

## Debate learning strategy in female postgraduate school: A Saudi case study

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Ongoing global crises, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, have made Saudi Arabia recognise the importance of moving away from its oil-dependent economy. This inaugural, exploratory study focused on female postgraduate students who, in addition to striving for intellectual growth and development, are shouldering a social obligation to strengthen their country's economy per Saudi's most recent national development plan, *Vision 2030*. Qualitative data were collected in Spring 2020 at an Eastern Province university by engaging 20 Saudi female students (convenience sampling) in debates and extracting relevant, structured reflections from their journals. A content analysis revealed they enjoyed and learned from the debate experience with comments revolving around what constitutes the essence of a debate, special skill sets required, learner benefits, learner challenges, and lessons learned as novice debaters. Findings add to the nascent body of knowledge about utilising debate as a constructive learning experience for female students in a Middle Eastern university. Saudi university curriculum planners and instructors are invited to design learning interventions that teach women critical thinking, sound reasoning, and argumentation with the debate strategy a positive first step.

### Introduction

Saudi Arabia (SA) was founded almost 90 years ago (1932), but Saudi women were not allowed to be educated until 1956. This gendered discrimination in education became standard practice (Alsuwaida, 2016). The first official primary school for girls was instituted in Riyadh, the capital city, in 1960 (Hamdan, 2005; Yizraeli, 2012). "Statistics show that in 1990 (i.e., 30 years ago) women represented 47 per cent of the total undergraduate enrolment at colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia" (Hamdan, 2005, p. 53). This statistic affirms gradual progress in women's education in Saudi Arabia.

As the world moves into the 21st century, female participation in all Saudi Arabian sectors is on the rise. Although Saudi heads of state have been replaced from within the same ruling family, the latter have given increasing government support for female empowerment since 2005, especially as the oil-based economy, which has been the country's lifeline until recently, is now being diversified with migration to a knowledge-based economy per *Vision 2030*, the most recent national development plan (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA], 2016). As a caveat, *Vision 2030* serves as the backdrop of this study whose central focus is Saudi women's education and empowerment via student-centered learning strategies.

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with climate crises causing "the contraction and reduction of pre-pandemic economic development and consumption" in Saudi Arabia (Alghamdi & El-Hassan, 2020, p.137), put additional pressure on female participation to

combat the myriad of social and economic issues facing the country. Fortunately, female participation in tertiary and higher education in Saudi Arabia is still increasing, having risen from 40% in 2011 to 70% in 2018 (a 75% increase) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of male and female Saudi university graduates from 2010 to 2019 – there were more female than male graduates every year (ranging from 49% to 57%) except for 2014 and 2015 (Puri-Mirza, 2020).



Figure 1: Percentages of male and female university graduates in Saudi Arabia, 2010-2019

The trend shown in Figure 1, however, cannot be interpreted as an equivalence to female university graduates' job readiness at graduation compared to their male counterparts. With *Vision 2030* (KSA, 2016) as the backdrop, this exploratory study focused on Saudi female graduates. Alghamdi and El-Hassan (2016) argued that education is a vehicle for women's empowerment. Specific pedagogies, when used, allow "students to critically analyze what they have learnt and to evaluate their sources of data rather than taking the information for granted" (p. 430). One such student-centred educational learning strategy is debates (formal, public interchange of arguments about an issue).

Debating is an especially effective learner-centred instructional strategy, because students are in direct control of their own learning, which is the hallmark of student-centred learning (Najafi, Motaghi, Nasrabadi & Heshi, 2016). Such learning is centred on thinking and forming judgements by themselves as they investigate a contentious issue, develop a position on it (pro or con) and justify it to others with evidence and effective argumentation. Najafi et al. (2016) described a debate as a comprehensive learner-oriented method that involves a "bilateral relationship between teacher and learner... [E]ach one has his/her own share in the learning and teaching process" (p. 213). The teacher serves as facilitator and moderator with students at the very centre of the experience. Najafi et al. (2016) described the professor as a guardian who champions and supports students as they learn the nuances of debating.

This approach to helping students learn is quite a shift in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries where universities are mostly teacher-centred, using formal lectures or laboratory settings. Students do not actively participate in the learning process; instead, they listen passively to the instructor and engage in rote learning (repetition) and memorisation (Hamdan, 2005; Najafi et al., 2016). This teacher-centred approach has been criticised because students are inactive and controlled by “the master axis (professor axis). [This] superficial and transitory education” (Najafi et al., 2016, p. 217) delays students’ ability to draw inferences, and it compromises the inherent human trait of connecting with groups and society (Najafi et al., 2016).

