

## Feminism, Strategy, and Pedagogy in Intercollegiate Debate

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In "Dominant Form and Marginalized Voices: Argumentation About Feminism," professor Carrie Crenshaw raises a number of important questions relating to forensic practice. The analysis of the way that conventional form can shape judge and debater expectations and therefore guide debate practice is genuinely insightful. I think this conclusion merits exploration and treatment as a broad-based explanation for much of debate culture.

The focus on reductionist tendencies, not just in argument about feminism but in all areas of competitive debate, also is instructive. Debate practice surely illustrates another of Kenneth Burke's conclusions about human symbol use, the proclivity of people to take a good idea to the end of the line, producing a bad end. Finally, the concluding focus on the "responsibility for evaluating those rhetorical proofs" that is shared by all forensic educators points to the obligation that all of us working with debate have to shape debate practice toward pedagogically valuable ends and not simply act as van drivers.

While the value of this essay is obvious, I want to begin a brief analysis of some of the positions in it by asking why debaters have not done precisely what the author suggests. Why have they not argued about the value of feminism(s) or even attacked feminism?

### Strategy and Practice in Academic Debate

While conventional form undoubtedly plays a role in shaping debater and judge expectations, I think the primary explanation for the failure of debaters to consider the complexities involved in contemporary feminism can be traced largely to strategic and cultural factors. Conventions in form have not prevented debate practice from evolving at a rapid rate over the last two decades. Not so long ago, no one ever presented a counterplan. Then, we went through a period in which counterplans were presented in almost every debate. There was a time when topicality debates focused very heavily on standards. That is less true today. Whole resolution issues go in and out of style. A

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similar point could be made about many theoretical and substantive issues. If conventional form alone were the primary factor explaining argumentative evolution, then there would not have been so much change in these areas.

I think the main two reasons for the evolution in formal practice are strategic and cultural. In the case of feminism, debaters argue for single causation and massive (unreasonable) impacts because such choices increase their chance of winning debates. If they focus on a multiplicity of different and to some extent inconsistent feminisms, they may win only a little link and a little impact to their affirmative case or disadvantage. It is completely understandable that they focus on mega-impacts and a single link. Such a choice gives them more net impact and thus a better chance of outweighing the other side.

By the way, debaters are not the only arguers to make such choices. Routinely, journalists and politicians emphasize disaster scenarios, because that is a way of rousing public interest. Thus, debate practice is not so different from the real world, a point that has been emphasized by field theorists who note the way that purpose shapes argumentative practice.

It seems to me that the most interesting question is not why debaters focus on single links, but why their opponents only attempt to "turn" the link and do not choose other strategic options. In the discussion of how feminism is argued, it was quite clear that debaters as a rule seem to assume the value of feminism. If the affirmative argues a feminism case, the negative is likely to argue that the present system is actually helping feminism, via the creation of an issue energizing the feminist movement. And the opposite happens when the negative argues a feminism disadvantage.

Why don't debaters argue other kinds of responses? On most disadvantages/advantages, there are a range of answers, including link denials, harm denials, and impact "turns," as well as the link turns that apparently dominate debate practice in this instance. It is not a question of strategic incentive that prevents use of these other arguments. For example, there certainly are sources out there who argue that a feminist victory would produce disaster in this nation. Obviously, I do not subscribe to this view, but it is odd that debaters have not latched onto those sources. Debaters have argued any number of other counter-intuitive positions (nuclear war is good, for instance). The clear answer to this question is that cultural factors inhibit the dialectical process from working in its normal fashion. It may not be culturally acceptable to dispute the importance of or even to attack the value of feminism. This cultural constraint drastically reduces the options open to the affirmative and negative. And thus the combination of cultural and strategic constraint largely explains the state of forensic argument about feminism.

At this point I want to argue for a shift in emphasis from the conclusion drawn in "Dominant Form and Marginalized Voices." One of the main points of the piece is that the dialectical process can be utilized to "fix" problems in causal reasoning present in the debate process. Unfortunately, there are some cases in which the combination of strategy and culture prevents the dialectic from emphasizing sound causal argument.

Here, I don't think that the key point relates to the contrast between rhetorical and empirical proof. It seems to me that Zarefsky's second and third forms of causal reasoning require empirical proof, just as much as the first form (see 180-82). For example, arguments about responsibility inevitably depend upon assessments of actions. And you have to know the actions before you can make any other judgment. Zarefsky cites as representative of type two causal reasoning the question, "Who is to blame?" (181), a question that requires empirical data in order to develop an acceptable answer. Thus, our assessment of the responsibility of Clarence Thomas for behavior in relation to Anita Hill depended upon what we thought he did. All causal reasoning requires both empirical proof and rhetorical analysis of reasons linking the empirical data to a conclusion.

If the key to the problem does not lie in the contrast between rhetorical and empirical reasoning, where does it lie? I think the key to reforming the dialectical process in debate lies in positive actions by forensic educators. As the analysis of feminist argument so ably indicates, there is no guarantee that forensic practice necessarily will evolve toward strong argument. Strategic and cultural constraints may prevent such evolution. Thus, judges must take the responsibility to shape practice in appropriate ways, a conclusion completely consistent with the argument developed by Crenshaw.

Obviously, this requires some level of intervention by the critic. I am sensitive to those who decry judge intervention as producing unpredictable, often biased, results. In general, I think that we should let debaters shape the argumentative practice in any debate. At the same time, it seems altogether reasonable to me that judges should impose minimum argumentative standards on the positions created by both teams. Thus, a judge could require debaters to meet a sort of minimum burden of support and refuse to evaluate disadvantages or advantages not passing the appropriate threshold. If the judge informed the debaters about this threshold prior to the debate, his/her practice would provide a powerful incentive for the debaters to develop their causal positions in more depth and with more sophistication.

It is obvious that imposition of a minimum burden of support standard creates dangers of abuse. Judge intervention can be used to support irrational and biased decisions. And yet, if a judge wants to vote for a given team, he or she undoubtedly can find a reason to do so in almost any round.

Surely it is odd that in competitive forensics, the experts on argumentation theory have granted all power to shape argumentative practice to the very group that the experts supposedly are training. If a medical school were organized in such a manner, all would scream malpractice. Perhaps our failure to establish minimum academic standards for competitive debate deserves a similar response.

### Conclusion

In "Dominant Form and Marginalized Voices," Crenshaw raises a number of interesting issues. Most of all the essay points to the importance of using case studies of debate practice, both to inform forensics pedagogy and as means of testing larger issues relating to argumentation theory. Hopefully, the essay will serve as the starting point for useful discussion of the way that form, strategic constraints, and culture shape the evolution of forensic practice.

### Works Cited

- Zarefsky, David. "The Role of Causal Argument in Policy Controversies." *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13 (1977): 179-91.