

COLLEGE DEBATE  
A QUARTER CENTURY LATER

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Yesterday, February 19, 1989, I returned from my first college debate tournament since the NDT finals in 1966.<sup>1</sup> None of our debaters was even born then. I judged six rounds at the UNC-Charlotte CEDA tournament, three varsity, two novice, and one novice octas, and sat through half of two other varsity rounds involving my own teams.<sup>2</sup> The tournament was well and professionally run, despite an ice storm. What follows is my subjective impression of the changes in college debate after not having seen one for nearly a quarter of a century, and suggestions for change based on those impressions. My former experience was, necessarily, with NDT, which may offer an alternative explanation to the passage of time for the changes I observed. But I doubt it.

My first observation is that I heard two teams that approached the Larry Tribe teams of Harvard I heard in the 1960's.<sup>3</sup> The debaters on these particular CEDA teams were excellent. They were well dressed, cool, polished, polite, and professional. They spoke very rapidly, but were completely intelligible, engaging in excellent analysis, reasoning, refutation and delivery. My estimate from the debates I heard is that perhaps 30% of the speakers and teams tend toward this style, though not in general executing it as well as the two really good teams. Unfortunately, the vast majority of this 30% were in the novice division. A full two-thirds or more of the speakers did not emulate this style, and it is the behavior of the majority in the varsity division which prompted this paper.

Concerning the style of the majority, I was prepared for speed. I was not prepared for total unintelligibility and hostility in delivery. Several debaters must have come close to dying from stroke. While I am talking CEDA, I am told NDT is worse. The very worst speaker I saw, who had a good record in the varsity division, wore a rumpled open shirt with sloppy slacks and dirty sneakers. He was among the better dressed debaters. He gave his entire presentation with both forearms supporting his upper body weight while leaning on a low table, from which he read his whole speech verbatim. As he spoke, his right foot extended up and behind him, its top resting on the top of the back of the chair next to him. He turned from a normal color to beet red during his constructive, which he screamed at the top of his lungs. I was quite surprised to see him survive the experience. I would estimate his speaking rate in the area of 600 words per minute, to be compared with a thinking speed of perhaps 450 words per minute.

I suggest that no thinking was occurring during this or most presentations. The speaker was simply reading prepared text as fast as possible. I speak very rapidly as a result of my debate training. I am in no position to argue against rate. But I am clear, intelligible, and I articulate each sound in each word I

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use. This speaker, and an amazing number of others I heard, clearly well over half of those at the tournament, were close to total unintelligibility and total inarticulateness. I listened carefully, and often could catch only one in every five to ten phonemes which should have appeared in the words. I believe I did not get them because they were not there to be perceived. Many multiple phonemic words were represented by a single slurred phoneme, which slipped and slurred into the next single slurred phoneme representing the next multi-syllabic word.

In addition to incredible speed and total inarticulateness, a good deal of hostility was sometimes generalized, sometimes aimed specifically at an opponent, and sometimes aimed at the judge. The latter typically occurred as part of a high speed, inarticulate, high-pitched scream, with the available phonemes suggesting something to the effect that the judge had to be a total idiot if he couldn't see that the debate was now completely over since the previous speaker had dropped a particular issue. When directed against the other team or one of its members, the invective was often accompanied by complaints that the other team or its arguments or case or definitions or whatever were "unfair and totally abusive," whatever that means.

Now how is it, you may ask, that the other team and other judges could understand what each of the speakers says and you, Steinfatt, can't? Must be that you, Steinfatt, just don't have the intelligence and comprehension ability that the other judges and debaters have, so don't bring our activity down to your level.

Naturally I do not buy that view, but then I am biased concerning my own competency. I have a different explanation. The other judges and debaters do not hear anything more than I do, nor do they flow the debate any faster or more completely than I do. Rather, the other listeners in the room are making inferences as to what the speaker would have actually said if he had had time to articulate it, based on three additional sources of evidence available to them: (a) their past experience with the topic, (b) the written statement of the case and the written evidence handed back and forth between rounds during prep time, and (c) the questions asked and answered during cross-x, which takes place at a fairly normal rate. Debaters seldom raised embarrassing questions during the rounds I saw, and in only one instance did a debater attempt to hammer home an opening he had developed during cross-x. Instead, cross-x is just used as a chance to try to understand what one couldn't understand during the constructive because it was too fast.

