Improving Communication Skills Through Virtual Discussions

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Abstract This article describes the structure and step-by-step procedure of the virtual discussion conducted between American Universities of Central Asia and Nigeria and Parami University in Myanmar. The article aims to offer multidisciplinary instructors interactive scaffolding activities designed, modified, and implemented to enhance written and oral communication and help students be better prepared for virtual discussions. From observation during the preparations and actual discussions, the scaffolding activities and the virtual discussion foster essential skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity in students. The authors also provide a general evaluation of student performance based on the observations collected via Google Forms and the virtual discussion to demonstrate the effectiveness of the activities.

Keywords: Interactive activities, communication skills, virtual inter-university discussions (VIDS), virtual discussions (VIDS), structure, organization, and procedure of online events.

1. Introduction In light of recent events, with the emergence of generative AI in particular, many professionals in academia have been worried about ChatGPT because of its ability to write annotations and summaries, provide logically organized comparative and analytical short essays, and even write poetry and compose music. Many educators feel that they should take action. In countries such as Italy, China, Iran, and North Korea, Chat GPT is banned as it is considered a tool for plagiarizing.[1] Some faculty rushed to investigate the drawbacks of ChatGPT and teach their students how to use it appropriately, and others merely switched to the old teaching mode, allowing only pens and papers during exams. No matter what we do, we must admit that the world of academia has changed forever and the role of educators as well. Therefore, our purpose as educators is to ask students what they can do themselves, where they can apply the knowledge from AI, and how they resolve daily real-life problems.

On the role of education in the era of AI, contemporary philosopher Yuval Harari argues in his book *21 Lessons in the 21st Century* that "Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity" should form the basis of contemporary education (Harari, 211). In other words, educators should explain where students can apply their critical thinking skills, why it is essential to teach students to set their own goals and help them to achieve them, and finally, provide the arena or real-life situation where students could interact with each other and solve real issues, and if not solve then discuss and talk about real threats and think about peaceful solutions to real problems or conflicts.

It is worth pointing out that there might be another problem educators might face when working with students today; it is the reluctance and apathy of some students to interact with the world, which is the result of low self-esteem and lack of basic skills of oral and written communication (Gaya Tridinanti, 2018). For this reason, one of the activities/tools that can facilitate and stimulate students to scrutinize a target topic, acquire knowledge, practice their writing and speaking skills, and implement their developed faculties in communication is virtual inter-university discussions (VIDS). In this article, they will also be called "virtual discussions" and abbreviated as "VIDS."

To prepare students for the virtual discussion, we gradually involve them in more challenging activities, eventually making them more mature, self-confident, and open to new ideas (McGlynn & Kelly, 2019). In other words, to motivate students to be engaged with the topic students should pick the topic. This year, for instance, we provided six students with thematic topics such as "The Threats of AI on Humanity," "The Violation of Human Rights," and "Contemporary Slavery." We asked students to think of the ones they would like to work with, as the topics can be related to student research papers, majors, or interests. So, in the spring semester of 2023, we shared the following discussion prompts with students: "Scientific evidence can no longer be trusted," "People with tattoos should not be stigmatized," "Amorality in the interest of a government is justifiable," "Feminism is contextual as it is experienced differently everywhere," "Tertiary
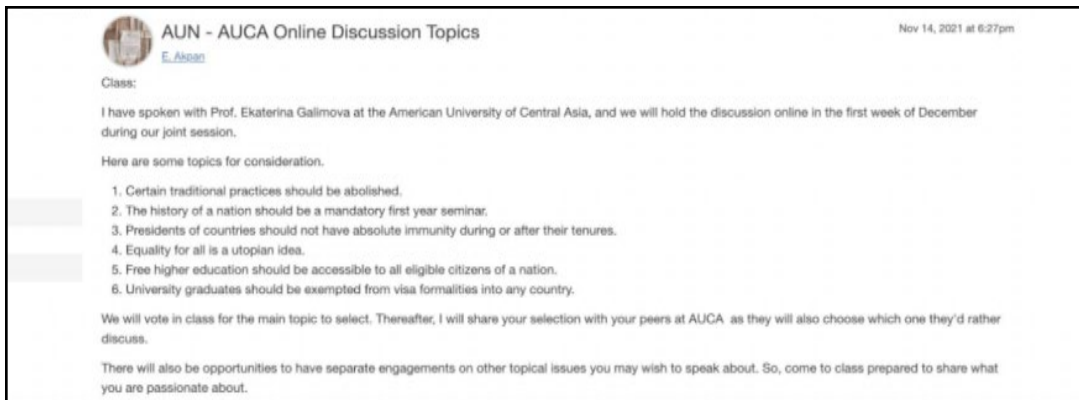

Figure 1. AUCA, AUN, and PARAMI Instructors Shared Six Initial Topics.

institutions should be closed during general elections," "Each continent should have a common currency for the countries in it," and "Partisanship taints democratic governance." Another thing that keeps students engaged is providing students with case studies to help them get used to the environment of both written and oral communication in and outside the class.

Hence, this article aims to present a detailed description of the virtual discussion structure, giving readers a number of the most successful interactive scaffolding writing and oral activities based on our observations and evaluations of students, along with Google Forms analysis of post discussion surveys. We also encourage educators from other universities to join and engage in future virtual discussions.

2. The Structure of the Virtual Discussion

2.1. The Format The virtual discussion is a student-centered activity conducted via online platforms like Zoom, Skype, Cisco WebEx, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and TeamViewer. The VIDS can have at least three formats, i.e., the first format may have only one topic for the discussion (General Discussion). The general discussion format allows students to pick one target topic, scrutinize it for two or three weeks, and discuss it for up to two hours maximum during the virtual discussion. The second format may include several topics conducted within breakout rooms on the Zoom platform. Based on our annual surveys, this format is handy for introverted students who struggle to talk in a large group and need more time to overcome this psychological barrier. The VIDS in this format may last two hours as well. The third type of format of the VIDS is a hybrid that comprises both general discussion and breakout room discussions. We assume this format satisfies the needs of both extroverted and introverted students, allowing them to explore multiple topics. Introverted students also jump in to share their opinions with the whole group. Both parts of the hybrid VIDS last for 50 to 60 minutes.

