THE POTENTIAL FOR GENERIC ARGUMENTATION IN CROSS EXAMINATION DEBATE ASSOCIATION DEBATE: TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS

C. Thomas Preston, Jr.
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Educational debate strives to promote critical thinking and rigor in research. At the same time, debate urges students to develop the persuasive communication skills necessary to discuss complex ideas. Long a controversy in policy debate, the use of generic arguments in Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) debate calls forth discussion of their ability to promote the debating skills noted above.

Generic arguments constitute debate positions that address an assigned topic indirectly and are argued recurringly across debate topics (Congalton, 1987; Pfau, 1987; Walker, 1983; Walker and Congalton, 1987). To Ulrich (1985), a "generic argument is an argument which can be applied to a wide variety of cases" (p. 14). Preston (1987) notes, "such issues which spur a 'debate within a debate' include those for and against economic growth, for and against nuclear proliferation, for and against Rights/ Malthus, for and against extinction of the species, for and against totalitarianism, and (increasingly), for an against the benefits of the international drug trade, to name a few" (p. 1).

While some of the literature discussed primarily policy debate, all generics noted above may appear in CEDA rounds for two reasons--first, CEDA topics often have policy implications, and even if we force CEDA into the value cookie-cutter, some scholars claim that values alone have policy implications (e.g., Tuman, 1987). Second, generic arguments usually occur when debaters link the topic to some generic issue.[1] Third, to the extent that "value objections" often mimic the generic disadvantages of policy debate, the aforementioned discussion defining generic arguments applies.

Recently, a new genre of generic argumentation has emerged in CEDA debate--the generic theory argument. Teams may spend much time defending generic arguments on the definitive issues, at the expense of discussing substantive topic-specific issues as an afterthought. To avoid the burden of rejoinder, negative teams also try to "pull the affirmative team off of its case" as early as first negative constructive by using extensive generic theory briefs. Thus, alongside the purposive development of "value" and "quasipolicy" debate theory (CEDA Yearbooks, 1981- date; Church and Wilbanks, 1986; Midgley and Woods, 1986; Midgley and Woods, 1989; Thomas and Hart, 1987) has sprung the use of many generic theory blocs in debate rounds--such as for and against the use of plans, for and against the need to be "whole resolutional," for and against defining "is" as "present tense," for and against the use of holistic argumentation or examples to prove resolutions, and many more.

While Gass (1987) notes the need for some theoretical argumentation, some scholars may object that the excessive use of generic theory in some CEDA rounds may be undesirable for at least three reasons. First, such arguments tend to focus the debate away from the substantive issues in a way that hampers the educational goal of training a student to engage in topic-specific research. Second, they destroy microscopic (point-specific) clash. Third, they arguably violate the social contract to engage in a debate on a certain topic.

Pfau (1987) has explained well why generic arguments exist in policy debate. This essay seeks to extend Pfau's discussion of generics arguments to CEDA debate. Given how increasingly often arguments such as the ones mentioned above apply to CEDA resolutions, the following question demands attention: What standards should the debate community use to maximize the potential generics have for enhancing the development of research skills, critical thinking, and effective persuasive communication in CEDA debate? In order to answer this question, this article will first discuss the uses of generic argumentation. Second, it will consider possible misuses. Third, it will suggest methods by which the debate community could encourage the constructive use of generic positions, while at the same time discourage the potentially abusive practices.

Uses of Generic Arguments

When used effectively, generic arguments certainly benefit both the theoretical and substantive levels of debating. On the theoretical level, the need to know generic positions promotes the student's acquisition of research skills within the subdiscipline of argumentation. By researching such generic areas as the meaning of "is," standards of topicality (reasonability, best definitional, or better definitional), whether topicality is a voting issue for the negative in quasipolicy or value debate, and whether topicality constitutes a reverse voting issue for the affirmative, students gain a theoretical foundation from which to sharpen their own critical thinking skills on such issues. A thorough understanding of such issues developed through off-season practice of running generic arguments on such positions cannot help but enhance a student's ability to communicate theory to a critic persuasively.

