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The Practical Pedagogical Function of Academic Debate

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Nearly ten years ago Scott Deatherage and I wrote about a crisis in policy debate (Rowland and Deatheridge). We noted trends in argumentative practices and program development that we believed could threaten the future of academic policy debate. Thankfully, in many ways the situation that we feared has not developed. Policy debate remains strong and many high quality teams also participate in CEDA.

And yet the fears that we expressed in that essay have not been proved totally groundless. There are many who wonder whether academic debate in CEDA or NDT any longer provides real world argumentation skills. Others claim that debate no longer does a good job of training students in advocacy. Still others argue that the student population served by debate is so self-selected that the activity now primarily furthers the educational needs of the elites. Yet, there are undeniable strengths in contemporary debate. No one disputes the depth of research carried out by the debaters of today. And contemporary debaters, who often access materials through computer services, are far more up to date on crucial issues on any topic than were debaters in previous generations.

The purpose of this essay is not to weigh the relative power of the arguments made on each side of the debate is good, debate is bad dispute. Rather, my purpose is to discuss broader issues relating to the pedagogical goals that academic debate can serve and the kind of structure that is needed to fulfill those goals.

PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

The first step in the analysis of the pedagogical function of academic debate is to consider the educational goals of the activity. One cannot evaluate the functioning of any activity without first identifying the purposes that the activity is designed to fulfill. In the case of academic debate, I think there are clearly three primary goals. Academic debate is designed to train students in argumentation and critical thinking, public advocacy, and research.

The primary goal of debate, in my view, is to train students in order to develop argumentation and critical thinking skills. Through the give and take of the debate process we hope that students will learn both to invent and test arguments.

The relation of argumentation and critical thinking is one of means and ends. Skill in invention and analysis of argument leads students to become critical thinkers. Argumentation is the means and critical thinking the result. This explains why argumentation and critical thinking are often treated in synonymous terms, especially in the work of those operating within the informal logic movement.

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I label development of facility in argument and critical thinking the primary goal of debate because the skill is so basic to problem-solving in all aspects of life. And it is a widespread conclusion of experts and study commissions that our education system has not done a very good job of teaching critical thinking.[1] Thus, the most basic purpose of academic debate is to train students to be skilled arguers (and therefore effective critical thinkers).

The second goal relates to advocacy. Lee Polk[2] likes to say that debate should play an essential role in training the articulate citizen. His point is that training in debate should help students develop the advocacy skills that they need to be effective at every level of the political system. Thus, debate can help students gain the written and oral advocacy skills that they need to file an appeal of a property tax assessment or represent their district in Congress.

The third primary function of debate is to aid students in the development of research skills. With the explosion of information available in print and on-line sources, the research training function of debate may be even more important than it was in the past.

Of course, debate serves other goals as well. Students learn about subject areas in the course of research. The competitive aspects of the activity may help students learn lessons about good sportsmanship and so forth in a manner similar to athletic competition. And debate serves a number of public relations functions for any university. However, these goals are clearly of secondary importance. There are numerous ways to learn about subject areas. Debate would be just one more sport, except for its educational value in training skilled arguers, forceful advocates, and effective researchers. It should be noted, however, that the primary functions can not be achieved without the competitive structure. Students are willing to put enormous time and effort into debate in part because of the competition inherent in the activity.

PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTIONING

In this section I want to briefly evaluate the degree to which academic debate is serving the three primary pedagogical goals that I have identified. My evaluation will of necessity be quite general. I have not conducted research on the pedagogical functioning of debate and I have not been an active debate coach for several years. At the same time, I have stayed abreast with developments in both NDT and CEDA and discussed my conclusions with active

[1]The conclusion that we have not done a good job of teaching critical thinking is a very common one. See e.g., Wendy Leopold, "Focus Turns to Thinking skills," *Chicago Tribune* 4 March 1990: Sect. 20, p. 6; Diego Ribadeneira, "Study Finds Mass Students Short on Critical Thinking," *Boston Globe* 20 December 1989: 40.

[2]Lee Polk is Department Chairman and former Director of Forensics at Baylor. Professor Polk coached the 1975 National Debate Champions.

participants. In any case, to avoid over generalization, I will limit my judgments to conditions that seem so obvious as to be almost undeniable.

In the area of training in argument and critical thinking, it is useful to break this goal down into skill at inventing arguments and skill at testing them. On the former, there can be no doubt about the worth of contemporary debate. Debaters show great creativity in developing innovative policy (and non-policy) positions. And the criticism that much debate argument is not real-world seems mis-guided. Twenty years ago, debaters warned (via disadvantages and affirmative cases) about the relationship between energy consumption and climate change. Some labelled these positions "absurd." The "absurd" arguments of that time are now the conventional wisdom. If debaters sometimes make extreme claims they are hardly alone. And a certain percentage of those ridiculous extreme arguments come true. I vividly remember talking to my debaters at Baylor about the absurdity of believing that the Soviet Union would allow German reunification. So much for my crystal ball.

The problem is not that debaters present absurd arguments; it is that often they do not support those arguments adequately or test them carefully. One manifestation of this problem is the reliance on evidence (and a very limited definition of evidence) as the only means of denying a claim.

In the real-world it is important that citizens be able to critically examine claims without going to the library in every single case. A parent at a PTA meeting needs to be able to ask simple questions about the strength of the evidence and reasoning being presented. Unfortunately, academic debaters are much more adept at finding counter-evidence to deny a claim than they are at applying field-invariant standards to test the quality of evidence and reasoning cited in support of a claim.

