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Structured debate

Characteristics

The **structured debate** is an organised and moderated (directed) discussion of a group of people who exchange arguments on a selected topic. It can follow a specific scenario.

The subject of a structured debate is predetermined. It should be formulated in such a way as to engage the participants in a discussion. At the same time, the topic cannot be easily or quickly resolved, because the debate will not bring the expected result.

Many structured debate techniques require assigning specific roles to participants. In some situations, the persons participating in the discussion may have to prepare in advance – to obtain needed information and prepare arguments in support of adopted theses.

Debate participants may be asked to, for example, actively participate to solve problems and to answer problem questions on the basis of joint investigations, considerations and conclusions.

The leader of the structured debate (the “moderator”) introduces the topic of the discussion and monitors its course (including the division of roles), and gives the floor to the participants. Each debate should end with a short summary of the results and a discussion of the most important conclusions – as a rule, this is also the responsibility of the moderator.

Using this method, it is possible to assess the cognitive skills and social competences of a candidate (e.g. how persons with different views are treated, coping in various contexts and imposed roles). The participant of a structured debate should demonstrate, among others: in-depth knowledge on a given subject, the ability to present their own position (including to communicate and formulate consistent statements), and the ability to assess the positions of other persons.

The assessor listens to the debate and assesses the learning outcomes of individual candidates. His/her competences in interpreting participants' behaviours during the discussions as well as the ability to use tools to assess the debate are important.

The results obtained using this method are usually repeatable regardless of the place and time of the validation.

It should be remembered that when assessing the statements made by a candidate during a debate, any interruptions to the discussion (e.g. changing the topic) may affect the final result. This is particularly harmful when the new thread relates to learning outcomes that are not included in the debate scenario. An assessor who acts in this way is not performing his/her duties properly. However, even in the case of less significant disturbances, the effect of such behaviour can, for example, change the atmosphere of the assessment process. As a result, the candidate may limit his/her involvement in the discussion, stop responding in detail or honestly. This also causes stress for the person being assessed, who may consequently achieve a worse result.

One of the factors helping to maintain the neutrality and objectivity of validation is ensuring that all participants observe the standards and guidelines of their roles – the assessor, candidate and any supplementary personnel (required by the given method and technique). The moderator plays a crucial role in structured debates, this is the

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person who is responsible for ensuring that all participants are able to speak freely and whose statements are treated equally, and that all the required topics are discussed within the prescribed time.

The validation stages in which the use of the method is recommended

The structured debate is most often used to diagnose and assess a person's learning outcomes.

A study by Cedefop (an agency supporting the development and promotion of vocational education and lifelong learning in the European Union) shows that the debate ([structured](#) and [unstructured](#)) is used in 13 European countries. In nine countries, it is used both in the stages of the identification and assessment of learning outcomes, but only in two countries in the documentation stage.

Scope of the learning outcomes that may be confirmed using the method

Information on the scope of the learning outcomes that can be confirmed by the unstructured debate is for guidance only.

It should be remembered that the choice of a given method must always be based on an analysis of the learning outcomes for a given qualification.

The structured debate can confirm knowledge (and the level of its understanding) and a range of skills and social competences relating to communication and the ability to comprehensively analyse various issues. Among them are:

- critical thinking;
- analysing and evaluating, for example, facts, phenomena, methods and dependencies between them;
- utilising different sources;
- formulating thoughts and stating them in public;
- correct argumentation and counter argumentation;
- looking at problems from different perspectives;
- ability to exchange concepts with others;
- understanding other people and using their experiences;
- critically reviewing one's own ideas and their assessment; and
- the ability to participate in a team to solve problems.

The structured debate enables a candidate to present his/her knowledge and social competences. This method can also be used to assess the skills needed to plan various activities, organise work and follow rules.

[The suggested learning outcomes that can be confirmed using the Structured Debate method](#)

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Strengths and weaknesses of the structured debate

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the candidate's learning outcomes can be identified with relative precision • can be effective in confirming the candidate's knowledge and a range of skills relating to critical thinking, associating facts and communicating with others • a group of people can be assessed at the same time • it is easy to organise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • depending on the technique used, validation with this method can be time-consuming (the time needed for participants to prepare themselves should be added to the duration of the debate itself) • depending on the technique used (e.g. the Oxford debate), validation may require significant financial expenditure (e.g. renting a room, hiring people to act as the audience) • the results may be influenced by such factors as the individual characteristics of the candidates, their communication style and subjective assessments by the assessors (this method is quite susceptible to the “examiner effect”)

Limitations of using the method

Participants must be thoroughly informed about the objectives and the course of the debate conducted with the use of the chosen technique, otherwise their results may be lowered.

The use of this method may be difficult for candidates with hearing and speaking disabilities. People who do not like public speaking and participating in discussions may not agree to the use of this assessment method.