Moreover, scholars of value and quasipolicy debate continue to debate over standards of presumption (Berube, 1986; Brownlee,

[1]For example, the Fall 1987 topic on the desirability of covert United States involvement in Central America could be linked to economic growth in the region as well as drug trade generics. Also, the Fall 1986 topic on military preparedness and US/Soviet relations called forth many proliferation generics.

1986; Cox and Jensen, 1989; Tuman, 1987; Zarefsky, 1980).[2]

To that extent, age-old theoretical arguments over decision rules for evaluating CEDA debate would apply across many topics. Additionally, the dispute over the use of counterwarrants may apply when affirmative teams attempt to exclude certain off-case contentions for consideration in the round and when negative teams then try to justify their use (Paulsen and Rhodes, 1981; Keeshan and Ulrich, 1980; Ulrich, 1984; Berube, 1984; and Simon, 1984). The process whereby a student comes to understand the alternative positions scholars have taken in such disputes and how those positions can be used in a debate round cannot help but enhance a students research skills, critical thinking ability, and persuasiveness in communicating from a position of sound theoretical knowledge.

In terms of the substantive issues of debate, there are four beneficial uses of generic arguments. First, since generic arguments usually occur over whether an impact claimed in a debate is good or bad, they can help focus the debate on the paramount value. Second, one cannot consider the debate topic in a vacuum--since all topics may be affected by issues which when taken by themselves may seem to fall beyond the scope of the resolution, the discussion of these other issues can become very important background information for establishing a position on a topic. Third, if squads constantly update their generic briefs, they necessarily inquire deeply into issues that affect the broadest possible range of events that are crucial to understanding our world. Such in-depth research not only makes debating a year-round activity, but promotes creative thought about significant events. Fourth, as in policy debate (Pfau, 1987), the development of generic positions may be helpful to negatives faced with the "onerous" research burden of responding to the myriad of cases using many permutations of small areas of the resolution to justify the resolution (p. 60). As the students understand the generic positions they present, then not only will they be more persuasive communicators, but will acquire greater critical thinking and research skills on issues that may be the necessary background material for CEDA resolutions and real-life decision-making issues.

[2]An example of effective use of generic theoretical argument was seen in both teams in the CEDA National Championship Debate of 1988 (Brey, 1988). On the topic, "Resolved, That the American judicial system has overemphasized freedom of the press," the affirmative team focused on environmental impacts to promote the resolution. Against this narrow interpretation of the resolution, the negative team argued that the affirmative team had not upheld the whole resolution. A generic debate within the debate did ensue on the whole resolutional argument--but not at the expense of the substantive issues disappearing from the debate round. Although the negative did lose the debate on a 5-2 decision, their use of the generic whole resolutional position proved both a wise and educationally-sound decision, especially since they attempted to clash with the affirmative case.

Misuses of Generic Arguments

While generics can be used effectively, their misuse may undermine the educational value of debating. Perhaps the greatest abuse of generic argumentation occurs when debaters unprepared to clash with reasonably chosen affirmative substantive points use generics to avoid the burden of rejoinder. Theoretically, for example, negatives may discuss definitions, values, and/or criteria ad nauseam to avoid performing research on a particular area of the topic where easily accessible and effective good arguments may exist to either negate or turn specific affirmative case arguments. For example, on the Fall, 1989 CEDA resolution, "Resolved: That Violence is a Justified Response to Political Oppression," negatives manipulated the definition of "is" into an absolute form that excluded all affirmative examples not as recent as the debate round itself from consideration. Furthermore, on the Spring 1988 resolution, "Resolved: That the American Judicial System has Overemphasized Freedom of the Press," (for past CEDA topics, see Freeley, 1990, pp. 406-407) some negatives used generic whole resolutional positions in an attempt to increase the scope of affirmative's prima facie requirements, although the area affirmative chose to prove its case was both reasonable and researchable.