It has been said that “participating in the process of ‘debate’ is better than one-month repetition of a lesson” (Najafi et al., 2016, p. 212). The learning is *that* powerful and sustained. Learners are repeatedly offered the opportunity of self-assessment leading to self-learning and cognitive learning (Najafi et al., 2016). In modern Saudi Arabia, women will be shouldering the social responsibility of strengthening their country’s economy. This task will require them to mature as learners and partake in debates: political, economic, educational, and social/cultural. Fortunately, research shows that, in the university setting, debates are a proven way to foster critical thinking about and deeper analysis of contentious and timely issues (Oros, 2007).

With this in mind, the researchers investigated the use of debate as a teaching and learner-centred strategy to develop Saudi female graduate students’ self-confidence and particular knowledge and intellectual competencies pursuant to skilful debaters: critical thinking, making analyses, reasoning, making evaluations, using persuasion, making convincing arguments, and making decisions and defending them in the face of opposition and resistance.

## Research purpose and question

The purpose of this study was to examine whether debate as an educational strategy is an effective way to enhance Saudi female graduate students’ learning and intellectual growth, and their ability to contribute to achieving *Vision 2030*. Previous researchers have affirmed the value of using debate as a teaching and learning strategy in many university disciplines (e.g., Al-Banna et al., 2016; Al-Hajoury, 2019; Ahmed, 2013; Chang & Cho, 2010; Oakley, 2012).

Although research has confirmed the cognitive benefits of debates (e.g., Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Al-Ma’olya, 2015; Iman, 2017; Kennedy, 2007) and asserted its usefulness as a learning assessment tool (Doody & Condon, 2012), virtually none of this previous scholarship has investigated the use of debate with female postgraduate students in a Middle Eastern country. The research question guiding this study was thus “*What was Saudi female postgraduate students’ learning experience with the debate learning strategy?*”

## Literature review

### Debating in Arabic culture

Historically, the practice of debating is an authentic part of Arabian heritage. Arabian debating assemblies began in “Dar Al-Nadwa” (a place in Makkah where the clansmen of Quraysh gathered to confer and decide about various issues) (Paret, 2012). Similarly, for their European counterparts, debates have been used as a method to elicit discussions on profound topics since the early times of Greek philosophers (Lane, 2018; Najafi et al., 2016). However, using debate skills as a teaching strategy to serve educational purposes developed later in the KSA (Al-Hajory, 2019). Indeed, Najafi et al. (2016) claimed that the “consequences [of debating] and how it works in the field of education and training is unknown and obsolete” (p. 212) especially in Middle Eastern nations.

Najafi et al. (2016) referred to the place of debate in the Quran and “the ‘circles of the mosques education” (p. 212). By this they meant the use of study circles (*Halaqat al-ilm*) in mosques where Muslims (practitioners of Islam) cluster around a spiritual leader to study the Quran. Mosques are considered centres of discussion and debate (Imamuddin, 1984). Arabic scholars Najafi et al. (2016) believed that “knowledge firstly can be acquired through logical reasoning debates” (p. 212). Citing Khaje Nasir al-Din Tusi’s (2011) book *Adabul Motealemin*, they noted that debating fell from favour in the Middle Eastern formal education system.

Fortunately, holding debates at universities in the Arab world has been gaining momentum. Kamel (2018) asserted that debate clubs now flourish in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which hold regular debate championships at universities. In a recent study in the Arabian Gulf region, a teacher used debates to bolster English as a second language (ESL) students’ language acquisition and fluency and make them more excited about speaking practices. Respondents strongly agreed that debates helped improve their social and speaking skills, especially how to speak logically (Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2015).

### Purposefully developed debate practice framework

Park, Kier and Jugdev (2011) affirmed that university students and teachers tend to enjoy debating as a learning strategy. Nevertheless, students can resist debates if they lack confidence, question their own intellect, and query their ability to express themselves (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). Knowing this, university educators must find a balance between supporting the debate and allowing postgraduate students time to learn how to prepare for and conduct themselves during a debate.

To help university instructors find this balance, offered herein is a practical model or framework for using the debate strategy in a university postgraduate setting (Figure 2). Insights for the development of this model were gleaned from relevant literature and research (Ahmed, 2013; Al-Banna et al., 2016; Al-Hajoury, 2019; Apdoludin et al., 2016; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Iman, 2017; Lan & Lam, 2020; Scott, 2008). This debate

preparation and application model can be easily applied in a university classroom where postgraduate students want or are expected to adopt an active way to learn. Each phase is now discussed.

