

# 11 International E-mail Debate

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For the past four years at the University of Rhode Island, small groups of American students have had the opportunity to use e-mail to formally debate a variety of topics with peer groups in universities in England, Ireland, Korea, Finland, the Netherlands, India, and other countries. This project, called International E-mail Debate, began with efforts of the University of Rhode Island's College of Business to "globalize" their curriculum, but it quickly evolved into a writing-intensive, small-group project that could be part of any class. In fact, International E-mail Debate has proven to be a particularly exciting way to introduce formal, highly structured writing tasks into any class. Furthermore, International E-mail Debate poses interesting challenges to the current theoretical approaches of writing across the curriculum, and it questions whether or not a fairly deliberative use of e-mail can prompt the same kinds of spontaneity, democratization, creativity, or resistance as other uses of e-mail. The outcome of the University of Rhode Island's three-year test effort with International E-mail Debate suggests that highly focused, formal, topical writing should have a strong place in writing across the curriculum theory and practice, especially when joined with international e-mail communication.

## **International E-mail Debate Description**

International E-mail Debate is a semester-long, collaborative writing project in which students debate with their counterparts in another country about topics related to their classwork. For example, during URI's three-year pilot test, 1992–1995, students majoring in management information systems at the University of Rhode Island debated with students from the University of Bilkent, Turkey, about whether or not the *United States would long retain world leadership in the semiconductor industry*. As another example, students majoring in business management debated with students from the Technical University, Braunschweig, Germany, about whether or not corporate sponsorship of nonprofit events (such

as McDonald's sponsorship of the 1996 Olympic games) improves a firm's success. These students researched and wrote in depth about themes they viewed as important to their professional careers, and the best of these topics were deepened by the international perspective afforded through the e-mail exchanges with students from another culture.

These electronic exchanges were conducted in English and followed the rules of formal collegiate debate. Typically, within classes at each site, groups of three to five students formed into debate teams, and then in response to a debate resolution, each team researched, wrote, and sent via e-mail three long position papers to their international peers. First, each team sent to the other team an opening position or "constructive" essay that either supported or opposed the debate resolution. Next, each team closely read their opponents' constructive essay and responded with the second debate document, the "refutation" essay. Finally, each team wrote the third document, their "rebuttal" or reconstruction of their original position, one that also accounted for criticisms and responses received during the refutation. Along the way, each team also produced an "executive summary" of their position and a list of the definitions of key terms in the debate.

### **General Results of the Three-Year Test Period**

During the three-year test period, which was sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the project leaders monitored the instructors' plans and procedures, the students' writing, and the students' overall responses. These sources of information, which are elaborated below, helped us to understand much of the excitement and many of the difficulties specific to International E-mail Debate. By way of preview, on the positive side, students were excited as well as a little intimidated by the prospect of communicating with peers in foreign countries, and during the debates students wrote extensively and deeply on their debate positions. The more problematic side of International E-mail Debate emerged later in the debate process, when some teams responded rudely and insultingly to their peers' arguments, an occurrence in keeping with others' experience with e-mail communications and some forms of argumentation (Frey 1990; Hawisher and Moran 1993, 631, 634).

The typical faculty experience during the pilot study was most eloquently summarized by Albert Della Bitta, professor of marketing, whose class debated with a team from the Manchester, England, School of Management on the resolution "The nature of marketing research needs to change little across Western cultures in order to be successful." In general, and typical of other instructors' experiences, Della Bitta found that his students participated enthusiastically and wrote extensively, and some developed a sustained interest in other cultures. "The success story of the project," says Della Bitta, "is seen in one student who had no international awareness at the beginning of the class. After the

project she started to communicate with other international students and then she spent a year in Israel.” He also found that throughout the debate his students’ assumptions about life in England were corrected, such as when the Manchester students informed the URI students that people in England do not need to shop every day for fresh food or that many Britons do not view themselves as European in culture or lifestyle. On the other hand, Della Bitta noted that while his students wrote a lot for the debate exchanges, they did not necessarily deepen their knowledge of marketing as a discipline. “Next time, I would be much more careful about the topic of the debate, limiting it to a resolution that is really variable in consumer behavior and, in that way, helping students learn more about marketing.”