Candidates should be clearly informed about the principles of conducting structured debate, its purpose and assessment criteria. Otherwise, their results may be lowered due to lack of proper preparation (e.g. for the Oxford debate).

The use of this method by awarding bodies may be limited by the need to organise a group of people. This applies to both candidates (for example, the Oxford debate requires two teams of six to eight people), as well as ensuring a sufficient number of assessors, and in the case of some debate techniques – also the public. This translates into costs (e.g. HR, room rental) and may affect the scheduling of validation (depending on the group of candidates and staff availability).

Required human, organisational and material resources

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When conducting a structured debate, a properly trained moderator must be used. His/her role is to prevent, among others, the discussion being dominated by persons who are talkative, exceeding the time schedule, digressions from the topic). This person should have knowledge, skills and social competences relating to:

- the purpose, course and manner of conducting a structured debate;
- managing the group process;
- activating participants (e.g. encouraging people who are quiet or shy);
- summarising events and statements and formulating conclusions; and
- maintaining impartiality.

Depending on the technique used and the number of candidates in the group, a structured debate may require the participation of more than one assessor. These persons should have knowledge, skills and social competences relating to:

- the purpose and course of the structured debate;
- the nature of the learning outcomes that are being validated;
- observing several people at the same time;
- drawing conclusions about the achievement of specific learning outcomes based on participants' statements and behaviours;
- the use of assessment tools (e.g. the debate assessment sheet);
- the sector in which the validation is being performed.

In addition, more people may be needed in the debate as an audience or observers. Their role will depend on the technique used. For example, it may require asking questions of the candidates (panel debate) or voting for the side of the discussion that better presented their arguments (Oxford debate).

In order to conduct a structured debate, one needs to:

- properly prepare the debate (which includes choosing the technique, deciding on the topic, assigning roles, providing participants with the information needed to prepare for the discussion, preparing the assessment sheets),
- properly arrange the room (its size and equipment depends on the technique used) – all participants should be able to hear each other well and maintain eye contact,
- provide the required supplies and equipment, including, for example, to present the discussion rules (flipchart, whiteboard, multimedia projector, etc.), microphones and sound equipment, recording equipment (camera, voice recorder – only after obtaining the consent of the candidates to record the debate).

Possibilities of combining the structured debate with other methods

The structured debate is usually used as an auxiliary method – this method allows information to be obtained supplementing the data acquired with the use of other methods, e.g. observations in [real-life](#) and [simulated conditions](#).

Cedefop data show that the debate is sometimes used to supplement the [analysis of evidence and statements](#) (e.g. in Norway and Liechtenstein).

Example techniques

A technique is a way of doing a particular task in a given method, used to collect and analyse data proving that a

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person has achieved the learning outcomes.

Aquarium

The Aquarium is a technique in which a discussion is conducted on a selected topic by several selected participants sitting in a circle. The other people taking part in the meeting sit around the participants of the debate and act as observers.

The observers may be assessors. Their task is to analyse the course of the discussion in terms of the selection and effectiveness of the arguments, respect for the rules and the general course of the conversation. The moderator's function is limited to making sure that the rules of the discussion and its duration are respected. The moderator should not interfere with the course of the discussion.

The Aquarium is a process-oriented technique – observing the behaviour of the participants is more important than the result of the debate (the solution that has been worked out). It particularly enables social competences to be assessed, as well as for confirming a candidate's ability to debate, formulate arguments, present his/her own position and keep to the topic.

Oxford debate

The Oxford debate (also known as the student debate) is a technique based on conducting a dispute by two teams of participants presenting opposing positions in a given case. A group of observers watches the debate.

There are six to eight people in an Oxford debate, divided into two equal teams. One of them defends a given thesis (the “proposal”), the other tries to disprove this thesis (the “opposition”).

In addition, the debate involves the roles of:

- marshal (moderator),
- secretary (moderator's assistant),
- audience (observers),
- assessors.

The debate takes place according to strictly defined rules, which are briefly presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Rules of the Oxford debate

1. Each team member plays a different role previously agreed to within the group. One of the team members presents the group's position, a second one argues, a third one presents counterarguments to the opposite team's point of view, and a fourth member summarises the points made.
2. From among the remaining participants in the debate, two persons are elected who will act as the marshal (moderator) and secretary (moderator's assistant).
3. The marshal is the moderator of the discussion. He/she welcomes the participants, presents the topic of the debate and both sides of the dispute. In the course of the debate, he/she gives the floor to the speakers and the public and makes sure that the order of discussion is observed. Finally, he/she informs all participants about the outcome of the debate and summarises it briefly. He/she is also obliged to thank all persons who participated in the debate.
4. The secretary assists the marshal. His/her tasks include tracking the time taken by participants of the debate, asking questions and providing information.
5. Members of both teams take the floor alternately – first the side of the proposal (“for”), then the party of the opposition (“against”).