In this article, we shall consider the hybrid format of the VIDS in more detail. The preparation for this activity consists of the following stages:

I. Before the VIDS, instructors (a) select the topic and (b) prepare students for the VIDS with the help of various interactive scaffolding writing and speaking activities.

(a) Selecting the Topic The process of picking a topic is challenging but feasible. It may take place a month before the VIDS actually happen. Within the first week, the university instructors get together via Zoom platform or exchange their topics via emails and select up to ten. The instructors also encourage the students to propose topical issues for discourse. During the second week, instructors introduce the selected topics to students in class or by email and announce the voting process's start and deadline. The voting can take place either with the help of a poll platform or in class. As a result, students at each university should come up with only one topic of their preference, out of six or ten. The instructors share the topics selected and conduct the second voting in their classes. This time, the students pick one out of the three,

Figure 2. Breakout Room Formation.

and the one with the most votes becomes the general discussion's main topic. As we consider the hybrid form of the VIDS, all the topics that get fewer votes are declared to be the topics for breakout rooms.

(b) Preparing students for the VIDS with the help of various interactive scaffolding writing and speaking activities, such as introductory emails/padlet screenshots, long table and round table discussions, debate, and Socratic seminar activities.

To break the ice among the participants so that they could feel comfortable, the instructors sent the list of students and emails to the volunteer who was willing to create minor groups so that the participants could start exchanging introductory emails with their peers from other universities. Each instructor provides guidelines for the introductory emails.

2.1.1.

Level: Intermediate/Advanced

Time required: 5-10 minutes.

Goals: to stimulate students to get acquainted with each other

Materials: Cell phones, laptops with an Internet connection, pencils, pens, copybooks, or other digital devices useful for taking notes.

Preparation: After learning how many students would participate in the virtual discussion, Emilienne Akpan, Director of the Writing Center and faculty of the American University of Nigeria (AUN), made a list of attendees. As there were more American University of Central Asia (AUCA) students, each AUN and Parami University (PARAMI) student could have 2-3 AUCA students. The list of students is spread among the participants and students are encouraged to participate in the activity by writing emails to those in the assigned group. At this stage, students are encouraged to write introductory emails to each other via various media platforms, such as Padlet and LMS emails. Below are the Canvas LMS and Padlet screenshots, where students post their stories about themselves.

Emilienne Akpan provides students with step-by-step instructions concerning details they should mention in their emails and posts on their e-course (Figure 3).

Mia Sasaki, an instructor from Parami University, offered the prompt via Padlet for an icebreaking written activity; the sample of the screenshot is below (Figure 4).

Ekaterina Galimova, a General Education faculty member of AUCA, asked her students to describe three memorable things from a student biography, asking the recipient to guess the false fact at the end of the message. Natural curiosity stimulates students to discern truths from lies.

It is necessary to point out that each student receives individual, face-to-face, or online consultations while preparing for the online event. Besides the primary texts discussed in class, instructors must assist students in locating supplementary materials, such as scholarly articles, documentaries, films, or fictional stories related to the topic. To facilitate students in overcoming psychological barriers, instructors conduct debates on the target subject, for instance, the "Threat of AI to Humanity." It is important to note that teachers should provide guidelines on how students should engage with the materials, including leading questions. For example, while preparing for the VIDS, students are encouraged to take notes and answer the following questions:

- Who is/are the main character(s) in the story/video?

- Where does the action take place?

- What is the main idea of the text or documentary?

- How does the main idea connect with their research paper or video project?

- What is the most shocking episode in the article or movie, and why?

No matter how well the students are prepared on their topic, mutual communication requires knowledge of basic linguistic phrases and expressions to join the discussion smoothly, politely respond to the question, pose implicit questions, or diplomatically express disagreement with opposing views. Studies conducted by Colette Bennett (2023) imply that language learners need to use unfamiliar words or phrases in 17 situations to use them fluently in everyday conversation. To achieve this, language instructors should allow students to use these linguistic tools in various contexts in class and home assignments. Students need some help expressing themselves coherently during class activities, i.e., to remember to use transitional phrases or sentence starters to get involved in the discussion; the instructor can first advise them to practice these language patterns at home. Suppose this does not help or the student is reluctant to do so. In that case, the instructor advises such students to keep a handout like "Transitions" handy during the online event/virtual discussion (see Appendix A, Handout 1).

