



Superhero Square-Off: Batman vs. Superman Shaping Arguments Activity

We frequently discuss the inter-connectedness of argumentation skills and content learning and knowledge. To think critically, and to enter an argument-based dialogue, about an issue or controversy, we have to have a baseline of content knowledge. Students are unable to generate much in the way of counter-arguments, for instance, when they are unfamiliar with the terms, context, and specific elements of an issue. Likewise, if content knowledge is taught outside of an argument framework it can be quickly forgotten, lacking purpose and relevance for students. It is also limited to the surface unless students think critically and apply higher-order thinking to this subject-area content.

So we consistently try to bring together content and thinking skills objectives. Still, there are occasions when students can productively take part in activities that either are solely focused on argument skills, or are solely focused on building content knowledge. This activity has students practice argumentation skills in the absence of academic content. Students shape and make arguments on the fun topic of superheroes and their super-powers.

Debatable Questions

This list of debatable questions for use in the Shaping Arguments Activity should be viewed a set of suggestions. Neither exhaustive nor intrinsically superior to other questions not included, the questions on this list are models of the kind of questions teachers and students can create themselves.

Which superhero is it tougher for evil villains to defeat, Batman or

Superman?

Which superhero would make a better NBA basketball player, Batman or Superman?

Which superhero would make the better United States President, Batman or Superman?

Which superhero would make a better teacher, Batman or Superman?

Method and Process

These are the steps that teachers should take to implement this version of the Shaping Arguments Activity. This activity can be fitted within a single 50-minute class period.

1. The class should be introduced to the set of debatable questions on Batman vs. Superman. Provide context for the questions, as needed. Solicit from students one or two argumentative claims that can be made on each side of the questions.
2. Divide the class into two halves, a Batman side and a Superman side. Further divide each side into groups assigned to each of the debatable questions. Each group should have a leader tasked with organizing the work of the group and ensuring that the group is prepared for the actual Shaping Arguments Activity.
3. Groups should be given 10 – 15 minutes to prepare informal arguments. Arguments can be shaped in accordance with the **claim – evidence – reasoning** structure, or in a less formal **claim – backing** structure. Evidence should be as factual and as objective as possible, so students should try to make references to actual feats or actions or statements from the movies or comics as evidence and backing.
4. When the groups are ready to go, begin the activity with the first round on the first debatable question. Rounds should last about 10 minutes. Call on students, alternating sides (Batman, then Superman, then Batman, then Superman). Students should speak for 30 seconds or less. No student can speak a second time until every student in their group has spoken once.



5. During the round students can do one of three things. (1) They can make an argument for their side of the debate, their superhero (Batman or Superman), or add evidence or backing to an argument their side has already made. (2) They can make a counter-argument to an argument the other side has made. Or (3) they can respond to a counter-argument or another response made in the round.
6. Very important: you should track the argumentation on a board or projector for the class. Each side's argumentation should have its own color – e.g., Batman in black marker, Superman in red marker. And you should use shapes around the argumentation. Arguments should have a circle around them. Counter-arguments and additional responses should have a square or rectangle around them. Also, lines should connect argumentation when it is responsive, and the lines should have an arrow pointing to the argument that is being engaged with and responded to. Only track new, additive argumentation; do not take note of what is repetitive or non-germane. (See the model for an illustration of shaping arguments in color, as described here.)
7. Students on each side that are not participating in a round can shape arguments and give suggestions to the participating group on its side of the question by sending in notes or post-its with their ideas.
8. You can offer a verdict on each round by very briefly analyzing the tracked argumentation on the board, noting especially successful uses of evidence or of refutation, and resolving each argument toward an overall choice of one of the sides.
9. Consider using an Argument-Centered Education assessment instrument, or your own assessment system for the activity.