The speeches of the first three participants should last five minutes, while the person summarising the

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position of his team has about seven minutes. If the time is exceeded, the marshal should either take the floor from the speaker or permit him/her to complete the thought.

Members of both teams can prepare for the debate before it begins. This is based on researching source material and formulating the arguments to be presented.

The debate begins with the audience voting “for” or “against” the thesis. This allows one to later determine which party used more convincing arguments and how many people were persuaded to agree with a given side’s arguments after the debate.

Then both teams give their speeches in accordance with the rules provided above. At this time, both the opposing team and the audience can ask questions of the person who is talking (a question cannot be asked for longer than 20 seconds). However, a speaker cannot be interrupted during the 30 seconds at the beginning and at end of the speech (i.e. no questions can be asked or additional information provided). The person who was asked the question may refuse to answer. If he/she does decide to answer, the time needed to ask the question is included in the time allotted to the entire speech.

After summarising the speeches of the representatives of both sides of the debate, the audience members may join the discussion (each person has only four minutes to speak).

In the next step, the audience votes again. Viewers decide which party of the debate was more convincing and whether the thesis was defended. The following criteria are taken into account: ability to discuss and persuade, as well as the arguments used.

The debate concludes with a summary made by the moderator or assessor. It covers both the substantive value of the discussion and the skills of individual speakers needed to participate in the debate.

The Oxford debate requires that the space be specially organised to allow participants to be placed in such a way that they are divided into supporters and opponents of a given thesis, and the persons who have not yet chosen a position.

Members of both teams should sit opposite each other in the first rows. The seats behind them are reserved for that part of the audience which supports them. The persons who are not yet decided sit in the middle benches, which are set perpendicularly to the debating persons. The marshal (moderator) is located at the opposite side of the room, on an elevated platform. The debate secretary sits next to the marshal. According to tradition, the team representing the “for” arguments is on the right side of the marshal, and the opposing team – on the left. Participants in the debate are not allowed to change seats or leave the room until the interval between speeches.

Panel debate

The panel debate consists of a discussion by a designated group of people (the “panel”) under the direction of a person acting as a moderator.

Typically, a group of panellists prepares for the discussion before the debate, informing the moderator about what he/she is going to say during the debate. The task of the moderator is to give the floor to panellists and audience.

The panellists should present different points of view, so that different positions appear in the debate. Their statements are observed by an audience acting as both observers and participants of the discussion (at the indicated time).

After the speeches of all panellists, the observers take the floor. They can ask panellists questions, comment on their statements, and present their own point of view.

At the end of the debate, the moderator comments on the statements of the panellists and audience, and summarises the results of the debate.

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Multiple debate

The multiple debate combines the plenary debate with a discussion in small groups. Its goal is to find the best solution to a problem.

This type of debate takes place in three phases. In the first phase, the moderator defines the problem, which is then briefly discussed by each participant. Then the persons participating in the debate are divided into teams, which are assigned individual problems to be solved. The subject of discussion in the groups may be the same issue that was raised during the plenary debate or one of its elements.

In the second phase, all teams discuss their choices about the possible solutions, one of which is ultimately chosen. The participants' task is also to prepare a justification for their decision.

In the third phase, the leaders of individual teams present the results of the work at the plenary session, during which they are subject to discussion. At the end, all participants choose the best solution to the problem. This may be done in one of the following ways:

- a. vote on one of the proposed solutions;
- b. provide alternative solutions, if there are several appropriate solutions to a specific problem in the discussion;
- c. justify the choice made by the participants in the debate;
- d. the moderator gathers the arguments and provides the final justification of the adopted solution; and
- e. the moderator presents the conclusions on achieving the set goals.

The assessor assesses the work of individual teams and their leaders using a written form (descriptive assessment), as well as the course of the plenary discussion, indicating the most active and the most contributing participants in solving the problem (completing the assessment sheet).

The multiple debate allows many different skills and social competences to be confirmed at the same time, especially in the areas of problem solving, team work and team management. It enables the participants to exchange information, as well as to present their knowledge and different points of view.

Debate “for” and “against”

This technique is similar to the Oxford debate. Participants are divided into two groups to analyse a specific problem from two different points of view. At the end, they decide together about a given case.

The assessor selects the topic of the debate, defines its principles and divides participants into supporters and opponents of a given thesis. However, he/she does not comment on the statements of the debaters and does not rule on the outcome of the debate.

The moderator (moderators) opens the discussion, gives and takes the floor to and from participants and ensures the smooth development and culture of the discussion.

Observers (by filling out observation sheets) or an audience (by voting) assess the party which used better arguments and was more convincing. All voices “for” and “against” are recorded, for example, on a board. During the summary, the arguments receiving the most votes are determined.