Below is another example of an interactive scaffolding activity that is helpful for students to improve their reading, listening, and research skills and overcome psychological barriers to develop their public speaking skills. It is called long table discussion and is presented within the Debate Club framework, led by David Register, the director of the Bard Debate Union.
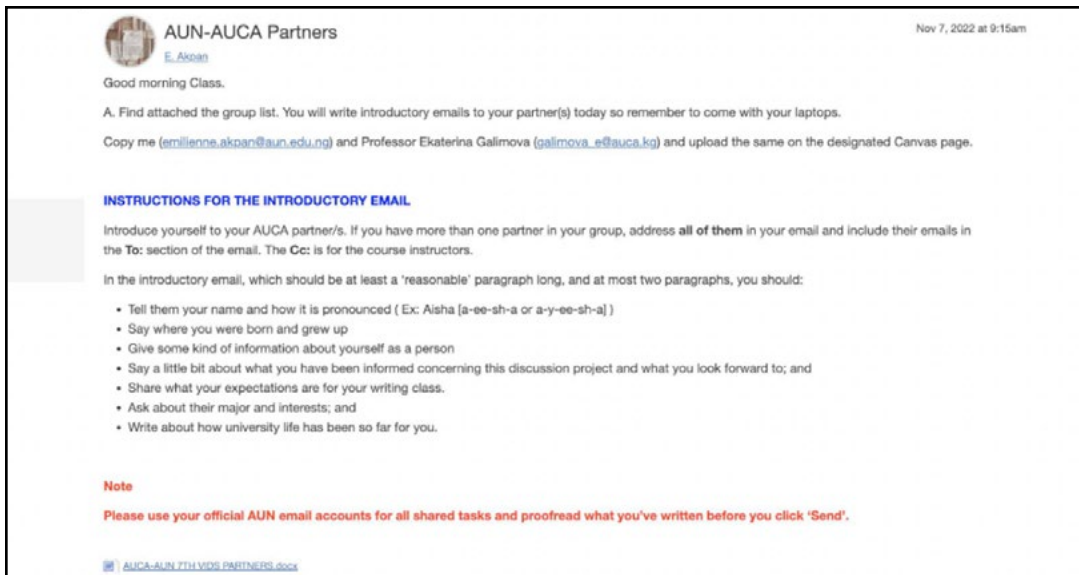
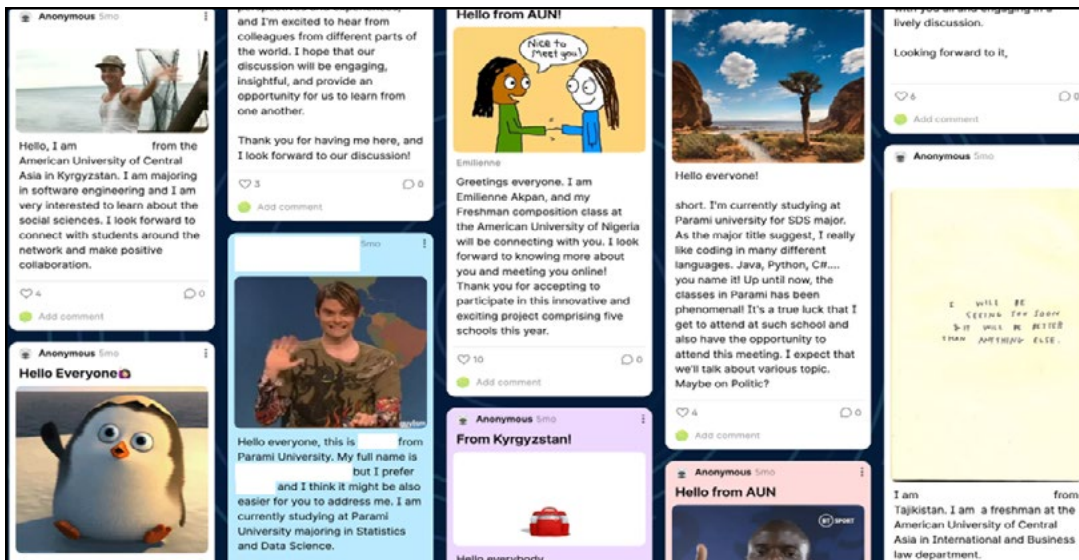**Figure 3.** Sample from Emilienne Akpan's Introductory Email Guidelines.

Figure 4. Padlet page of introductory messages from the 2023 virtual discussion attendees.

2.1.2.

Level: Intermediate/Advanced

Time required: 75 minutes.

Goals: to evolve critical thinking and research skills and improve reading and listening comprehension, interpretation, and note-taking skills.

Materials: Cell phones, laptops with an internet connection, pencils, pens, copybooks, or other digital devices useful for taking notes.

Preparation:

(Option 1 - Impromptu Mode)

1. The instructor declares the proposition on a target topic and ensures it is concise, clear, and provocative.

2. The instructor subdivides students into two groups and asks them to discuss their pros and cons.

3. Students have approximately 30-45 minutes to prepare for the discussion/debates and find arguments for (pro) and against (con) a proposition.

(Option 2 - Prepared Mode)

1. The target topic can be a take-home assignment.

2. The instructor declares the proposition in class, subdivides students into two groups, and asks them to discuss their pros and cons in a group. Students have

10-15 minutes to review and discuss their notes in a group.

3. To motivate students to consider both sides of the premises, the instructor does not announce which team will be either pro or con.

After the students return from their breakout room, where they exchange their opinions, the instructor announces which team will argue for or against the topic. Then, the instructor posts speech/grammar pattern(s) that s/he wants students to improve on in class on the PowerPoint or Interactive Board or writes them down on the Black/White/Interactive board. The students should provide counterarguments to make the activity lively within 10 seconds. The students are allowed to contemplate for only 10 seconds. Unfortunately, if the student is late, s/he is out of the team. The winner is the team that loses the fewest or no team members and successfully reaches the end of the round. Each round may last up to 5 minutes and can end at the instructor's discretion if students do not have arguments or counterarguments to continue.

Procedure:

1. The instructor declares or writes down the topic.

2. Students pull the straw to identify the pro/con team. The one who draws the short straw is the pro-side team.

3. The volunteer or the first speaker from the pro-side team declares their argument and names the next speaker from the opposite team.

4. The second speaker of the con-side team follows the speech pattern below:

> *I hear you are saying that / What you want to say is that... /*
>
> *Yes, that is true* + paraphrasing the previous speaker's argument.
>
> *However/But/Nevertheless/Notwithstanding, I argue/ claim/ state that...* (your counter-argument + evidence/examples/sources) and says the name of the next speaker from the opposite team.

5. Using the same speech pattern, the third speaker introduces their argument and the next speaker from the opposite side. This process goes on until somebody stops or the time is out.

The sample of the long table discussion in action is in Appendix B.

As a follow-up activity, students can be asked to reflect on this assignment and process write about whether it has been hard for them to defend the opposite position and why it is essential nowadays to be able to accept the opponent's views, where this skill can be applied in everyday life.

Since the virtual inter-university discussion is entirely student-centered, students volunteer to be discussion leaders or hosts. In this case, the role of the instructor is to provide students with the relevant preparatory resources for online discussions and explain approaches for opening discussions, speech patterns to use to stimulate the attendees to participate, what to do if students are afraid or reluctant to talk, whether it is necessary to give comments that express agreemet or disagreement with the speakers, and what are the polite ways to talk with speakers.[2]

To stimulate students to participate in the in-class discussion and at the same time to prepare them for the VIDS, round table discussion is one of the most efficient scaffolding activities that allow students to try various roles. It is based on the principle of role cards and speech patterns. Conducting this activity after students get acquainted with the tutorials on "How to Lead a Discussion" from the Guide to Discussion Skills website is highly recommended.

2.1.3.

Level: Intermediate/Advanced

Time required: 75 minutes.

Goals: to evolve critical thinking and impromptu speech, to improve listening comprehension, interpreting, and note-taking skills.

Materials: Notify students to read the Guide to Discussion Skills before the activity, copybooks, pencils, pens, copybooks, or other digital devices useful for taking notes.