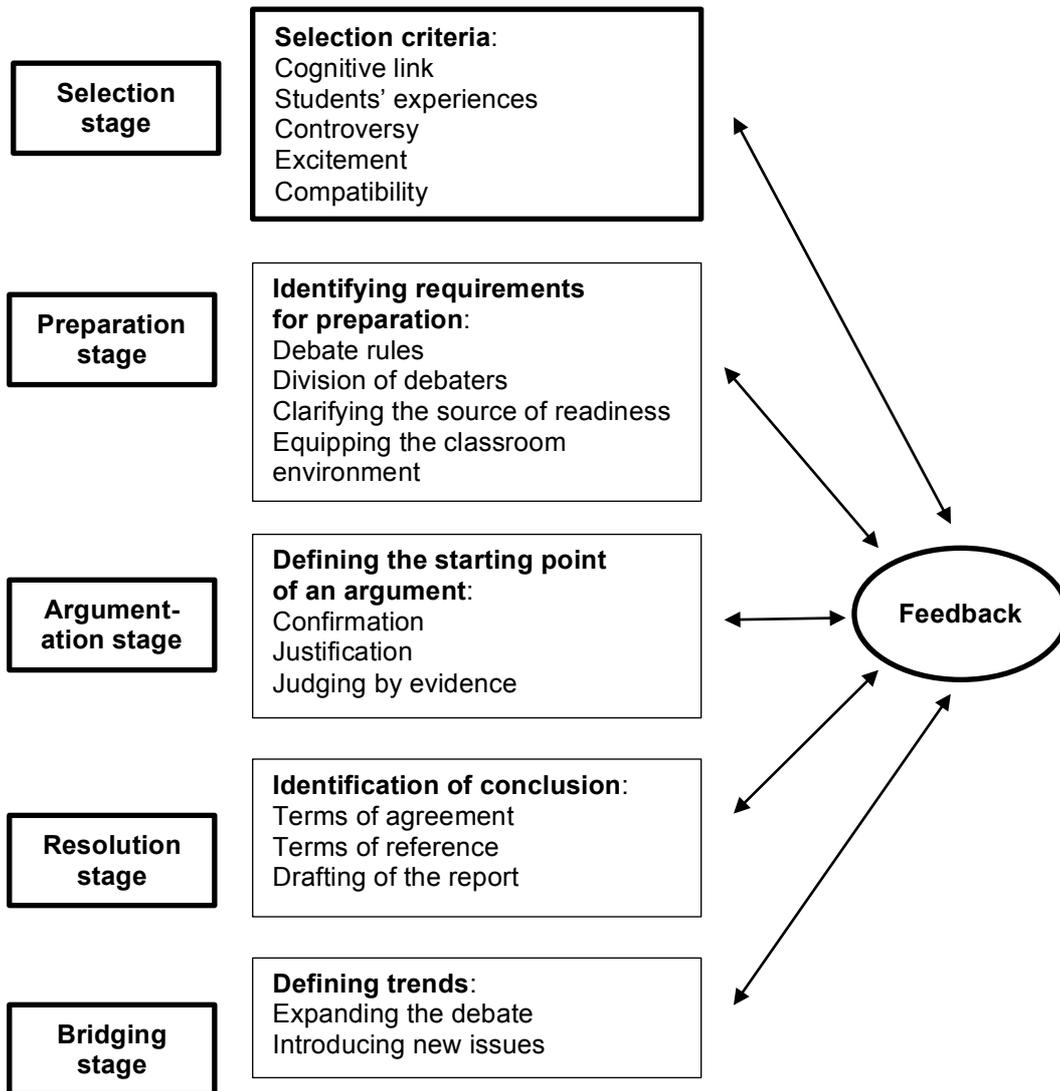


Figure 2: Practical university-level debate model (developed by the authors, translated from Arabic)

At the selection stage, the university instructor should apply a set of criteria related to choosing a topic for debate, whether it is a realistic or imaginary issue. The topic should (a) provide a cognitive link between debate and cognitive learning objectives; (b) be compatible with postgraduate students' experiences (cognitive or in life); (c) be able to raise controversy among learners as they think and gather information and evidence; (d)

excite postgraduate learners and drive and inspire them to think; and (e) be compatible with, perhaps contest (nudge), their skills and skill level pursuant to grappling with the given topic.

The preparation stage requires a commitment from the university instructor who must first (a) define the debate rules: time limit, number of questions, method of presentation, duration of the debate, and consequences of not following the rules. It is up to the university instructor to then (b) physically equip the classroom for the debate by organising seats for students and any audience members, inviting judges or moderators, and arranging for any technological devices and support for the debate activity. (c) The instructor must divide students into debate teams, whether they comprise one or two people or larger groups. Equality between groups must be taken into consideration. The university instructor will also have to (d) prepare the students by guiding them to initial sources of information and teaching them how to gather more information and document, critique and analyse what they find in preparation for the debate.

During the students' argumentation stage (i.e., the actual debate), instructors must pay attention to several dynamics. They must ensure that students (a) have both confirmed their point of view through examples, facts, statistics, documentaries and references and provided experts' opinions that support the debaters' ideas; (b) have persuasively justified their position through explanation, clarification and demonstration of viewpoints; and (c) know that the merits of the debate are judged by both the evidence they have used to develop their position and the persuasiveness of their arguments.

