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THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Speaking & Debating
Source Book
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For the last year and a bit, I have been leading a new 'speaking and debating' group in Merton U3A. The only problem (which is that at times there have been too few people) has been easily outweighed by the pleasure and value felt by those who do attend. Quite naturally, this is the type of group that finds benefit in having an experienced leader. In my case, I have almost 30 years of close involvement with speakers clubs, debating groups, speaking training and so on. However in theory a group could possibly develop quite well by members simply sharing their own experience and views.

It is for potential leaders of new speaking and/or debating groups that I have compiled the suggestion lists that follow. Most of the items listed are activities that we have actually done in our first year, and which could therefore work for another new group. Doubtless there are many more ideas that we or other groups will discover as time goes on.

Ten basic points

First I should like to list a few basic hints.

1 Why do people come along? Perhaps because they have done some speaking or debating before. Perhaps because they have never done any speaking, and feel themselves possibly lacking in confidence or technique. It is important to consider why people come to the group. Some come more for the 'speaking' side -- others come along more for the 'debating' side. So it is important to bear both needs in mind in planning the activity.

2 The social side of any U3A group is of great importance, i.e. the enjoyment of a cup of tea and a chat with friends. Having said that, the key must still be planning and carrying out a full, enjoyable and hopefully useful speaking or debating programme for a couple of hours.

3 Prepare a full agenda, even though at times you may need to adapt it on the day, or leave something out if the other items take longer. (Notes on 'Agenda' follow)

4. I have found it particularly useful to send a 'follow-up' letter to members after each session. Obviously this should normally be via e-mail. Such a letter will help the group to grow and retain its members: it will be very useful for any members who were absent: and it is also a good reminder for their home preparation for the next session.

5 Ask people to prepare something for the next session, if they have time. This would normally be putting a talk together, or perhaps thinking through and possibly preparing something for a debate.

6. The mechanical factors. You will ideally need a lectern of some kind (maybe a music stand), and a stop watch is always useful. Handouts of course will often be useful, perhaps including some type of 'cribsheet' form to aid feedback and evaluation. The room layout itself can vary. Much of the time, people may sit as a semicircle, with those speaking either

talking from a lectern at front or perhaps discussing while seated. In addition, the group can at times use 'top table' formality for debates, especially in a large room.

7 Variety is as important in the content of the programme as it is in the colour of a good speaker's voice. But a U3A group is different from those types of speakers clubs which have the same programme elements on each occasion. (Those clubs have a different aim and rationale, which includes training people to get on better in their careers).

8 There should certainly be feedback ('evaluation') for members, on some of their talks at least. However it is vital that this should be clearly encouragement, as opposed to criticism. In other words, "That was really good, and here is a way that it could be even better".

9 It is possible that the U3A group might benefit from having some kind of link to another organisation or body, such as a school debating group or an outside speakers club. This could always be explored.

10 It is useful to keep a record of each session's activities and of who spoke.

The agenda

Depending on how many in the group, a normal programme for the session could start with a very brief warm-up, have either 2 or 3 main constituent parts, have a short half time break, and end with briefing about any preparation for the next session. Clearly this need not be the case every time. For example, a larger group might find that a formal debate will last for the whole meeting.

Warm-up: each member to talk for 15-30 seconds (max 1 minute)

'Speaking' activities: these tend to fall under the headings of

- 'prepared talks' (probably from the 'homework', and possibly with evaluation feedback)
- impromptu speaking
- tutorial or similar

'Debating' activities: these tend to fall under the headings of

- more formal standing-up debating types
- less formal sitting-down Question Times or similar

Finally: any club business, and agreeing/briefing on next time.

Examples

Variety is most important, and the only limit is one's imagination. However, in the hope that it will be of assistance, the following lists state in outline what our speaking and debating group has carried out in its first 'year and a bit'.

15-30 second warm ups

something good that has happened during the week

the word 'warm up'

what do you think of (snow, or presents, etc)

a country I would like to visit

someone I would like to be (or to meet)

something that I wish George Osborne would cut

a choice of two items examples – 'Apples? or Pears?' – or 'Car travel? Or Train travel?'

Subjects of talks (normally briefed in the previous session)

something you feel strongly about

a hobby or interest

my hero

an after-dinner speech

a travel talk

pick some aspect of education to talk about

pick some aspect of religion to talk about

each one giving a talk about a different decade

a persuasion speech

a humorous speech

a 'How to ...' speech (eg make shelves or cook a curry)

the type of talk you'd give to a Woman's Institute or similar, if you were paid to give a talk

bring some object from home, and talk about it (Based on the BBC's 'World History in 100 Objects')

a party manifesto (eg for your new 'Pleasure First' political party)

a market trader speech, selling Christmas presents

describe a TV programme

describe a novel you've read

an aspect of your family history

a recent holiday

your earliest memory

Feed back and evaluation

ordinary evaluation of a speech as a whole (strengths, any area for improvement, etc)

evaluation of a single aspect of the speech

the 'evaluation sandwich' (ie praise for a strength/idea for making it even better/praise)

evaluation by the leader, or by others

a general evaluation of the meeting (or of a debate)

separate written comments passed to a speaker

Impromptu talks

my favourite food ... drink ... place ... etc

which U3A group you would like to join

about money matters

where you might live

about education

about the seasons or particular times of the year

getting into character (e.g. different people's views about snow, eg a child, or a street cleaner)

views on your daughter marrying different types of people (eg a politician, a twice-divorced man)

'for' or 'against' ... 'agree' or 'disagree'. (perhaps 2 people give views)

the age at which you should... (eg walk to school on your own)

describe a TV programme without stating its title

persuade us to donate to a given charity

post-election thoughts

a quotation

your recent holiday

Impromptu talks should normally be timed at 2 or 3 minutes. At times a one minute reply or comment might follow. Evaluation is possible, if wished, including the 'evaluation sandwich' principle.

Education spots or 'tutorials' (with or without practical exercises included)

The look -- gestures, eye contact etc

the sound -- delivery

speech preparation

speaking on social occasions

use of notes

practice in speech openings and endings

rapport

the stump speech

voice exercises, tongue twisters, etc

the mind map (in preparing a talk)

the talk you would give to (Women's Institute etc)

what makes a good speaker? Words about speaking

evaluation workshop

the Stand .. Stride .. Smile routine (when called to give your talk)

Discussing

Question Time (variety of subjects)

Variants, eg 2 teams, men vs ladies etc

Debating

standard debating (motion, proposer, opposer, floor contributions, voting)

cogers debating (current affairs)

debating in which the proposer and opposer are grilled

other styles

balloon debates (e.g. a celebrity or oneself; their choice or your choice; being the person or talking about the person)

Debate subjects to date included or planned have been:

that the NHS needs major reform

that life was better in the old days

that parents know best

that divorce should be more difficult

that voluntary euthanasia should be legalised

that the monarchy should be abolished

that the country would be better off with a woman prime minister

that voting should be compulsory

that you should love your country, right or wrong

that it would be better if the Internet has never been invented

that nationalism is too dangerous

In conclusion

Numerous further possibilities exist. Prepared talks, for example, could include:

- inspirational
- 'thought for the day'
- a talk to show gestures (or use of voice, or word pictures, etc)
- own choice of talks
- longer talk, with speaker then taking questions

The programme could include such education spots as:

- visual aids
- microphone use
- interviewing

And include variations such as:

- Call My Bluff
- video-ing
- mock trial or mock wedding
- poetry reading. This could be ... your choice or their choice ... short or long ... serious or humorous, etc.

We wish you good fortune and much enjoyment with your own 'speaking and debating' activity.

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