Preparation: (Option 1 - Impromptu mode based on Dilemmas)

The instructor must create colorful cards beforehand. It is essential to explain the roles of each card and the speech pattern to the students so they can discuss the dilemma. To illustrate, let us consider each role card separately:

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2   Guide to Discussion Skills [unsw.edu.au]

Card 1 (yellow)

Speaker 1: Imagine yourself as a Leader of the discussion/Host. Read one Dilemma to the entire group. Your introductory part of the dilemma should not exceed more than two minutes. Following the Guide to Discussion Skills tips, lead a discussion by asking specific questions. Encourage students to speak and provide evidence. If the Timekeeper stops a speaker, you have the privilege to let the speaker finish his/her idea but not more than one minute.

Disclaimer: Dilemmas can be displayed on the White/Black/Interactive board.

Card 2 (green)

Speaker 2: Listen to the dilemma carefully, take notes and provide its interpretation using the following speech pattern: In other words, you want to say that +S+V+O paraphrase of the main idea. Make sure to provide evidence to make your point clear. Be ready to respond to the questions from other speakers. You have up to two minutes.

Card 3 (pink)

Speaker 3: Listen to the dilemma and its interpretation, take notes, and doubt what was said by the previous speaker. Ask a reported question using the following speech pattern:

Although the idea of … may seem obvious, it remains unclear how/why/in what case/what would happen if + S+V+O…add a reported question

Make sure to provide evidence to make your point clear. Be ready to respond to the questions from other speakers. You have up to two minutes.

Card 4 (purple)

Speaker 4: Listen to all the speakers carefully, take notes, and respond to the question expressing agreement or disagreement, using the following speech pattern:

I hear you are saying that + S+V+O, FANBOYS, I want to add (if you agree) /

I argue/disagree (if you disagree)

Make sure to provide evidence to make your point clear. Be ready to respond to the questions from other speakers. You have up to two minutes…

Card 5 (blue)

Speaker 5: Imagine you as the Time Keeper. Set the alarm. Declare or show how much time is left starting from 1 minute, 30 seconds, 5 seconds. Be strict! The speakers can ask questions for clarification during the discussion.

Procedure:

1. The instructor ensures students read the Guide to Discussion Skills before class discussion by asking some questions. The instructor can ask overview questions right before the activity to check it.

2. Then, the instructor explains the ground rules of the *Round Table Discussion* and the roles of speakers written on each card.

3. After that, the instructor subdivides the entire class into several groups of five and gives one set of cards to each group. The discussion of the first dilemma lasts 13–15 minutes approximately.

4. As soon as the first dilemma is discussed, the participants pass their cards to someone beside them. The intent is that each participant should try each role. If this activity is regular, students can practice responding to different sides of the topic and prepare for the inter-university virtual discussion.

Another scaffolding activity that can improve students' critical thinking, research, and communication skills and make them feel more confident during the VIDS is debate. It can be used to prepare students for the VIDS, but it can also be used as an extension, allowing students to examine other perspectives on an issue.

2.1.4.

Level: Intermediate/Advanced

Time required: 90 minutes for the debate.

Goals: to work as a team to present an argument, appealing to the audience through logic, sources, and emotions.

Materials: Cell phones, laptops with an internet connection, pencils, pens, copy books or other digital devices useful for taking notes.

Preparation: (Option 1 – Debate)

1. The instructor plans the following parts carefully before the debate:

1.1. The structure of the debate, especially the debate timing. (Note that the design of this debate does not typically follow the formal, competitive debate structures because these are often too advanced for students unfamiliar with competitive debates.

Simplifying the debate structure allows first-time debaters to feel more comfortable participating.)

1.2. The proposition and opposition teams for each debate. (It is best to have three students per group, but groups can be as large as five to have each student engaged in the work equitably. Beyond five, students may need more work as they divide their roles.)

1.3. The grading of the debate. (It is often helpful to prioritize participation to increase engagement, especially for students who have not had the chance to participate. An instructor may also want to have a group grade where students can mark the contributions of their colleagues in addition to an individual student grade. This peer marking invests students to see their contribution to the debate as a group effort and an individual assessment.)

1.4. The scaffolding needs for the students to be prepared for the debate. (Debates are often helpful when connected to a writing assignment in a course. By allowing students to discuss the topics they are writing about, they can refine their arguments, especially their counterargument and rebuttal.)

1.5. Helpful planning resources also provide useful information for students (OSUN Global Debate Network, n.d.)

2. Optional step: The instructor can allow the students to vote on the debate topics. A tool like Padlet, where individual posts can be upvoted and downvoted, makes voting easy. (E.g., students can use an essay topic they plan to write about in the voting. Using student topics gives students an authentic view into arguments they could use in their paper while prioritizing the topics students are interested in debating.) While this is an option, allowing the students to select the topics stimulates their interest and engagement in the debate.

3. Use classes before the debate to prepare students for the discussion. These class times should also give students time to research and prepare. For Mia, the previous four classes allowed students to prepare, using some time in class to explain the debate format and work in groups to research and prepare debate platforms.

Procedure:

1. Hold the debate, usually in one class period of 90 minutes. However, this timing would depend on variables such as the class length and the number of students. (The instructor should, at most, only need to act as the moderator.)

2. After the debate, reflecting on the process and what students learned from the debate's structure of sharing ideas is essential. (This reflection could be done through an online discussion thread, a debriefing session in class, using small groups, or even a survey.)

2.2. During the VIDS Student Performance Evaluations
At this stage, students are encouraged to take notes, as they will later be required to submit follow-up assignments to use the data in their essays, research papers, or individual video projects. (See Appendix A, Handout 2, "Questions to keep in mind during the discussion or text annotation"). Students can also fill out peer evaluation forms, and instructors mark student progress during the discussion with the help of observations.

> The 8th Virtual Inter-University Discussion was hosted by Karomatkhon Alimova (AUCA), Zhanara Zamirova (AUCA), and Yusuf Abdullahi (AUN), who were shy at the beginning but were able to overcome their public speaking discomfort and keep on leading the discussion. The peculiarity of the 8th Virtual Discussion was that it was led in oral and written forms. That is to say, Zhanara Zamirova asked students questions and gave comments in oral form, and Karomat Alimova used the chat box to encourage "silent" students to post their opinions on the topic via the chat box. (*Crossing borders through social media and dialogue: AI and its impact on humanity* 2023).