This technique is useful in confirming the skills of critical thinking and arguing, solving problems, seeking and organising information, and assessing various theses.

Examples of the use of the structured debate

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The following example illustrates the use of the Oxford debate to assess students' learning outcomes.

Institution name	University of Reading
Country	United Kingdom
The context of its development	<p>The Centre for the Support of Quality Assurance and Development at the University of Reading recommends the Oxford debate as a method to educate and assess students' learning outcomes.</p> <p>The Centre is responsible for supporting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the development and improvement of the quality of education and learning, • the development of internal quality assurance procedures, • the professional development of staff. <p>Its tasks include ensuring that quality assurance processes are tailor-made and productive, as well as informing about the progress of teaching and learning at the university.</p>
Name of the qualification	<p>Programme: <i>Approaches to sustainable development</i>.</p> <p>Number of students: 20–40</p>
Brief description of the method used	<p>The use of the Oxford debate as a learning tool is well established in the Anglo-Saxon system (for example, the Oxford Union Society has been organising such debates since 1823).</p> <p>The Oxford debate can also be used as a tool to confirm those learning outcomes that relate to development (e.g. teamwork, the synthesis of information, use of knowledge, communication – in particular, discussing).</p>
Possibilities of acquiring information about the method on one's own / with the help of a counsellor	<p>Information on the rules of the debate and how to assess it can be obtained from the academic staff. In addition, students are encouraged to independently obtain information on this subject of the debate.</p>
Factors underlying the choice of the method in given circumstances	<p>In this programme, the debate is used because it allows the confirmation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge about sustainable development and its understanding, • communication skills, in particular, arguing and presenting in a public forum. <p>Students are very positive about the debate as a tool for learning or assessing learning outcomes. In their opinion, this method is dynamic and interesting, both because of the demanding nature of the debate itself, as well as the motivation it generates to prepare for it.</p> <p>Negative comments generally relate to a question about the team's performance and those who are “quiet” by nature, who often do not perform well in debate situations.</p>
The procedure	<p>A member of the teaching staff decides which issues will be debated. Questions can be formulated by the students themselves (e.g. which are the two most urgent issues relating to sustainable development in their opinion).</p> <p>In advance, the assessor should prepare a guide for the structure of the debate, the</p>

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	<p>duration of the individual stages and the functions to be performed by the members of individual teams. He/she also provides students with an overview of the debate topic and divides them into teams. Topics often focus on current issues, but should be chosen so that both sides can provide realistic arguments. The assessor can also indicate the basic bibliography, although students should look for sources themselves.</p> <p>The optimal size of the team is five people, which means that 10 students are involved in each debate (half presents arguments “for” and the other half – arguments “against”).</p> <p>More than one topic can be discussed in the debate, which allows a large number of people to be assessed at once (for example, if the debate has four topics, 40 students may be involved in the discussion, while individual teams present their arguments, the other participants can be the audience).</p> <p>Each team has two weeks before the debate to prepare, including a presentation, which is then presented during the opening speech.</p> <p>The debate usually proceeds as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.The public votes “for” or “against” the given thesis. 2.The applicants give a fifteen-minute oral presentation of their point of view. 3.A session of questions asked by the opposing team and the audience follows. 4.Each team presents a ten-minute summary of the problem (prepared by the team) and tries to include answers to the most important questions posed during the debate. 5.The audience votes again. <p>The marshal (moderator) presents a brief introduction to the debate, ensures that its course takes place in accordance with the rules of fair play, procedure and keeps to the prescribed time.</p> <p>Afterwards, each participant prepares a report on the subject that was raised in the debate (maximum of 1500 words).</p> <p>It is recommended that at least two members of the teaching staff assess the learning outcomes of the students during the course of any debate.</p>
<p>Results of the validation process</p>	<p>The results of the debate form the basis for assessing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.the substantive content and organisation of the debate (based on previously prepared criteria) – first for the whole team, and then for individual persons based on the mutual evaluation of group members; 2.the individual reports on the topic raised in the debate (also on the basis of pre-determined criteria).
<p>Organisational and material resources</p>	<p>Required resources include a room large enough to set up the equipment according to the Oxford debate rules and has sufficient space for all participants.</p> <p>The success of the Oxford debate depends on having staff who are able to apply this technique and evaluate the results obtained with this technique. The debating process also requires its effective management by the moderator.</p>
<p>Limitations of use</p>	<p>This method may be limited by staff shortages, as well as organisational and material shortages (insufficient number of persons able to use this method, lack of access to a proper room) and insufficient information provided to students, which affects the level of</p>

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their preparation and, consequently, their results.

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Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej: <https://glowna.ceo.org.pl/>

HKU Assessment Resources: <http://ar.cetl.hku.hk>