During the resolution stage, the university instructor or the moderator (judge) must indicate the outcomes of the debate. This involves (a) identifying points of agreement and what has become common beliefs after the debate; (b) stating the terms of reference, which may need more evidence as they are still controversial; and (c) drafting a report aimed at documenting clear and specific understanding of the outcomes of the debate, without being influenced or interfered by each team's point of view.

Once the debate is over, the bridging stage includes (a) expanding the debate based on points raised in the resolution stage but not thoroughly discussed yet, which may require further evidence, proofs and refined argumentation. Also, (b) the students, the university instructor or both may offer new debate topics for future, deep discussion.

## **Method**

A qualitative exploratory research design entailed document analysis to discern Saudi female postgraduate students' thoughts and reflections about the debate strategy they employed in class (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2016). Analysing documents created in a field setting is a fruitful way to collect data to answer a research question. Herein student journals created during a course were analysed. Journals are an example of personal documents constituting primary data and considered a legitimate source for exploratory research (McGregor, 2018). The exploratory research design also

enabled the researchers to provide initial, broad understandings of the phenomenon (i.e., debate strategy in a Middle Eastern university setting) and lay the groundwork for more conclusive future studies (Dudovskiy, 2018; McGregor, 2018) with larger, gendered, multi-university sample frames.

### **Sample frame**

This study was conducted at Imam Abdul Rahman bin Faisal University (IAU), which is in Saudi's Eastern Province (one of 13 provinces). Over several years, in her role as vice dean of a female education section of IAU, the lead author has taught or advised nearly 300 female graduate students. The convenience sample frame comprised the lead author's 2020 class of 20 female postgraduate students who were studying for their masters degree in the College of Education.

The sample was aged 25–45 with specialisations in arts, education, business administration, or basic sciences. They were full-time postgraduate students. Some were also teaching in either the public or private school systems. Most had never used debate as teaching strategy nor were they familiar with the two debate topics (to be discussed).

The students were enrolled in a Master of Education program, which is course-based with a mandatory thesis. Some IAU professors use debating as a teaching strategy but at their discretion. Unlike the course in this study, the other courses or units in the IAU MEd program do not contribute to the transition from teacher-centred to student-centred; they are mostly traditional, teacher-centred offerings in a university context where this is the norm.

### **Data collection**

Qualitative data were collected from (a) the authors' reflections on their long-term engagement with female postgraduate students, prompting the authors to ponder the merits of the debate learning strategy relative to *Vision 2030*; and (b) postgraduate students' feedback about and reflections on their experience with the debate strategy (expressed in their journals) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although called data triangulation (intimating three sides), two or more researchers using two research techniques constitutes data triangulation (Harvey & MacDonald, 1993). Also, researchers' reflections (with or without attendant field notes and journals) constitute a legitimate data point for data triangulation, because they "provide for corroborating evidence" (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018, p. 2254).

The lead author arranged for her Fall Semester (2019-2020) class to experience two debates (40 minutes each) that she facilitated after orienting students to the debate process using Figure 2 and assigned readings. She arranged for four-member teams giving students the choice of which side of the debate they wanted to represent (for or against). The Western concept of a debate was employed (i.e., two teams, one for the proposition, the other against) with the intention of ensuring that both personal and diverse perspectives were represented.

Prompted by COVID-mandated distance education, the first debate was about “*Should we implement distance education in Saudi Arabia?*” The second debate queried “*Should Saudi educational system reform start with the teacher or the curriculum?*” Students were not given any information ahead of time on these topics. This part of the data collection process entailed the development of a set of motivational questions to capture data from the students about the debate strategy. The lead author required students to address these questions in a journal, which was submitted in Arabic, their first language and that of the researchers. These data were then translated into English after data analysis. Suh et al. (2009) advised that translation after data analysis better ensures capturing the meaning and cultural expressions and concepts.

### **Ethics approval**

Two months after grade submission at the end of the Fall Semester, 2019-2020, the lead author obtained permission to use the students’ feedback on the implementation of the debate strategy. Each participant had already granted signed and dated consent for her journal to be used in the study.

### **Data analysis**

The participants’ journals underwent a content analysis wherein the researchers coded instances of reference to participants’ thoughts about the debate learning strategy they had experienced in their course. Content analysis is an acceptable analytical approach for a document analysis research design strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It helps researchers “analyze relatively unstructured data” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 49) (like journal entries) to discern latent and manifest messages (meanings and expressions) from the data source. In this case, that source was Saudi female postgraduate students engaging with and reflecting on the debate learning strategy. In addition to measuring frequency, each of words, phrases, clauses, and full sentences were accepted as evidence and reported verbatim in the findings. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants’ identities (e.g., AA, DL).