A second abuse of generic argumentation occurs when coaches and/or students use canned positions to sidestep the valuable tools of teaching and learning substantive, on-topic research skills. In the business or government world, very few decision-making or adversarial proceedings begin to discuss the issues on the agenda and then proceed to "now we need to consider the impact of nuclear proliferation" or "let's talk about toto" for the bulk of the meeting or court time. If debate is to train students for the practice of argumentation in later life, then students should learn that if generics are used, they should be used as necessary background material for the issue at hand, not as a focus for discussion. In short, generics are abusive when used to avoid research responsibilities, and thus in-depth discussion of the semester's resolution.

A third abuse of generic argumentation occurs when no clear, evidence-backed link is made between the generic issue and the topic. Typically, there will be a low probability that the generic impact will occur, but the generic impact will be big (such as a nuclear war or two). Admittedly, negatives may be wise strategically to offer such an argument in second negative constructive to as a "decoy" to force first affirmative rebuttal to cover and have less time to spend on affirmative case. Nonetheless, such strategies may not be helpful in promoting the research, critical thinking or persuasive communication skills of the participants.

Simply put, generics are useful when they enhance the development of communication and research skills on the part of the debaters. When they hamper communication skills by "dumping" an excessive amount of old evidence into a time-constrained debate

contest, when they hamper effective on-topic research or when they are flat-out used as a way to avoid the necessity of research in the development of topic-specific critical thinking skills, they become abusive. Maximizing the benefits of generics while minimizing their abuses should form any foundations for developing standards for their use. The remainder of this essay suggests how prudent topic-wording, prudent and educationally- sound coaching advice, and effective criticism can lead us in that direction.

Mechanisms to Encourage the Proper Use of Generics

Pfau (1987), noting the previous standards developed by Unger (1981) for evaluating disadvantages, makes the following observation about how critics should cope with generic arguments in policy debate: "The important point is that the use of standards is the optimal method for determining whether a generic argument is good or bad" (Pfau, p. 62). In CEDA debate, three mechanisms could enhance the standards for evaluating the generic arguments within the context of non-policy debate: 1) topic wording, 2) coaching practices, and 3) judging practices.

Topic Wording. In his explanation of why generic arguments have become common in policy debate, Pfau (1987) noted that topics have increased the affirmative ground while decreasing negative ground. By calling for degrees of action instead of absolute action, he observes, policy topics have given negatives little choice but to develop generic positions rather than have no responses to many cases. Though CEDA topics do not overtly call for action, a similar evolution of generic argumentation has occurred in response to CEDA topics expressed in terms of degree, such as, "Resolved: That significantly stronger third party participation in the United States Presidential elections would benefit the political process," and, "Resolved: That increased restrictions on the civilian possession of handguns in the United States would be justified." (emphasis mine) In each of these recent topics, the topic expressed in terms of degree increases the range of cases possible by affirmatives, thus encouraging negatives to use generic positions both at the substantive and theoretical levels. Topics worded more discretely, such as 1979-80's "Resolved: That compulsory national service for all qualified United States Citizens is desirable," would perhaps eliminate the need for at least some of the theoretical generic arguments.

Howe (1985) has noted that topics should be capable of precise definition. That way, the wording clarifies for the critic and student which generic positions would apply and which ones would not. Of course, any topic will invite some generic arguments--and generics do not have to be bad. However, topics such as "Resolved: that the United States federal government is using reprehensible methods to reduce illegal drug trafficking," (with possible links to nuclear war, the benefits of the international drug trade, economic growth, rights/Malthus, and theoretical disputes over the definition of "is," whole resolution disputes over how complete a list of "methods" the affirmative must provide to win, and topicality disputes over what constitutes "illegal" and "drug") invite too many generic arguments into the round for many debaters to be able to truly discuss in-depth the substantive issues of the resolutional area.

In sum, effective topic writing can help reduce the abuse of overused and overrun positions. Perhaps CEDA coaches having rejected the drug topic offers a hopeful sign in this direction.

Coaching practices. Generic arguments can yield educational benefits to coaches and students. One advantage is that generically structured topicality arguments involving 1) standards, 2) violations, 3) counterdefinitions, and 4) voting issues provide a simple structure that can be taught year after year to beginning debaters, enabling them to understand theory much earlier. Such structure accomplishes this educational objective by enabling the students to have a concrete picture in their minds to help them organize complex theoretical material.