I offer the following suggestions. First, eliminate the hardcopy transfer of information between teams during a round. If the debaters cannot follow it then neither can the judge. Case, evidence, objections, etc., should all be handled this way. The object of debate is to point out orally to the judge that are problems in what the other team is saying. If these problems extend to intelligibility then that is fair game for argument too, as in "We couldn't understand it and we bet you (the judge) couldn't understand it either." The process should be self-

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regulating since if the judge could understand, the team claiming unintelligibility should have gotten the drift too. If faked evidence is a concern, one could introduce a rule that at the end of a round, any team should be able to request a look at anything said by the other team that exists or should exist in hardcopy, with the opportunity to suggest that the judge look at evidence that does not read as represented. Reason: if hardcopy transfer is allowed it strongly encourages the incompetent oral skills so obvious in college debate.

Our School of Communication currently maintains a travel budget approaching \$30,000 for debate. Postage would be far cheaper if we are to redefine debate as a written activity. Even cheaper and faster is BITNET. If we are all going to pass written cases, evidence, objections, and definitions back and forth, why not conduct debates over BITNET or another network? If people are just going to scream a string of unintelligible sounds at each other, and then hand each other the case and evidence for it, why should we regard this as a valuable oral activity? Let's make it a written activity, turn it over to the English Department, and let them try to deal with it.

An objection raised to my observations has been "but they learn to think doing debate, and that is what we really want." It seems to me that the object of debate is a combination of thinking with oral skills. If thinking is the only goal, BITNET and computer network debate would work as well. And I do not regard what I have seen in current debate as evidence of thinking. Rather, due to the rate, which allows the introduction of large numbers of arguments, no one could possibly think up counter arguments against most of what has been said during an actual round.

To an extent, this has always been true. One of the values of debate is the many hours of argument between team members working on case and objections, hammering back and forth to work out a viable position. That is where I learned the most from debate, and it is probably the only good reason for saving the activity, as it is currently practiced, from the scrap heap. But when practice replaces the activity itself as the reason for the activity, isn't something wrong with the activity? Shouldn't the activity itself have value? What passes for thinking in a debate round is catching enough of a phonemic string to bring a keyword to mind, say "patriarchy." Once this keyword hits the debater's cognition, it triggers a hand motion into the file for "patriarchy." It is quite irrelevant what the context for "patriarchy" was, or the way in which the originating team intended "patriarchy" to be understood as an argument. All that matters is the hand movement which brings out a preset "argument against patriarchy" hardcopy file to be read by the next speaker, regardless of its relevance to what was said, if anyone could have understood it. I do not regard this process as deserving of the label "thinking."

Thus, suggestion two: eliminate reading as a method of delivery in debate, except for the reading of evidence. You can prepare an outline of the argument, but you cannot read it. The

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worst of the speed, unintelligibility, and lack of thinking are all bound together in the reading that seems to be an accepted practice in current debate. You do not have to think. You do not have to debate. All you have to do is read blocks fast. Outlaw the reading and you clean up a lot of the problem. Enforcement? Has to be up to the judge, where the buck stops anyway. If a speaker is overly dependent on reading arguments from hardcopy, the speaker is heavily docked and the team loses the debate. Sure, a few teams which had the better of the arguments will lose some rounds this way. But as soon as they stop commiserating over their unjust fate, they will be motivated to reform their oral delivery to eliminate not the using, but the reading of prepared blocks.

Suggestion three: penalize heavily for incivility and hostility. This is purely on the grounds of human civility. Intensity is fine. Personal attacks, whining, and complaining about "unfairness" and "abuse" are not. Why not hope for the time when an opponent presents an "abusive" interpretation of the topic so that you can nail him or her to the wall with it, rather than whining to the judge? If the other team is not topical, agree with them and win the debate. If they are topical, stop griping just because you didn't anticipate their case. Any actual abuse or unfairness, whatever that is, should be turned on the opposition in the form of debate about the resolution. If it cannot be so turned, then it is not unfair. It may well be uncivil or hostile however, and the team so abused must take the high ground, refuse to be suckered into the same tactics, and depend on the judge to spot the behavior in the opposition and penalize it, so stating in the critique.

My fourth suggestion may be a function of the particular proposition being debated. I do not know whether this goes on with other resolutions. But from my limited experience with this proposition comes suggestion four: let debate center on the issues implied by the proposition rather than on stock metapositional issues. In the rounds I hear, between 3 and 7 minutes of the typical constructive was concerned with whether the other team was debating the "whole resolution," or, on the definition of some particular term in the proposition such as "would." Two to four minutes was the average spent on the topic itself in varsity rounds, five to seven minutes in the novice rounds. When debaters begin debating debate theory, as a stock metapositional issue, I think things have gone a bit too far. Why is it we should care, as an issue during a debate round, that a debate authority says that you have to do this or that in a debate? If that is so the judge should know it and penalize for it or its absence. How self-reflexive can an activity get anyway? As it is, few but debaters and coaches seem able to understand the speakers, their thoughts, or much of the purpose of continuing the activity. Should we really be listening to debates about debate?