### **Findings**

One research question guided this study: “*What was Saudi female postgraduate students’ learning experience with the debate learning strategy?*” Findings from data triangulation (in this case, two researchers using two sets of data, Harvey and MacDonald, 1993) are presented: (a) the Saudi researchers’ reflections on their experiences with teaching Saudi female graduate students prompting them to conclude that debates warranted further exploration; and (b) Saudi female postgraduate students’ reactions to experiencing debates.

### **Researchers’ reflections**

A key aspect of data triangulation in this study was researchers’ reflections of teaching Saudi female postgraduate students and the former’s conviction of the merit of using a more learner-centred, active-learning pedagogy (e.g., debates). They were further inspired

by Oros' (2007) study that compared a class that used structured classroom debates (SCDs) with a non-SCD class. He reported that "the active learning mode of debate preparation contributed to an independently positive effect" (p. 306).

### **Teaching methods and learning experiences**

As university professors who teach Saudi female graduate students at IAU, the authors became aware of some of the challenges encountered in teaching beyond lecturing. They became curious about not only how to develop teaching methods that suit postgraduate students, but also how to provide unique learning experiences and support learning to develop soft skills such as verbal discussion, intellectual reasoning, and convincing and persuasive communication.

By way of rationale, after teaching them for nearly a decade, in a university context where formal lectures and teacher-centred teaching is the norm, the researchers had learnt that Saudi female postgraduate students enjoyed class discussions, which were often missing in other courses. Students responded to the instructional innovation of guest speakers who brought alternative points of view and thus challenged students' conventional thinking. Class readings from non-Arabic sources, although often lengthy and critical in nature, were appreciated.

However, other aspects of the authors' experiences while teaching Saudi female postgraduate students led them to conclude that students had minimal experience arguing effectively, reading comprehensively, analysing and synthesising, thinking critically, judging others' scholarship, writing essays, and conducting and reporting research. These are, in effect, the proverbial cognitive toolbox for postgraduate students.

Also, some Saudi female postgraduate students suffered from the inability to speak publicly about their thoughts and shied away from doing so, because they struggled academically due to inadequate cognitive skills. Judging them to be outside their comfort zone and inadequately prepared for the intellectual rigors of postgraduate studies, the authors concluded that such academic and scholarly limitations could hinder their progression through a postgraduate degree program and hamper their ability to obtain real benefits from graduate studies.

Ongoing reflections affirmed the authors' intuitive knowing that life during and after the academy is predicated on thought, dialogue, and mental judgment. They remained convinced that curricula and instructional planning for academic programs should contain courses that qualify postgraduate graduates for the job market as well as societal leadership roles. This preparation necessitates learning strategies that deeply engage their intellect, one of which might be the debate strategy.

The authors believed that debating has merit but only when universities decide that the teaching process is no longer just about lecturing students but providing favourable conditions for deep learning, which teaches cognitive skills and dispositions to strengthen human, social and decisional capital (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013). When students learn

deeply, they ultimately construct their *own* framework for understanding deep, complex issues instead of relying on others to interpret the world for them (Nicholls & Adolphus, 2003). The authors were convinced that this independent thinking is what Saudi female graduates will need for intellectual growth and individual development and to contribute to achieving *Vision 2030*.

### **Students' engagement**

The authors were also convinced that postgraduate students must be engaged in the learning process, working toward a set of learning goals designed to help them become independent critical thinkers. They strongly believed that university teaching is a planned process through which faculty members consciously apply a set of strategies and instructional methods that develop postgraduate students' skills, attitudes, thinking, and personalities. Postgraduate students must be enabled to critically access and assess information and create knowledge themselves; that is, they must take responsibility for their own learning and intellectual growth and subsequently for their future role in Saudi society.

Overtime, the authors came to accept that, to be successful in teaching postgraduate students, faculty members must pay attention to and consider the students' ideas, concepts, and previous experiences, which may help the latter build and expand their cognitive abilities, leading to cognitive change. Unacknowledged inconsistencies between the students' and faculty members' ideas may hinder the learning process. The authors were convinced that one aim of postgraduate education is to effect conceptual change by using appropriate methods to persuade students to advance beyond outmoded concepts and constructs.

To that end, the authors held that effective faculty members help postgraduate students understand and correct their learning mistakes rather than anticipate (in) correct answers. Being capable of self-correction indicates students are understanding the intended learning. The authors strongly believed that the debate strategy would contribute to this deeper learning.

Upon reflection, the authors also learned that providing the right environment for associated postgraduate students' learning requires faculty members to create the conditions in which students can present and express their opinions, talk to each other about them, and take responsibility for their own learning. This learning environment entails a problem-solving pedagogy wherein students can develop hypotheses, collect pertinent information, test the hypotheses, and come to their own conclusions. The debate strategy requires the use of these core learning tools to develop, present and defend reasoned arguments (Nicholls & Adolphus, 2003).