Coaching in argument choice can help promote proper use of generic argumentation while at the same time discourage improper use. First, students could be coached to update constantly their generic files, discarding completely old generic positions from the file, and practice constructing positions. Effective introduction, use, and discussion of evidence could be taught off-season as these new positions are developed. Such practice will benefit the student in later academic and professional life as the student learns not to take for granted the impacts of such phenomena as economic growth, nuclear proliferation, and the international drug trade.

Second, coaches could discourage the use of evidence from the "generic handbooks" except for the purposes of "knowing what's out there." Handbook reading discourages the development of research and critical thinking skills, and places the student at the mercy of the opponent who knows the context of the handbook evidence. Not understanding that context also hampers a student's ability to communicate persuasively the material.

Third, coaches must avoid merely handing out generic briefs prepared by past teams to students. Such practices, while they would appear to occur even at tournaments, are at best ethically questionable, and at worst destroy any chance whatsoever debate has to enhance the student's ability to develop his or her own research, critical thinking, or persuasive communication skills. Jensen's (1989) suggestion that coaches could promote the spontaneity of debate by discouraging the use of briefs--generic or otherwise--in favor of the card files may prove helpful here.

Judging Practices. Standards show vast potential for maximizing the potential for effective generic argumentation in CEDA debate. A critic of argument perspective that does not take a generic position for granted (Balthrop, 1983) yet does not intervene radically by outlawing arbitrarily arguments deemed "generic" would seem to serve this goal well. When generics are clearly shown relevant to the discussion, backed by sound evidence, and discussed specifically in terms of the topic-specific arguments that transpire during a debate round, they

should be rewarded by the critics with high speaker points. The critic should base the win/loss decision on the decision rules emerging in a particular debate, regardless of the degree of genericism (Preston, 1987) contained by the arguments presented therein.

If the topic selection and coaching does not discourage the abuse, then ballot criticism will. Hence five suggestions are offered for critics mindful that students watch closely the advice they receive on ballots:

1. Apply a strong negative burden of rejoinder when affirmative cases are topic-specific. However, when the affirmative links the topic to a generic position and spends the rest of 1AC reading last semester's 1AC, then negative counterwarrants linked to values and criteria should be rewarded with high speaker points. If the negative wins that counterwarrant and wins that the argument is a voting issue, then negative should win the debate.
2. Evaluate carefully the link between the topic and the generic issue. If strong, then the generic should be considered; if weak, then it should be dismissed from the decision calculus of a round. Students who consistently make weak links should also receive fewer speaker points.
3. Treat overused positions and old briefs the same way performance (interpretation) critics treat programs of overused literature (such as The Glass Menagerie); namely, by assigning low speaker points and (in debate), if necessary, a loss.
4. Examine generic arguments with the same critical standards of topic-specific positions--in other words, in terms of how recent the evidence is, in terms of the absence of logical fallacies and the like. As usual, students meeting these standards should receive higher speaker points.
5. Evaluate strictly how well the debater discusses the argument as it applies not only to the topic as noted in (2) above, but to the opponent's point in the particular debate round in question. The critic should also weigh how it is weighed in light of the other arguments that have been made in the particular debate, and how effectively it is delivered (as opposed to merely read). Here, these considerations should definitely affect speaker points and in some cases the decision.

Conclusion

Generic argumentation has sparked controversy perhaps since the founding of intercollegiate debate. Debate scholars have debated its usefulness in the forensics journals, CEDA topics call forth its use to varying degrees, and even in the growing area of extemporaneous "parliamentary" intercollegiate debate, controversies arise over "canned" speeches of generic arguments across topics. Generic arguments are not unlike Kenneth Burke's concept of ambiguities in language--we should not seek to do away with all of them, but to maximize their potential. While critics should not automatically accept a particular generic, they should realize both the potential and the limitations of such arguments.

This paper has not only explored these, but has offered some standards aimed at maximizing the potential of generic arguments while minimizing the potential limitations. Hopefully these standards will serve as a starting point for discussion as to how we view the role of generic argumentation in the development of CEDA debate.

REFERENCES

Balthrop, V.W. (1983). The debate judge as "critic of argument": Toward a transcendent perspective. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 20, 1-15.

