not meeting criterion: The Witches could have saved Macbeth at the end of the play, if they had wanted to.

The first has been written and debated about for 500+ years, whereas the second is an example of a ‘pseudo-controversy,’ something that sounds controversial but has never actually been argued about before and may be a kind of ‘pet idea’ of the instructor.

- **Intellectual Interest**

Debatable issues should be of real intellectual interest – immediately, to as many of the students as possible, but also accepting that some are likely to become more intellectually interested in the issue as they learn more and develop arguments about it. The intellectual interest of the teacher is relevant here, too. Intellectual interest is key to building the motivation and energy to work and to learn.

Meeting criterion: Income inequality is significantly dampening economic growth in the U.S.

Not meeting criterion: Fiscal policy is more powerful than monetary policy in the U.S. economy.

Of course intellectual interest is subjective, but part of what makes teachers effective is their knowledge of and intuition about what will interest and motivate their students. We’re positing that for most high school or middle school students, fiscal vs. monetary policy is too technical and specialized to be of strong intellectual interest, relative to the economic impacts of inequality, which though it is a crucial economic issue is also one that affects communities and families in ways that students are aware of and likely interested in.

Formulating debatable issues is an essential part of argument-centered instruction, and (we would argue) good teaching generally. Debatable issues not only assume a primacy in summative structured argumentation performance tasks, but they can and should guide instruction – including content instruction – throughout a unit. More on how debatable issues are used in argument-centered education – effectively and ineffectively – in Part 2.