The authors further believed that modern university teaching is characterised by providing postgraduate students with opportunities to reflect on their educational practices and progress during their studies. It is not enough for students to learn specific information; instead, they must continually monitor their self-learning and modify it to achieve meta-

cognition (i.e., become aware of and recognise their *own* personal learning styles and processes). The authors were convinced that engaging in and journaling about debates would aid in this pedagogical goal.

Beyond debating, the authors recognised that teaching from a modern point of view employs a wide range of instructional methods that respect the inquiry process. It is not an authoritarian education, in which faculty members monopolise most of the time. Instead, an inquiry approach makes postgraduate students the focus of the educational process. Learner-focused, active-learning pedagogical approaches let students access information and create new knowledge (internalised) on their own through collaborative learning, problem solving, conceptual mapping, modeling, thinking aloud, and project-based research.

Finally, upon long and deep reflection, the authors deduced that employing the debate learning strategy might be a very effective way to instil this collection of cognitive-changing skills and personal predispositions in Saudi female graduate students. Their conviction of the merit of debating as an instructional tool in their context was validated upon completion of a thorough review of related literature. With this support from the literature, and after orienting her postgraduate students to this learning strategy, the lead author gave students the chance to experience and journal about two debates.

### **Participants' experience with the debate strategy**

The second data point for this study was the participants' reflections on the debate process gleaned from their journal entries. The researchers parcelled these data into five categories used to organise the presentation of findings: the essence of a debate, special skill sets required, learner benefits, learner challenges, and lessons learned as novice debaters. Per reporting requirements for a content analysis, a combination of sentences, clauses, and phrases was used as evidence of proposed findings (Krippendorff, 2013).

#### **Essence of debates**

Several participants described debate as an art form. To illustrate, G said, "debate is an art that shows the backgrounds and cultures of the debate." Tied closely with the debate process, HA said that "listening is an art that not everyone can master." AB suggested that a debate is "a grouping of individuals who possess several socio-linguistic intellectual skills." G believed that "the beautiful thing about a debate is it lets you discuss ideas and thoughts without taking things personally." She further suggested that "debating serves as a good mental exercise enriching the use of strategy." AB said debates "must be governed by a set of rules." OP agreed, positing that postgraduate students engaged in debate must "respect time limits." GM characterised the essence of a debate as an oxymoron. It is "interesting and thorny." G said, "it is fun!"

### **Special skill sets**

Some participants identified particular skill sets required to debate effectively, which is not the same thing as identifying benefits, which do overlap somewhat. In effect, participants saw some skills sets as ‘must have’ to debate while benefits were viewed as positive outcomes of debating. AB suggested that “the success of the debate strategy depends on effective communication between groups.” NG agreed that “debates are about managing dialogues.” OP also mentioned the requirement of being “able to dialogue” and added that postgraduate students must especially know how to “express an opinion in a brief and useful way.” G similarly recognised the need for people to have “dialogue-making skills” and further noted that “people need practice to refute arguments. They need to learn to use the elements of assertion, explanation and evidence as well as listening skills.”

### **Learner benefits**

After the debate experience, HA explained that

Debating trains and highlights the importance of listening as one way to position oneself as a debater. It reveals the strengths of one’s argument and enables the debater to have the opportunity to detect the weaknesses as well as strengths of an argument.

G added that

The debate motivates people to acquire new scientific knowledge and skills. It also promotes people’s ability to think critically, make analysis, present arguments and evidence, and use them in making responses. Furthermore, it helps people develop public speaking skills intuitively and accept differences in opinions.

NG also believed that debating was very beneficial to postgraduate students. She said benefits

... include enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem and motivating learners to search for information and acquire scientific knowledge and skills, develop their ability to build and organize ideas and think critically. Also, it helps learners develop the skills of scientific analysis and note-taking and presenting arguments and evidence. Finally, it enables debaters to work with peers and develop teamwork skills.

Sarah took a more expansive approach, claiming that the debate strategy

... helps learners develop many of the skills they will need in this century. They are enabled to ‘learn for life,’ because they experience team working, presenting arguments, making counterarguments, and supporting arguments with evidence.

OP also took a broader perspective, adding that

Debating strengthened many important [inclusive skills that postgraduate] graduate students must learn ... including avoiding racism, respecting all religions and sects and not linking them to accepting or rejecting an idea.

OP further acknowledged the debate strategy as one of the best ways to “respect the other party by accepting differences in opinions.” G concurred that debating helps postgraduate students “accept differences in opinions.”

### **Learner challenges**

HA identified a key challenge – that of not interrupting the speaker while following their argument. She said

I would like to clarify that the desire to respond to any statement or argument mentioned by the opposing party requires the first party to follow its argument and support it with evidence, published studies or quotes from literature and to understand that the response does not stem from one’s subjective opinions.”