Yusuf Abdullahi waited for the turn of AUN students and alternated selections for responses and contributions to points between his classmates and students from the participating institutions. As a team leader, he ensured that all those who wanted to contribute did so within the time allotted per person. When it was his turn, he referred to some shared ideas, appreciated contextual perspectives that differed from his, and contributed meaningfully to the discourse. Working with students from other institutions was definitely out of his comfort zone. However, he was able to work with his initial fears about how the general experience would be, lean into the virtual space and participate in creating a conducive environment where almost all of them were meeting for the first time. All the AUN students found their voices as the discussions progressed, thus achieving the related learning outcomes of the activity.

2.3. After the Virtual Inter-University Discussion the
instructors ask students to respond to a questionnaire created with the help of Google Forms to find out student opinions on the VIDS to get their general impression and learn how VIDS could be improved in future. As follow-up activities, students may also participate in the online forum posted on the e-course, reflect on whether they achieved their goals or not, write a 500-word argumentative or comparative essay reflecting on the international online event, or submit a newspaper article for publi-

Figure 5. Weekly discussion on the 8th Virtual Discussion as a sample of a follow-up activity

Figure 5.a. Student Response 1

Figure 5.b. Student Response 2

Figure 5.c. Student Response 3 (Ishenbekova et al., *Weekly Discussion Forum* 2023)

cation in the university student newspaper or website. (Galimova, 2021)

Here are some screenshots from the weekly discussion forums devoted to the 8th Virtual Inter-University Discussion posted by AUCA students (Figure 5).

Samples of students' articles written in different years, from the AUN website and the AUCA *NewStarPaper*, can be found on the websites listed in the references. For instance, Arman Adabi (SFW-121) wrote an article about his "Virtual Meeting Experiences" in the *NewStar* independent student newspaper issued by AUCA. (Adabi, American University of Central Asia). Furthermore, Phillip Bill Hansen (WRI-101) also did the same in "Connection between AUN and AU Central Asia," published in the school's newsletter, *AUNThisWEEK*.

3. Feedback Data Analysis The 8th Virtual Inter-University Discussions (VIDS) event was held on 1 April 2023, with participants from five institutions. A Google Forms survey was sent to attendees for student feedback. The survey provides information about the feasibility of outcomes, suitability for student educational needs, and opportunity for design revision.

Of the 23 responses, 20.9% were from AUCA, 26.1% were from AUN, and 13% were from PIUS.

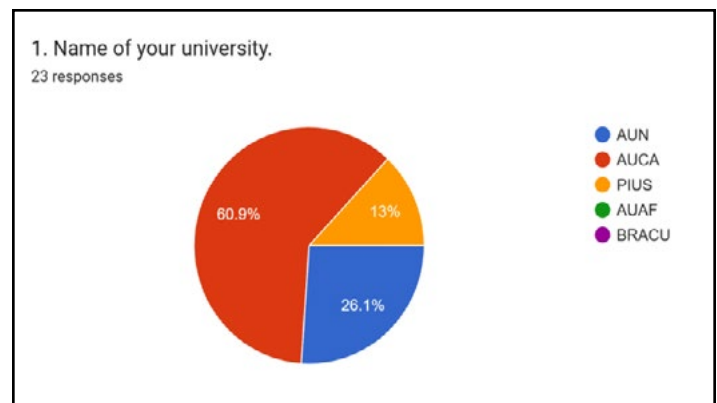**Figure 6.** Participants of the 8th Virtual Discussion.

The central theme of the discussion was that AI is necessary for humanity, and there were seven sub-topics for the breakout rooms:

1. Scientific evidence can no longer be trusted.

2. People with tattoos should not be stigmatized.

3. Amorality in the interest of a government is justifiable.

4. Feminism is contextual as it is experienced differently everywhere.

5. Tertiary institutions should be closed during general elections.

6. Each continent should have a common currency for the countries in it.

7. Partisanship taints democratic governance.

When asked about the three essential things students learned from the main discussion, they identified the following features of AI:

1. AI is used to search topics.

2. AI provides more job opportunities for computer-inclined students.

3. AI helps people with disabilities to interact with people.

4. Some people do not favor AI because they believe it will take their jobs shortly.

5. AI can make people lazy.

6. AI can help people in our everyday activities.

7. AI can cause job loss.

8. We should learn how to use AI effectively.

Integrating AI into our daily lives raises important ethical questions about how we use and regulate these technologies.

After the main discussion, students were put into breakout rooms with different sub-topics. These are their insights from their rooms:

1. During the virtual conversation, I learned a lot of interesting things while listening to students from different universities. The first is that different people have different views on a certain thing, and listening to them allows one to discover something new. Secondly, I realized that combining my knowledge and experience makes it possible to create new ideas that can positively contribute to various areas of our lives. And finally, the third thing I learned is that a virtual conversation can be beneficial and broaden your horizons without leaving your home.

2. Listen carefully to others, be able to analyze your speech and the speech of others and develop the conversation further.

1. The importance of good discussion organization

2. People have many opinions, and one needs to take notes to answer the interlocutor's thesis excellently.

3. What is evident to me is not so apparent to others and vice versa. The students in the virtual discussion were less optimistic about AI than I was. Moreover, that is good because it is a test of my beliefs.

Additionally, being patient and contributing to the conversation is essential, even if we are unfamiliar with the topic. By pushing ourselves through uncomfortable situations, we can build confidence. Making new acquaintances is also a potential benefit.

3. Diversity / Differences in opinion from different backgrounds / A more balanced view on the topic

4. The important things that I learned are as follows: I learned how students can have different thoughts over the same topics because of their background and culture. I also learned how to be interactive even though others are against my thoughts, and I have become more confident to share more of what I know. The discussion was informative, which is very important for me.

When the students were asked whether they achieved their short-term goals before the discussion, 22 replied "Yes," and one replied that they had no short-term goals before participating.

The students were also asked what skills they learned or improved on because of the discussion. 30.4% chose language skills, 30.4% chose leadership skills, and 39.1% chose "other" skills.
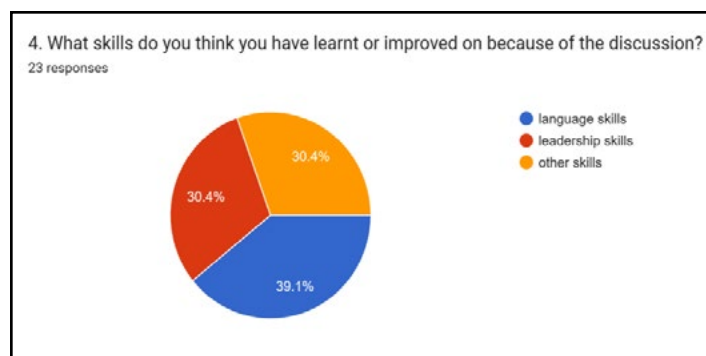

Figure 7. Skills learned or improved by students because of the discussion.