As I understand this "whole res" business, someone has apparently said in print somewhere that it is unethical, immoral, or possibly fattening, for the affirmative to fail to debate the resolution in its fullest sense, whatever that is. And that, in

addition to self-reflexivity, is part of the problem: whatever is the fullest sense of the whole resolution? Doesn't that notion smack of literal meaning? That the resolution in fact has a literal meaning on which some coach or some particular team has a monopoly? Do people really believe that? People who are supposed to be in communication? What's going on here? Meanings are in people, not in words or in debate propositions. The affirmative is supposed to offer a reasonable definition of the words of the proposition, and the negative is supposed to accept the definitions unless they are clearly out of the mainstream of the ways the words are used by adult speakers of the language. While this leaves the topic area wide open to interpretation, that is the name of the game. The negative either must be prepared for almost any interpretation, or must actually be able to think and debate!

#### Additional Suggestions:

Much of what I have argued is predicated on the assumption of a competent judge. On that basis I suggest we require a decision and a brief critique (or at least oral statement of the reasons for the decision) by each judge after each round. The debaters deserve this and it keeps the judge and the process honest. If you have to announce your decision and the reasons for it in front of God and everybody, it ought to keep the judges alert to what is really going on in a round, and serve as an incentive for judges who do not know, to bow out as judges and hire someone who does.

Eliminate prep time. Prep time is a crutch needed to prop up a system in which no one can understand what is said during a speech. It is used to pass hardcopy between teams, to orally question the other team (what was your position on . . . ?"), and to do what should be done during the preceding speaker's speech. The next speaker's time should begin no later than 30 seconds after the end of the preceding speech. If the speaker needs prep time, let it come out of his or her speaking time. Elimination of prep time would also allow for an increase in the time for constructive speeches, perhaps to 10 minutes, which would further reduce speed pressure.

It could be argued that eliminating prep time would increase the pressure to use canned arguments. It would. But penalizing for speed would ease this pressure by reducing the number of arguments introduced, even if time for constructives were increased. And outlawing reading, other than evidence, would solve the rest of this problem.

Suggest to all debaters that debate is an important enough activity that they dress at least as well while debating as the football team does while traveling, which implies attire appropriate for work in a large corporation. I had a beard and spent many days as a long-haired hippie when I ran for sheriff on a peace ticket in the sixties. But when I debated, I wore a business suit. (I must confess that on one day of the tournament I did not wear my summer suit as a judge, in an attempt to keep

myself from freezing to death in the ice storm, but next time I will be prepared with a winter suit.)

We should consider allowing judges the option of voting a double loss for a preliminary varsity round. Allowing ties would give judges an easy way out. But allowing judges to give both teams a loss for a particular round if they were both incompetent would really put the judge on the spot. Thus, it would not be used unless the judge were willing to stick his or her neck out, hopefully for good reason. Combined with the requirement for announcing the decision and an oral critique, this should enliven a few tournaments.

Finally, if the topic framers are going to use phrases such as "would be justified," why not just admit that this is policy debate and go back to debating propositions of policy?

#### NOTES

1. My debate background may help to put the manuscript in context. It consists of three years of high school debate in the late 1950's, two of them as a Michigan High School State Championship debater, three years of college varsity debate at Michigan State (it would have been four but I was put on strict disciplinary probation for protesting our initial involvement in Viet Nam in my senior year) and three years of coaching debate as a graduate assistant at Michigan State. I also wrote my masters thesis at MSU on college debate judging. From 1966 to 1988 I had no direct contact with debate. In the summer of 1988 I became Director of Speech Communication and Director of Forensics at the University of Miami. I hire the debate coach and oversee the program. As a part of that oversight I took the team to Charlotte, which prompted me to write this essay.

2. Eight rounds might be questioned as a small sample of current CEDA debate. Necessary sample size is a function of the variability of the phenomena being observed. Sample sizes much smaller than eight are typical of many established sciences such as quality control. Also, in eight debates one hears 32 debaters. I leave it to the reader to decide if the experiences I report seem typical of the style of debate they have heard.

3. Lawrence Tribe, in the recollection of many debaters and coaches of the time, was one of the greatest college debaters of the 1960's, and perhaps ever. He is currently Professor of Law at Harvard, and considered by many political observers to be heir apparent to the next seat on the United States Supreme Court available to a Democratic President.