NA also struggled with this aspect of debating

I was listening to each dialogue in more depth, so that I could respond with support or opposition. I tried to listen ... to be the critic and thinker and link their opinions and ideas to my personal opinion.

RH decided that one of the key “challenges that debaters had to face was contesting in a debate for the first time.” This was a new learning strategy for most of the participants. RG concurred, stating that “the debate was, in my view, unique and out of the ordinary.” NG admitted that “the use of the debate strategy was new and beneficial to me.”

### **Lessons learnt**

Finally, some participants spoke of key takeaways from the debate process. As noted, G said “it was fun!” with the exclamation mark intimating that this enjoyment was unexpected. RG too was surprised that “the debate was interesting, and I congratulated the winning team.” Sarah learned that “the debater may change or modify his/her opinion throughout the debate process.”

OP admitted that before this learning experience,

I was a passive listener. [The debating experience has taught me that it] is one of the best strategies for developing listening skills. ... I also learned that any written or published information must be based on evidence. Clear scientific support is needed to refute an argument.

After experiencing the debate learning strategy as a postgraduate student, GM was convinced that “the entire educational process [in Saudi higher education] needs to be reformed and redeveloped thoroughly.”

### **Discussion and implications**

As in previous research (Park et al., 2011), university study participants herein appeared to enjoy and benefit from the debate learning strategy despite unfamiliarity with this

instructional method in their university experience. This finding may be partially attributed to the practice of debate being a part of Arabian heritage (Al-Hajory, 2019; Paret, 2012) a suggestion somewhat mitigated by the reality that Saudi higher education tends to be teacher-centred, not learner-centred (researchers' personal experience). Active learning with all its benefits (Silberman, 1996) is not common in the KSA. In a telling comment, after experiencing the debate, GM said that the KSA's "entire educational process needs to be reformed and redeveloped thoroughly."

More likely, participants enjoyed the debate strategy because they learned – they were truly able to articulate a rich array of learner benefits gained from debating controversial issues (i.e., distance education and educational reform in the KSA). They reported that debating reinforced key cognitive skills: importance of listening (Ahmed, 2013; Jiménez et al., 2011; Martens, 2007); conducting and reporting research (Puchot, 2002; Williams, 2010); developing, judging and expressing reasoned opinions and arguments (Wendler et al., 2010; Yang & Rusli, 2012); thinking critically (Minch, 2010; Puchot, 2002; Williams 2010); critically analysing and passing judgement on information sources (Lustigová, 2011; Scotece, 2012); and engaging in discussion and dialogue with peers (Kennedy, 2007; UNESCO, 2012).

Study participants truly appeared to experience cognitive changes and advancements (Miller, 2002; Rutten & Soetaert, 2015) evident in their reference to being able to think critically, reason, form convincing arguments, and refute the opposition with valid evidence. Debates help learners on both the cognitive and personal levels (Jiménez et al., 2011). Regarding the latter, participants said debating enhanced their self-confidence and self-esteem for expressing their opinions (Minch, 2010); motivated them to want to learn (Scott, 2008, Snider, 2011; Wendler et al., 2010); sensitised them to the importance of learning for life so they can assume responsibilities (Ahmed, 2013; Al- Banna et al., 2016; Roucan-Kane & Wolfskill, 2012); affirmed the benefits from team work (Mahmood et al., 2011); and reinforced the need to respect others and their ideas and accept differences of opinions (Snider, 2011; Yang & Rusli, 2012).

These same findings also affirm the importance of the university's role in students' intellectual growth and development as individuals as well as Saudi universities' new role of producing graduates who can serve societal goals and contribute to KSA's transitional economy (KSA, 2016).

Findings further confirmed what the literature says about the debate strategy. As an active learning instructional approach (Silberman, 1996), study participants gained an appreciation for both the key role of higher order thinking skills and the need to be able to create new knowledge to defend their arguments instead of just amassing and regurgitating instructor-proffered information (Fulford, 2016) or letting someone else interpret the situation for them (Nicholls & Adolphus, 2003) – that is, deep learning. One participant actually said that she had started out as "a passive learner" but did not feel this way when the debate was over.

Furthermore, the researchers' deep conviction that postgraduate programs will benefit students most if university instructors intentionally create learning environments that foster higher order thinking skills was validated (Walker et al., 2008; Wendler et al., 2010). Using the debate strategy seemed to positively resonate with Saudi female postgraduate students, despite being unfamiliar with it beforehand.