When asked to elaborate on their choices, those who chose leadership skills talked about how they learned to take charge of discussions, encourage participation from others, and share to make better decisions. Those

who decided on language skills explained that they could better convey their ideas, learn new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions from other participants, and improve their English. Those who chose "other" skills talked about improving their listening and critical thinking skills and learning to be vulnerable in discussions.

They were also asked if they felt any pressure, anxiety, or inconvenience when talking to peers from other countries. Figure 8 is a summary of their responses.
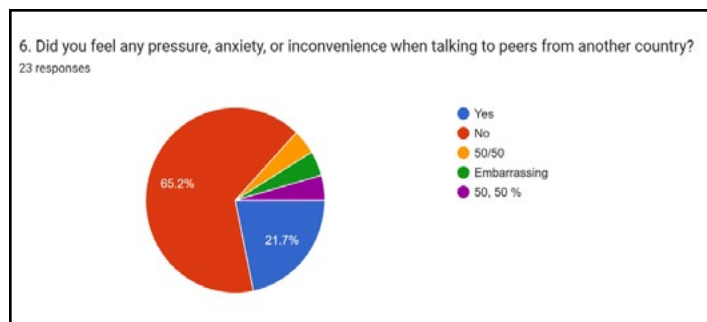

Figure 8. Feelings students had during the virtual discussion.

When asked to elaborate on their choices, those who replied yes mentioned they were shy because they had an inferiority complex and felt scared or nervous. Those who answered yes mentioned no tension, and the space was friendly. Those who responded 50%, 50%, or 50/50 said they felt shy or nervous. Only one person answered "N/A".

When asked if they would lead a discussion in future collaborative activities in their respective schools, 73.9% chose yes, while 26.1% chose "Neutral." No student chose "No."
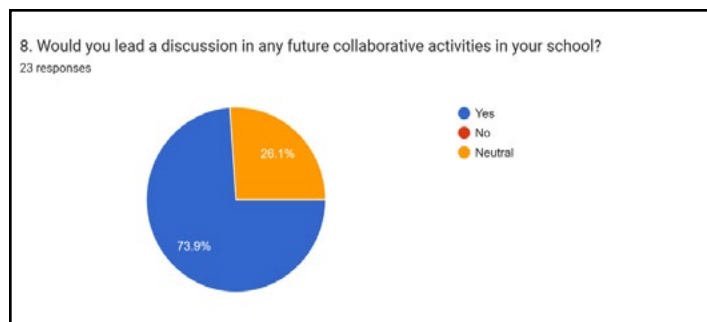
Figure 9. Potential Leaders of the Discussions

When asked if they felt more comfortable participating in the main discussion, in the breakout rooms, or on Padlet, 60.9% chose Breakout Rooms, 34.8% chose Main Discussion, and 4.3% chose Padlet.
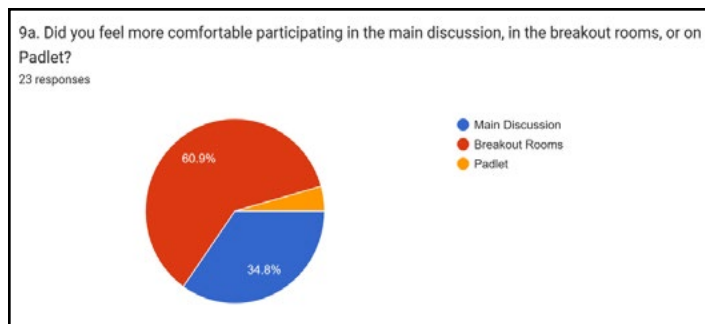
Figure 10. Format preference of the virtual discussion.

The students were asked how they felt using Padlet to introduce themselves. Twenty-one students answered, and the following are their opinions:

   • I enjoyed using Padlet.

   • I am already used to it in my school.

   • It was less intriguing than the virtual conference.

   • These are very relaxed and reliable classes for you and other students.

   • I forgot to use it because I had other assignments.

   • I have yet to use it.

The students were also asked what they would change in the online discussion format. Twenty-three students answered:

   • Nothing needs to be changed.

   • We need more time to discuss and a way to exchange personal contacts for those interested.

   • Spending less time on one topic

   • Allowing everyone to speak & participate.

   • Having an experienced and active facilitator

   • I do not know.

   • No comment

Lastly, when asked if they needed more time to discuss and a way to exchange personal contacts for those interested, the twenty-three students answered:

   • Yes, because it brings students together from different backgrounds and locations together!

   • Yes, because it helps people become more active and improve their skills.

• Yes, because it is a great experience.

• Yes, because it helps others learn more about people's lives and exchange experiences!

• Yes, because it is also an opportunity for the university to showcase its students' talent.

• I do not have any ideas.

Only one student did not agree or answer yes.

4. Benefits and Limitations of the Virtual Discussion
Analyzing the online forums conducted during and after the VIDS, as well as observing students' participation at various stages throughout the entire semester, we also came to the following benefits.

In addition, preparation for the VIDS, which includes searching for scholarly articles, reading, and comparing, provides English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students with the opportunity to evolve and implement their research skills, such as note-taking, annotating, asking profound and provocative questions. As a result, students' writing of academic papers drastically improved. Students became more aware of the main idea and the evidence. They also learned to support their opinions with quotes from scientific articles and peer-reviewed journals.

Another advantage is that preparation and participation in the VIDS allow students to master their communication skills at a higher international level. Students become aware that the more they speak English in regular classes, the more skillful they become in everyday speech. Some students started using sentence starters and transitions given before the VIDS to facilitate students to lead, continue, or smoothly and politely join the discussion regularly in their oral and written activities. Others noted that transitional words, phrases and sentences have been helpful for them to express their disagreement or agreement with various points without hurting each other's feelings.