Berube, D.M. (1984). Debating hasty generalization. Cross Examination Debate Association Yearbook, 4, 89-92.

Berube, D.M. (1986, September). Remarks at the South Central CEDA Workshop, Edmond, Oklahoma.

Brey, J.R., ed. (1988). 1988 National CEDA Tournament final debate: Has the American judicial system overemphasized freedom of the press? In Boaz, J.K., and Brey, J.R., eds., 1988 Championship Debates and Speeches. Normal, IL: American Forensic Association.

Church, R.T., and Wilbanks, C. (1986). Values and Policies in Controversy. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.

Cox, E.S., and Jensen, S.L. (1988, November). An alternative method for approaching value propositions. Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention, New Orleans.

Freeley, A.J. (1990). Argumentation and Debate: Critical Thinking for Reasoned Decision Making 7th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Gass, R. H. (1987). Theoretical arguments in debate rounds: toward a justification. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 23, 220-235.

Hallmark, J.R. (1984). Towards a paradigm for CEDA. Cross Examination Debate Association Yearbook, 4, 89-92.

Hollihan, T. (1983, April). Generic argument: contrivance of scoundrels or refuge for the unimaginative. Paper presented at the Central States Speech Association convention, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Howe, J. (1985, April). Address to the Cross Examination Debate Association annual meeting, Reno, Nevada.

Jensen, S.L. (1989, September). Evidence in CEDA Debate. Paper presented to the Speech and Theatre Association of Missouri Convention, Springfield.

Keeshan, M. and Ulrich, W. (1980). A critique of the counterwarrant as a negative strategy. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 17, 199-204.

Midgley, J., and Wood, S.C., eds. (1986). Prima Facie: A Guide to Value Debate, 1st ed. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt.

Midgley, J., and Wood. S.C., eds. (1989). Prima Facie: A Guide to Value Debate, 2d. ed. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt.

Paulsen, J.W., and Rhodes, J. (1979). The counterwarrant as a negative strategy, a modest proposal. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 15, 205-210.

Pfau, M. (1987). A reasonable approach to generic argument. In Thomas, D.A., and Hart, J., eds., Advanced Debate: Readings in Theory, Practice, and Teaching, 3d. ed. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Preston, C.T., Jr. (1987). Genericism vs. topicism: towards a rapprochement in Cross Examination Debate Association Debate. The Forensic, 73, 1-12.

Rhodes, J. (1981, October). A defense of the counterwarrant as a negative argument. In Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation (pp. 485-493). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Rowland, R. (1983). The philosophical presuppositions of value debate. In Zarefsky, D., Sillars, M.O., and Rhodes, J., eds., Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation (pp. 822-836). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Simon, R. (1984). The case against counterwarrants in value proposition debates. Cross Examination Debate Association Yearbook, 4, 48-53.

Thomas, D.A., and Hart, J., eds. (1987) Advanced Debate: Readings in Theory, Practice, and Teaching. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, pp. 385-496.

Tuman, J.S. (1987). Getting to first base: prima facie arguments for propositions of value. Journal of The American Forensic Association, 24, 84-94.

Ulrich, W. (1985). Debating Generic Disadvantages. Debate issues, 18, 14-16.

Ulrich. W. (1984). The nature of the topic in value debate. Cross Examination Debate Association Yearbook, 4, 1-6.

Unger, J.J. (1981). The words of a debate resolution and the debate subject matter: friends or foe? Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association convention, Anaheim.

Walker, G.B. (1983, April) The appropriate use and inappropriate abuse of generic arguments in competitive debate. Paper presented at the Central States Speech Association Convention, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Walker, G.B. (1986, February). Counterresolutional propositions in policy and non-policy debate: counterplans and counterpolicies. Paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Convention, Tucson, Arizona.

Walker, G.B., and Congalton, J.D. (1987). Generic argument and argument fields. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 23, 125-135.

Zarefsky, D. (1980). Argumentation and forensics. In Rhodes, J., and Newell, S., eds., Proceedings of the Summer Conference on Argumentation (pp. 20-25). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.