Although not many participants expressly said they gained new knowledge from debating, as is the norm (Doody & Condon, 2012; Najafi et al., 2016), this finding *was* latent in the data. To illustrate, G said that debating "motivates people to acquire new ... knowledge", implying that new knowledge was generated. Future research around the use of the debate strategy with Saudi female postgraduate students should explore how they differentiate between *information* (external to the brain) and *knowledge*, which is internal. Without this distinction, learners could erroneously assume that gathering information from various sources to prepare for the debate is the same thing as creating new knowledge. For information to become knowledge, learners must make it their own and meld it with their existing mental schema to effect cognitive change. Miller (2002) explained that changes in cognition (knowing) necessitates an appreciation for the principles of intelligence and learning so the mind can change. In that case, new information is not enough.

Several insightful participants described debate as an *art form* as did Al-Hajory (2019) and Paret (2012). The term *art form* refers to the elements of art (i.e., things that help the artist communicate – canvas, paint pallet, brush, paint) that have nothing to do with how people receive or interpret the final work of art (Monelle, 1992). This definition implies that debates, which depend on such elements as words, logic and rhetoric, can constitute an art form when they are used to create persuasive arguments thereby augmenting one's own and others' knowledge base about an issue.

Additionally, comments posted at the Debate.org site explained that art is the "creative power used to make something" (Cuccinelli, n.d.). If a person creates something based on facts, statistics and hard evidence, it is simply a discussion. But if that person uses reason and argument, logic and rhetoric, and intelligence and creativity to support and express their opinions, debate then becomes "an art form" (Cuccinelli, n.d.). Future research could explore Saudi female postgraduate students' views of the nature of debate. Their perceptions of it as just a discussion and conversation versus a form of knowledge creation through creative argumentation may impact their acceptance of it as a learning strategy.

Following another semantic thread, study participants tended to use the word *dialogue* when explaining special skill sets needed to debate, not seeming to appreciate the difference between the two learning processes (Jiménez et al., 2011). For them, dialogue meant a conversation, but dialogue as a learning strategy refers to something else. Eschewing opposing teams where someone must lose, dialogue instead involves collaborative, inclusive meaning making where all voices count; everyone wins (Jones, 2007). An interesting future research trajectory would be to facilitate Saudi female postgraduate students being able to experience both debate and dialogue and then have them compare the two experiences.

On a final discussion point, the researchers had earlier observed that many Saudi female postgraduate students did not enjoy public speaking. On an affirmative note, one participant expressly stated that debating “*helps people develop public speaking skills intuitively.*” This sentiment implies a realisation that such insights will be gained through ‘osmosis’, which is “the gradual, often unconscious absorption of knowledge or ideas through continual exposure rather than deliberate learning” (McGregor, 2018, p. 3). If postgraduate students engage in debates, they will become more comfortable speaking in public regardless of the venue; it is not just limited to speaking to opponents in a closed event.

As anticipated by the researchers in their reflections, it appears that the use of debates will allow postgraduate students to become more comfortable with speaking in public forums and, by association, feel more at ease in professional settings including graduate school. This comfort in an academic setting will augment both postgraduate learning and participation in public debates about controversial social, political, educational, and economic issues (Wendler et al., 2010). However, this can only occur if university instructors intentionally include active learning strategies like debates in their pedagogical repertoire (Najafi et al., 2016; Silberman, 1996).

### **Limitations**

As with any qualitative exploratory study, findings cannot be generalised to the broader population, but they serve the critical role of providing comprehensive, preliminary understandings of a phenomenon and pave the way for future work (Dudovskiy, 2018). Researchers are encouraged to augment this exploratory study with both a more significant female sample frame and the inclusion of male students (who are taught separately in segregated classrooms or universities in the KSA). A gendered comparative study would also be beneficial in gender-segregated KSA. All students strive for intellectual growth and development regardless of sex or gendered role expectations.

### **Conclusions**

As anticipated by previous researchers (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013) and the authors in their reflections, the debate learning strategy enriched the study participants’ learning experience. This inaugural Saudi exploratory study revealed that debating resonated positively with female postgraduate students, who consequently benefitted from empowerment (i.e., self-confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, and self-determination). They gained an appreciation for the imperative of honing their higher order thinking skills with the potential outcome that success with one active learning intervention may predispose them to ask for more from their university.

The findings are timely and meaningful, because the KSA’s (2016) national development plan (*Vision 2030*) depends on a well-educated populace including women. Newly minted postgraduates must know how to stand up proficiently and effectively for their reasoned positions on political, societal, economic, and educational issues. Educational inquiry-based learning strategies (including debates) prepare women postgraduates for future roles

in Saudi society, because they graduate with enhanced intellectual growth and development, self-confidence, and self-esteem. With this understanding, curriculum planners and university instructors can design learning interventions that teach critical thinking, sound reasoning, and argumentation. This benchmark study contributes to that pedagogical effort.

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**Please cite as:** Alghamdi Hamdan, A. K. & Aldossari, A. T. (2021). Debate learning strategy in female postgraduate school: A Saudi case study. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(2), 327-347. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/alghamdi-hamdan.pdf>