Plus, while getting ready for the VIDS and after it, students are given a chance to assess their self-study skills, identify their challenges, such as time management and procrastination, and overcome them by creating or launching the organizer, digital reminders, setting short-term goals, etc. It is no secret that the errors noticed by the learners themselves are most likely to be corrected and learned in the future.

It is also worth mentioning that the VIDS created such an environment within the framework where the students had to speak English only and avoid switching to their native language, which is a common problem for EFL/ESL learners. In our case, we had students from five countries who, whether they liked it or not, had to use English only

to be heard and understood. Plus, the online event conducted at the international level encouraged students to be well prepared, more organized, and tolerant of each other, that is to say, to be politically correct, avoid interruptions, or talk at a slower pace if needed.

Moreover, the flexible online format of the VIDS allowed all the students to participate verbally and in writing. In other words, none of the students was left behind: those eager to develop and implement their leadership skills did so by hosting and leading discussions and commenting on their peers' opinions in either the General Discussion or Breakout Rooms. At the same time, shy students who did not have a chance to express their ideas orally managed to do so via Zoom chat box. When asked what students valued or enjoyed about the VIDS, they responded that the discussion gave them a chance to hear other perspectives. One student wrote, "Different insights and perspectives were appreciable." Another explained,

> Even though I haven't participated much time in [the] main room, I had a chance to talk and chat a few words in each breakout room. I enjoyed this VD because we learned how to contribute our expertise through various and diverse communities. I value and appreciate [the] contributions. We have many different thoughts, but all thoughts are going to [have a] positive impact on everyone who participated and enjoyed this discussion.

While there were many benefits of the discussion expressed by students, it seems that a diversity of perspectives was highly valued among participants.

After the VIDS, students could write about their international discussion and how their world outlook has changed either in university student newspapers, on university websites, or include their findings in their research papers or video projects.

Students had an outstanding possibility to get acquainted with their peers from at least five countries, exchange their points of view, broaden their perspectives, and, who knows, find business partners.

While communicative, discussion-based activities have been shown to benefit learners, it is essential to note that these activities take time and careful planning (Omar et al., 2020). Activities like virtual discussions take time for discussion and require instructors to prepare students to participate confidently. An instructor must consider the student's needs, considering each student's confidence level in the target language used for the discussion and the content knowledge needed. An instructor needs to scaffold the content (such as providing readings and time to research) and the student's language needs (such as discussing vocabulary, useful phrases for speaking, and other related support). Thus, while engaging and valu-

able to students, the virtual discussion requires early and detailed planning on the instructor's part.

Not only is planning necessary for success, but consideration of the discussion topics must also be based on the cultural context and student needs. Specific cultural or religious issues may not be appropriate in contexts with conflict amongst various people groups. For example, in the Nigerian context, gender fluidity may conflict with Nigerian legalities, alongside religious and cultural sensitivities. In Myanmar, where the current military regime has curtailed freedom of speech, care for student security is essential. Additionally, the instructor must evaluate topics for relevance. Topics may be appropriate for the context yet find no resonance in students' lives. The instructor is thus tasked with being mindful of what is contextually appropriate, relevant, and significant to students.

Another area for improvement in the virtual discussion is the challenge of technology and student representatives serving as moderators. Technology, especially in unstable environments facing political unrest, can be unavailable to students or need better connections. These tech issues can make students feel less confident in the discussion space. When students are moderating the discussion, they often need support and practice ahead of time to know who will be responsible for which tasks (i.e., sharing screens, having the slides, speaking, and so on.) Instructors can provide a mock discussion round beforehand so the students can practice using whatever online platform will hold the virtual discussion. In doing so, the drawback of technology in connection to student confidence can instead become a chance to authentically prepare students for the online workplaces they will no doubt enter after graduation.

Overall, the virtual discussion went well in spring 2023. Nearly all students responded to the survey that they felt their personal goals for the discussion were achieved, including leadership, language, and other skills. Additionally, most students responded that they felt relaxed while participating in the discussion. In light of these positive responses from the survey, we shall continue to conduct the Virtual Discussions for first and second-year students. For future discussion, we plan to incorporate the student feedback from the post-discussion survey and exit ticket. We are also reflecting on whether to change the structure of the activities, including more scaffolding activities to lessen student anxieties. A different kind of breakout room may be introduced where students use the chat to express their ideas, allowing shy students to gain more confidence. Ultimately, the students expressed wanting more time to discuss ideas. Therefore, in 2023, there will be another virtual discussion.

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Appendix A.

[Handout 1]

Transitional words, phrases, and sentence starters are to be used to join

the discussion smoothly and politely:

If you want to add your opinion:

> "And +S+V+O…"
> "Plus, +S+V+O…"
> "Moreover, +S+V+O…""
> "In addition, +S+V+O…"
> "I wonder, why/when/how/where +S+V+O…"
> "I cannot help saying that +S+V+O…"

If you want to contradict:

> "Nevertheless, +S+V+O…"
> "However, +S+V+O…"

If you want to conclude:

> "So +S+V+O…"
> "Therefore, +S+V+O…"
> "As a result, +S+V+O…"
> "In conclusion, +S+V+O…"

If you have a question, wish to disagree with the speaker, or make sure you understand the speaker clearly:

> "Although the idea of the author/speaker may seem obvious, it still remains unclear how/why/in what case/under what circumstances/what would happen if +S+V+O…"
>
> "I hear you are saying that +S+V+O…+ FANBOYS; I want to add that +S+V+O…"
>
> "I find that really interesting; however, I doubt that +S+V+O…"
>
> "In other words, the speaker/the author wants to say that +S+V+O…"

(Source: "Sentence Starters", "Thinking through Dialogue", Peg Peoples, September 2016, AUCA, Handout. Modified by Ekaterina Galimova)

[Handout 2]

Questions that students should keep in mind when annotating or analyzing the text or discussion

> 1. Why am I asking this question? How is it relevant to my research paper or project?
>
> 2. What does this add to what I already know about the topic?
>
> 3. What is the most/least convincing here? What do I dis/agree with? What do I think
>
> about differently?
>
> 4. What is its relationship to other things I have read? Does it verify, extend, or contradict what others have said?
>
> 5. How might I use this text in my project? Does it provide the background (general

information or factual evidence) I need? An argument whose claims I will engage?

The evidence I will analyze and interpret? Where in my project might I use parts of this discussion?