Della Bitta’s report of the students’ experiences is confirmed by the students’ own responses. Chai Kim, professor of management information systems, frequently solicited written feedback from his URI students and from the students on the opposing team. Most of the responses confirm the students’ excitement noted by Della Bitta:

This [International E-mail Debate] is a great idea, much more fun than a term paper. In fact, I think I got more out of the research and communications required for this project than I would have by any other means (paper, studying for test, case study, etc.). And my teammates were great about sharing the work and meeting when necessary. All in all, it was fun. (An American student)

First of all, debating with a counterpart was enthusiastic. I learn a lot from that study. . . . We spent weeks making research, then eliminating unnecessary documents. We spent more weeks reading and summarizing, finding statistical evidence. Through this process I learn to differentiate related issues from unrelated ones. Also I learn how to cooperate with group members efficiently. This project leaves me self-confident. . . . (A Turkish student)

Not every student gave blanket approval, however. Some of the students’ criticisms confirmed the importance of carefully selecting topics for the debates:

Although the concept is excellent, I do not think that we received their true views on the subject we were debating. . . . This program would work more effectively if the debate were over topics which the two countries were passionate about. Americans may be passionate about NAFTA, but most Turkish students are not. This format would be superb if we were debating Israeli students on the issue of Israeli-Palestine territorial issues, etc. . . . We should have debated the Mexican students on the NAFTA issue. (An American student)

This American student’s insight about the importance of choosing topics that are under debate by real people around the world is consonant with the conclusions of Della Bitta and other instructors.

This commentary from participating faculty and students was further confirmed and elaborated in the observations and data gathered by project leaders. The leaders noted that the students' writing exhibited three striking outcomes: the amount of writing was impressive; the attention to evidentiary material in the debate documents was notable; and the quality of peer critique was high.

One of the most noticeable outcomes of the pilot test was the high amount of writing. During International E-mail Debate, the debate teams produced at minimum about thirty pages of text and, more typically, upwards of sixty pages. This level of production compares favorably with writing in other classes at the University of Rhode Island. Two Faculty Senate surveys have shown that in lower level courses students write on average from zero to about fifteen pages, and in upper level courses from zero to about thirty pages. Classes engaging in International E-mail Debate easily outstrip this amount of writing while remaining enthusiastic about the project. Furthermore, this high amount of writing was also produced by the student teams abroad, all of whose English language ability was notably well developed and whose faculty were often looking for an opportunity for English language practice.

The second positive outcome concerned the highly focused, deeply elaborated style of writing prompted by the collegiate debate format. International E-mail Debate retains all of the conditions of formal collegiate debate. Thus, the topics are chosen ahead of time by the faculty and are stated in the form of resolutions; for example, "Resolved: Sponsorship can improve a firm's success"; or, "Resolved: Direct foreign investment in American technology should continue without restraint." Each team assumed either an affirmative or negative stance toward the resolution. From a writing perspective, this means that a team's central focus or thesis statement is provided for them, and the challenges for the team are to gather evidence and reasons to support that thesis and to elaborate each supporting idea with more evidence and reasoning as the debate becomes increasingly refined. For the most part, during the pilot test students rose nicely to these challenges, especially during the constructive portion of the debate, when most teams usually piled up numerous reasons to support their stance. In fact, in the debate about direct foreign investment in American technology, the affirmative team supplied at least nineteen reasons to support their stance that unrestricted foreign investment is a good idea. Most of the supporting ideas were, in turn, supported by references to journal articles, expert testimony, or examples from the business world. By and large, all of the teams researched their topics extensively and produced a highly focused, deeply elaborated constructive essay in a relatively short period of time.

The third noteworthy result of the pilot study related to the thinking and writing prompted by the refutation portion of the debates. During refutation, each team has a chance to read their opponents' constructive essay and to write an essay which points out the weaknesses, inconsistencies, and errors in their

opponents' argument. The teams routinely pointed to the inadequacy of examples or statistics, bias in supposedly authoritative testimony, out-of-date research, and illogical chains of reasoning. By offering these kinds of responses about content and argumentation, the teams were also pointing out weaknesses in writing and providing good peer criticism which could be used to guide the rebuilding of a position during rebuttal. For example, in the debate about whether or not marketing techniques may be standardized across Western countries, the team against the resolution, the Turkish team, accurately critiques the affirmative team's logic:

The grouping of [Western] countries into broad categories, based on studies by Szymonshi et al. (1993) and by Huszagh et al. (1982), does not lead to the implication that marketing research can be standardized in those countries. . . . the consumer price index and unemployment figures vary significantly from country to country. [Data follows in the passage.] Therefore the [affirmative team's] categories contain countries which have wide variations and must be researched on an individual basis . . . before any market research can go ahead. Using standardized techniques on the basis of "low-risk" categorization glosses over the cultural differences which exist whether or not there are economic similarities or differences. . . . These include differences in linguistics, religion, geography, climate, communication and distribution networks, legislation, customs and many others.

