Report on 2008 Debating Science Program Survey

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Executive Summary

This survey report comprises a summary of responses from the summer 2008 Debating Science Program, A New Model for Ethics Education. The New Model for Ethics Education involves an approach which guides deliberation through a logical structure designed to foster informed and thoughtful discussion. The Debating Science Program has two connected goals: to educate students about the scientific, ethical, and social issues involved in science debates and to teach students to develop habits of ethical deliberation. The weeklong workshop in Montana provided the students with the opportunity to think about and discuss scientific, ethical and social issues through attending expert lectures on numerous topics and small group sessions based on interest. During the semester long online course students participated in deliberation on the “Online Deliberation Center.” The ODC guides deliberation using a logical structure by asking students to consider the social goals, alternatives, obstacles, and side effects. This survey is intended to evaluate the extent to which the Debating Science program has met these goals.

Prior to the summer workshop, participants expressed general agreement about deliberation and science policy as well as the quality of public science debates. Several respondents rated the quality of current public debates over science policy as ‘bad.’ In elaborating this response participants discussed the public’s low level of science education and the poor quality of the scientific information available to the public. Several others mentioned the nature of science, and expressed concern over the capacity of scientists to engage the public. Overall, the majority of respondents reported that scientists should play a role in science debates and the vast majority envisioned being involved in public policy deliberation during their careers. Most participants rated their preparedness to enter into public debates about science policy with multiple stakeholders as neutral (44%) or good (35%). The majority of respondents
indicated that they were not involved at all as an active participant in public debates, while several (42%) indicated they were somewhat involved.

After the workshop, students reported having a positive experience. Participants mentioned the lectures, the quality of the speakers, the range of lecture topics, and the effectiveness of group work. With respect to group work, specifically, several respondents mentioned the benefits of working with a diverse group of students. Suggested improvements included more time for discussion, the need for introductory science lectures, more in depth science lectures, and better defined goals for group sessions. The workshop had a positive effect in raising student awareness of the social and ethical complexities associated with emerging technologies, on student confidence in participating in interdisciplinary ethical dialogue, and the likelihood of participants getting involved in public policy deliberations in their career. Participants rated the workshop overall as excellent or good.

Reflecting on the entire program, participants responded that online discussion and chats, collaborative experiences, the summer workshop, instructor interaction, and deliberative opportunities were among the strengths of the course as a whole. Descriptions of the course’s weaknesses were similarly varied, including content, format, goals, and participation. Some participants reported having difficulty with the wiki, mostly having to do with format and other barriers to participation. Overall, respondents found the online course to be a positive experience and agreed that the course allowed them to place the scientific research discussed into the broader social and ethical contexts. Participants responded favorably to interdisciplinary deliberations. The majority of respondents felt comfortable exchanging ideas and opinions on the ODC and felt it had potential as a tool for discussion for experts and graduate students, although this measure seemed to vary depending on the course. Participants in the climate change and
nanotechnology groups provided mixed responses regarding their experience deliberating on the ODC. Several respondents from these groups cited discomfort in online participation and lack of deliberative discussions while online. The biotechnology group reported an overall positive experience. Respondents from this group reported feeling comfortable participating and provided detailed descriptions of online deliberation.