6. Tell the story of your thinking about what you are reading as you read: my initial reaction to this is …, but now I think … and now I think …

7. What questions does it raise?

8. How reliable or authoritative is this source? Have you seen it cited elsewhere? Where?

(Source: Bruce Ballenger's The Curious Writer "Advising Senior Projects: Helping Your Advisees Organize Their Ideas, their Materials, and Their Research Papers". Handout. Workshop, Jane Smith, December 2018, AUCA, Handout.)

Appendix B.

The Sample of the Long Table Discussion in Action

Pro (Proposition)	Con (Opposition)
(Student 1) Provides an argument and calls the next speaker from the opposite team e.g. Bob: "Based on the recent studies, eating sweets improves the teenage brain function." →Mary	(Student 2) Paraphrase the Pro-side team argument (1) and provide the Counterargument Mary: "Yes, the teenage brain will seem to function better for a short period. Nevertheless, according to recent WHO studies, sugar gradually kills neurological connections. →Marat
(Student 3) Paraphrases the Con side counterargument (1) and provides their counterargument (2) Marat: "As far as we understand, your team claims that sugar will kill the neurological connections, which might lead to dysfunction of the human brain; however, we argue that adding natural products to sweets, for instance, we provide our brain with Conditionally Essential Nutrients (CENs) that will regenerate the killed neuroconnections and keep our brain functioning even better." →Steve	(Student 4) Paraphrase the Pro -side team argument (2) and provide the Counter argument (2) Steve: "What you want to say is that the teenage brain can be supported with the help of CENs, i.e., organic compounds that are ordinarily produced by the body in amounts sufficient to meet its physiological requirements and stop degradation; nevertheless, we need to take into account the fact that those "organic compounds" can be genetically modified and might have harmful effect on other organs." →Peter
Peter: "Actually by CENs we meant organic compounds that cannot be genetically modified. In addition, you mentioned that organic compounds can cause damage in other organs, but this is a 100% lie as organic compounds do not have any negative effect on human bodies." →Alina	Alina: "We hear you are saying that organic compounds make no harm to human beings, but what about those people who have autoimmune problems like allergies. They eat natural foods, such as nuts, but it does cause life-threatening effects like suffocation, swollen throats and shortage of breath, and eventually death." →Asel

Appendix C.

FORMAT/SPEAKER GUIDELINES for DEBATE

OPENING SPEAKER – PROPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Introduce the topic and define all key terms in the motion; if applicable, offer a model.
- Explain the general line of argument to be taken by your team
- Offer 2-3 substantive claims in support of your team's argument, which you develop with analysis and examples

OPENING SPEAKER – OPPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Introduce the Opposition team's general line of argument
- Offer a few key points refutation to the proposition team's case
- Offer 2-3 substantive claims in support of your team's argument, which you develop with analysis and examples

MIDDLE SPEAKER – PROPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Offer a few key points of refutation to the speaker who spoke before you
- Develop and rebuild the arguments made by the previous speakers on your team
- Offer 1-2 new substantive claims in support of your team's arguments

MIDDLE SPEAKER – OPPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Offer a few key points of refutation to the speaker who spoke before you
- Develop and rebuild the arguments made by the previous speakers on your team
- Offer 1-2 new substantive claims in support of your team's arguments

FINAL SPEAKER – PROPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Offer a refutation of the Opposition team's overarching argument and any new arguments made by the speaker before you.
- Continue to develop the key arguments that your team has advanced.
- Isolate 2-3 key points of clash that have occurred in the debate and explain why your team has offered a solution to resolve these.

FINAL SPEAKER – OPPOSITION TEAM (4 minutes)

- Offer a refutation of the proposition team's overarching argument and any new arguments made by the speaker before you.
- Continue to develop the key arguments your team has advanced by building upon them.
- Isolate 2-3 key points of clash that have occurred in the debate and explain why your team has offered a solution to resolve these.

GENERAL TIPS FOR A DEBATE

Get your Audience's Attention!

• You always want to start and finish strong. Plan what the first words you say will be. Think about the rhetorical difference between "Hello, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today I am here to talk to you about human rights" vs "The Essential nature of WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN: that is what I will talk about today."

• 'Attention-getters' can be anything from a powerful rhetorical statement to a statistic, personal narrative, anecdote, or example. The point is to get the audience interested instantly and focusing in on your speech (and theoretically forgetting about all of the speeches to come before you)

Time Management

• Always be aware of how much time you have to speak and balance between rebutting the other team's case and setting up your new arguments.

• If you sense that you are running out of time, slow down and finish on a high note rather than rushing through your remaining material, which gives the audience the impression that you have not covered everything necessary.

Pick your Battles

• Do not attempt to respond to and refute every argument made by the other side; instead, isolate the most significant statements that the other side has made and respond to those.

• If the other side has made several repetitive arguments that all seem the same, respond to it once rather than repeatedly.

Language/Voice

• Your voice is a compelling thing; use that to your advantage. Don't speak too quickly or too slowly, but rather moderate the volume and pitch of your voice to indicate essential moments and concepts in your speech.

• Don't use crude language or ad homs; such language takes credibility away from you as a speaker and authority on your subject matter.

Body Language

• Stand or sit straight; make eye contact with your audience; use your body to show your confidence and strength.

Have Fun!

• No audience or judge wants to watch a performance by someone uninterested in their subject matter or who seems miserable. If you look like you are into your argument, your audience will likely be into it.

HOW TO PREPARE for DEBATE

Preparing as a Team

- Decide upon the order of speakers: who will speak first, second, etc.
- Map out the central arguments for your side of the debate
- Decide which speaker will cover each argument
- Discuss what should be included in the opening statements (the first speaker's speech)
- Discuss how the arguments will progress from the first speaker to the second and the others.
- Discuss the likely arguments to be addressed by the opposing team
- Discuss how you will answer these arguments

Preparing your speech

- Plan to speak from an outline and not a script.
- Map out the central arguments you plan to make and add to the debate.

  - Remember, if you are the first speaker on your team, you will want to map out your entire speech.
  - If you are a middle speaker, you will only want to map out about half of your speech, as you will spend the other half responding to what was said by the opposing team.
  - If you are the final speaker, you want to think about what the final points your team wants to get across will be

- Map out the likely arguments made by the opposing team that you plan to answer.
- Consider planning exactly how you will open and close your speech

Appendix D. Self-evaluation for debate Google Form.