Here the Turkish team is accurately pointing out the inadequate and incomplete evidence in the URI team's affirmative constructive. This is good peer criticism. A second example comes from the debate on the most desirable kind of corporate structure—should corporate ownership be separate from corporate management? The team from the Netherlands refutes several points made by the URI team. Notice that in these excerpts, the students point to places where the logic and the writing fail to establish a strong connection between the evidence and the supporting reasons:

There exists no relevant relationship between this [summary of a journal article] and the resolution. The research does not support the argument that the most desirable corporate structure is one in which ownership is separated from control. . . . The argument [that firms which make the correct decisions prosper and firms which do not make the correct decisions are disciplined] is not restricted to a system of separate control and ownership. An owner-controlled corporate structure likewise allows the firms which make the correct decisions to prosper and the firms which do not make the correct decisions to be disciplined. The affirmative team does not state any supportive evidence for this argument. There is no reason to believe that a corporation with separate control and ownership will recover more quickly from market declines and crashes than an owner-controlled corporation.

In these passages the writers have again provided good peer criticism. They have pointed out exactly where the original text needs more evidence, more

explanation, and improved coherence. If the other team is able to “listen” to this peer criticism and revise the argument with this critique in mind, they could not only rebut the refutation but rebuild their original argument into the strongest possible case. Clearly, International E-mail Debate’s sequence of construction, refutation, and rebuttal formalizes the writerly tasks of drafting and revision while keeping the process exciting.

These positive outcomes prompted many of the instructors to be satisfied with the project. Other instructors, however, addressed themselves to problems that surfaced most clearly during the refutation and rebuttal portions of the debate project, problems which raised core issues about argumentation and about writing for e-mail. During the test period, some students had a hard time accepting the opposition’s refutation as valid peer criticism. Instead, they saw the refutation essay as their opponent’s attempt solely to discredit and destroy their argument. Also, some students misunderstood the nature of rebuttal, taking it instead as an opportunity for continued attack against the opposing team. Here is a sequence from the negative team’s rebuttal portion in the debate about standardized marketing research among Western cultures (*italics mine*):

Our opponents claim that “The statement the con team presented deals with the researcher (the person) not the nature of marketing research which is the subject being debated.” *Our opponents seem to be laboring under the ridiculous assumption* that the market researcher is not involved in the process of marketing. They then proceed to agree with our argument by saying, “A researcher cannot assume things about the population being researched.” . . . *Our opponents appear not to understand* one of the fundamental purposes of marketing research, which is to inform the researcher about consumer behavior and attitudes. . . . *Our opponents have failed to understand a vital function* of marketing research. [Our opponents write] that one of the statistics we used was thirteen years old and that this is therefore irrelevant. *This objection is pathetically weak.* . . .

These rebuttal passages, typical of passages from some refutation and rebuttal essays, resemble the e-mail phenomenon of *flaming* in their insulting tone and personalized attack. In fact, in the original debate just sampled the ad hominem objections and flaming served as the rebuttal, since the negative team merely added to these attacks by repeating some unimpressive material from their original constructive rather than rebuilding their case.

Several instructors in the project were distressed at these outbursts, and during a three-day face-to-face faculty conference held in Braunschweig, Germany, in 1994, they set about explaining this problem to themselves, finally viewing its occurrence as due partly to the students’ lack of skill with argumentation and partly to the tendency toward flaming on e-mail (providing examples from their own electronic discussion lists!). During these discussions, some instructors attributed such outbursts to the increasingly competitive aspect of the debate process, a competition which they found to become a little more intense with

each document exchange. They also agreed with composition specialist Olivia Frey (1990, 511 ff.), who notes that even in written debate of academic journals, where authors concentrate on establishing a set of apparently incontestable principles buttressed by supposedly sound reasoning and evidence, they are also tempted to discredit those who espouse opposing principles. International E-mail Debate faculty agreed that these ad hominem tendencies exacerbated the possibility of any kind of e-mail discussion to erupt into flaming. Thus, the pilot study faculty also agreed with Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran's explanation (1993, 631, 634) that the electronic environment may encourage such outbursts because e-mail conversations offer the spontaneity of a conversation while providing a degree of protective anonymity and distance; thus, e-mail messages are frequently critical and confrontational.

Given these problems, many of the faculty engaged in the International E-mail Debate project have now made adjustments to their International E-mail Debate instruction and assignments as well as to their own views of the purpose of debate. The simplest changes some instructors have adopted is to limit the length of the essays and to choose debate topics extremely carefully, warning students to be cautious and polite in their exchanges. Some instructors now also include a special lesson on the refutation essay and the rebuttal essay, helping students to see the refutation essay as a form of peer criticism, and urging students to use the critique as a prompt for improved writing, logic, and evidence in their rebuttal essay. Most interestingly, however, a few instructors are teaching their students that debate is not about winning (or not solely about winning). In these instructors' view, *International E-mail Debate* is valuable because it challenges students to explain the specific cultural conditions and the contexts which make their particular claims, evidence, or appeals more compelling. These instructors select debate topics that are widely and currently debated in the discipline. Students are then challenged to construct a particular argumentative thread to support their stance *and* to explain why, among the many possibilities, that thread seems most plausible to them. In this way International E-mail Debate is transformed from a pro/con exercise in argumentation to a rhetorical problem in cross-cultural communication with sophisticated applications to topics currently under debate in any discipline.

### **Transportability to Other Institutions**

International E-mail Debate originated at URI, but it is easily transported to other institutions. First, the technology requirements are not complex: International E-mail Debate simply requires that each team have access to a computer with a modem and an e-mail address. Second, the major phases of the project follow the widely known sequence of formal collegiate debate. Third, students are usually very receptive to the prospect of communicating with students in

other countries and welcome the project to their classes. But even with these features, International E-mail Debate will be more successful if project leaders at other institutions take note of a few important lessons from URI's pilot study.

A first lesson that emerged was that contact with faculty at universities around the world can probably be developed by networking among faculty at one's own campus. For example, during the three-year pilot study, the faculty abroad whose business classes participated in the three-year pilot study were recruited through the personal contacts of Chai Kim. In fact, Kim remains as a primary source at URI for technical information about International E-mail Debate and its applications to business courses ([chaikim@uriacc.uri.edu](mailto:chaikim@uriacc.uri.edu); see also <http://www.cba.uri.edu/faculty/kim/globalclass.html>). Several sources at the University of Rhode Island have also proven helpful in establishing other contacts abroad and in pursuing e-mail projects. Faculty in a variety of the foreign languages and in international study areas (such as business, law, and foreign relations) helped establish contact with institutions and with individual faculty abroad, and faculty in communications studies helped with debate procedures and provided useful suggestions for cross-cultural communications.

Another lesson from URI's pilot study pertains to topic selection. Faculty must attend to topic selection just after they have made contact with each other and have agreed to try International E-mail Debate in their classes. Faculty would do well to select topics and debate resolutions that are of current disciplinary interest but that are not too difficult for students to understand fairly quickly since the debate process is so fast-paced. Furthermore, the topics should not be divided into rigid oppositions. Instead they should invite the teams to develop one of many possible positions on the resolution. For example, instead of the either/or resolution, "Direct foreign investment in American technology is good and should continue unrestrained," the more open-ended yet debatable resolution might be, "When and under what conditions is foreign investment beneficial to the development of a country's technology?" Such attention to topic selection will help ensure that the debates are compelling to students and faculty, and do not degenerate into a flame war.

A third lesson from the pilot study involves cautionary words about writing for debate combined with writing for e-mail. Faculty at URI learned that the electronic debate forum can provoke the kind of inflammatory reactions that are counter to the best goals of International E-mail Debate. To counter this tendency, student teams should be encouraged to use e-mail to communicate informally throughout the debate. Faculty must also help students understand that the refutation essay is an opportunity for polite peer criticism and that the rebuttal essay provides an opportunity to rebuild a position while recognizing the validity of others' points of view. This kind of instruction helps students to understand the constructed nature of each debate position and to appreciate the differences of perspective rooted in divergent cultural experience.



### Theoretical Challenges

These lessons from URI's pilot study suggest that the rhetorical, social, and topical aspects of International E-mail Debate make it a particularly appealing writing-across-the-curriculum and e-mail activity. The challenge of persuading readers in another country about a truly debatable issue helps students to understand the constructed nature of most chains of argument and the rhetorical nature of most stances. International E-mail Debate helps students recognize what Don H. Bialostosky calls an "authentically situated voice" (1991, 17). As Bialostosky explains, students should wrestle with the formal discourses of academic disciplines, not because such writing leads them to discover who they are, but because the confrontation with new, difficult, even foreign-sounding languages holds these discourses at a distance, underscoring that each discipline offers a particular, constructed perspective and pattern of expression. He continues:

As part of a college education designed to initiate students into reflexive use of these authoritative languages, the study of college writing should not permit students to retreat from the challenges presented by these demanding languages to languages with which they are already comfortable or to conform without struggle to the new academic languages. It is more important to cultivate students' understanding of their ambivalent situations and to validate their struggles to remake themselves and the languages imposed on them. If they see that they do not possess a finished authentic identity and an authentic language, which the new alien languages threaten from without, they may also see that the new languages do not promise to provide such an identity but only offer new resources for seeing and saying. (1991, 17)

When students engage in International E-mail Debate they are, indeed, struggling with authoritative languages. They contend with topics that have an immediate disciplinary urgency, and they observe specific representations of that topic as written by authors who are presenting themselves to particular audiences in specific ways, and whose writing has disciplinary consequences. International E-mail Debate challenges students to appropriate a particular thread among those representations and to explain to an audience in a different cultural setting the conditions and the context which make that construction of the topic more compelling.

Thus, a project like International E-mail Debate is best understood from a social, rhetorical view of writing. Instead of private, exploratory, or personal writing, some writing across the curriculum activities ought to be framed by topic, from deep within the discipline, and they should have as their goal helping students to become active users of disciplinary discourse while also helping students to become critically aware of the constructed natures of these endeavors.

ors. Projects like International E-mail Debate also challenge proponents of computers in composition to acknowledge that some formal writing activities with e-mail, especially those that help students develop an authentically situated voice, may also be framed so as to contribute to a community-engaging, democratic electronic environment.

### **Future Prospects**

International E-mail Debate has proven to be a very appealing project at URI with interesting variations emerging each semester, suggesting interesting prospects for the future. Some variations occur on a class-by-class level and some occur at the program level. For example, some instructors are expanding the role of technology in the debate process. Della Bitta plans to have teams explore the World Wide Web for data and other information to support their debate positions, and another instructor has proposed holding a MOO as part of the debate experience. Thus, through these instructors' various uses of technology, each class project is becoming more individualized, yet each is still within the identifiable boundaries of International E-mail Debate.

At the same time a recent collaboration between Chai Kim and Norbert Mundorf, professor of communication studies, has led to a new, stand-alone course on International E-mail Debate which allows students to conduct their debates while also studying problems in cross-cultural communications. Not only are the colleges of both departments pleased with the collaboration, but the cross-disciplinary emphasis may shape International E-mail Debate projects in the future, throwing more of an emphasis on successful communication while highlighting the differences and difficulties that may be ascribed to culture. We surmise that as other disciplines will become engaged, new variations will emerge and add even more facets to International E-mail Debate.

Finally, at URI writing across the curriculum and International E-mail Debate will continue to drive and shape each other. Since students in any course using International E-mail Debate tend to write more than in other courses, we help promote and extend the use of International E-mail Debate across campus. In some classes, therefore, a schedule of drafting and revising is as important to the project as is the sequence of constructive-refutation-rebuttal. On the other hand, because International E-mail Debate is a formal writing project, we find ourselves broadening our philosophical bases from an expressivist-process orientation to include more rhetorical, social, and disciplinary concerns. We are nurturing this interaction, in particular. It seems to us that as International E-mail Debate continues to develop, we will, too.

## Notes

Computer technology: the University of Rhode Island provided IBM Model 55 computers for the project during the three year pilot study, 1992–1995. The debate documents were composed using Microsoft Word for Windows 2.0. Eudora was used for all e-mail transmissions.

E-mail addresses and URLs for International E-mail Debate: For technical information about International E-mail Debate and its applications to business courses, contact Chai Kim, professor of management information systems: [chaikim@uriacc.uri.edu](mailto:chaikim@uriacc.uri.edu); see also <http://www.cba.uri.edu/faculty/kim/globalclass.html>. For information on collegiate debate and on the adaptation of collegiate debate to International E-mail Debate, contact Stephen Wood, professor of communication studies: [docwood@uriacc.uri.edu](mailto:docwood@uriacc.uri.edu). For information on problems in cross-cultural communications, contact Guo-Ming Chen, associate professor of communication studies: [cqm101@uriacc.uri.edu](mailto:cqm101@uriacc.uri.edu). For information on writing across the curriculum and International E-mail Debate, contact Linda Shamoon, professor of English: [shamoon@uriacc.uri.edu](mailto:shamoon@uriacc.uri.edu).

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