This problem is nowhere more evident than in the failure of debaters to apply clear standards to test the quality of evidence. I understand that some believe there to be a recent trend toward high-quality evidence, but even if this is correct (and many believe it is not), there is still a major problem in regard to evidence use. Notably, it has been, and still is, common for debaters to cite sources that no real-world advocate would accept as possessing expertise. In the real world, extremists are viewed as well, extremists, and largely ignored. But in debate extremists may be preferred sources, precisely because they say such extreme things. And, of course, debaters are loathe to make arguments based on real-world data, if that data cannot be attributed to a source.

Thus, debate does a mixed job of training students in argumentation and critical thinking skills. The activity does a superb job of encouraging creative argument development, but not nearly as good a job of encouraging students to develop the ability to critically analyze any claim.

In relation to advocacy, the record is not as good. Contemporary debate denies the importance of two very fundamental advocacy skills, the necessity to adapt to audience and generic constraints.

No one would say that the style of academic debate is remotely similar to written or oral public advocacy. The type of writing found in debate briefs and the style of debate speeches are adapted to the highly specialized format of debate and the narrow audience of professional debate critics. This style is tied to the rigorous argument testing process found in debate. But the style is not one that is especially useful outside of the narrow debate context. Thus, tournament debate does not do a very good job of teaching student the importance of adapting to an audience.

Moreover, judge selection systems serve as a symbol of an activity that believes that only certain elites are qualified to evaluate argument and that it is inappropriate to ask advocates to adapt to the whims of ordinary audiences. A judge who prefers a delivery style that is similar to normal public advocacy or even merely demands that any speech must be comprehensible is likely to be treated as incompetent and routinely "struck," therefore limiting the number of rounds that he/she can judge and drastically reducing their influence.

A similar point can be made about generic constraints. Contemporary debate denies the importance of any rule that cannot be rationally justified at the particular point in time. This is the essence of the tabula rasa perspective. However, in the real-world there are often generic constraints, such as formal requirements for legal briefs, that are not open to dispute. Clearly, denying the validity of such generic constraints does not help debaters develop advocacy skills.

At the same time, the specialized form of advocacy in debate has developed because of two factors that are tied to the primary goal of teaching argumentation skills. The move away from an ordinary language style can be justified as allowing for greater and more sophisticated argument. And some say that because of the specialized argumentative characteristics of the activity, it would not be appropriate to utilize ordinary people as debate judges. The use of expert critics, in this view, leads to better argument and fairer decision making.

In sum, it seems clear that academic debate does a much better job of training students in argumentation skills than advocacy skills.

In relation to research, academic debate is, in the main, quite functional. The pressures of the debate process push students to do amazing amounts of research on extremely complex issues. And over the last few years, debaters have become quite adept at utilizing on-line sources to gather relevant data. Debate, more than perhaps any other educational activity at the university level, teaches students about both the importance of research and the wealth of material that is available.

At the same time, it should be remembered that debate does not do as good a job of teaching students to draw distinctions about the quality of research. Some years ago, a number of teams argued that space development could not occur because the earth was flat. I am not disputing that "flat earthers" made this claim in their publications, only that no real scientist or

policy maker would treat it seriously. This may be an extreme example, but it is indicative of an emphasis on finding someone (anyone) to support a claim as opposed to testing the quality of evidence available on an issue.

There is a final issue that relates to the educational functioning of academic debate, access. For debate to be functional, it must provide access to a population of students who can benefit from the activity. In the access area there are three related problems. First, college debate increasingly serves a self-selected population of former high school debaters. It is rare (although not unknown) for a true novice to join a college debate program and participate in the activity for a period of years. I am not saying that students do not gain from the activity, merely because they have had some previous experience in it. I firmly believe that even the most experienced debater can progress in further competition. At the same time, it is obvious that experienced debaters are a ways along the learning curve and that less experienced debaters might move more rapidly up that curve than their more experienced counterparts. Therefore, limitations in access reduce the pedagogical value of the activity.

Closely related to access is the level of time commitment that it takes to be a successful academic debaters. Obviously, any worthwhile activity requires a major time commitment, especially for the very best students. My concern is that with the decline of junior division and regional competition, especially in policy debate, the time commitment now required of all debaters, not merely those at the very top of the activity, is quite extreme. Obviously, time spent on debate is valuable, but it also may detract from other academic activities, as well as serve as a further access barrier.

Finally, in relation to access, the on-going conflict between NDT and CEDA is obviously dysfunctional. Over the years I have witnessed numerous examples of the conflict. While this conflict may have subsided somewhat, it has not been eliminated. For example, sometimes quite vituperative exchanges between advocates of the two activities occur on computer bulletin boards. This is a distressing situation. Such conflict obviously risks giving aid and comfort to those who would curtail support for debate. And conflict between activities may result in limiting the options that are available to our students.

In many ways debate does a superb job of training students. Especially in the areas of argument invention and research training, contemporary debate is one of the most valuable pedagogical activities available to students. Certainly no other activity did as much for me or I think for many of my students. At the same time, academic debate is not doing as good a job in training students in application of field-invariant standards to test arguments or in helping them develop advocacy skills. And there are troubling issues involving access to the activity.

Before considering possible solutions to these problems, it is appropriate to consider the causes that have led debate to the present pedagogical situation.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PEDAGOGICAL SITUATION IN DEBATE

The primary factor influencing debate pedagogy is clearly the process of debate itself. The competitive pressures within the academic game of debate push debaters to do the hard research and analytical work necessary for success in the activity. Competition pushes education, but this will continue to happen only as long as the structure of debate continues to be strongly tied to its educational mission.

The second factor influencing the pedagogical functioning of academic debate is a growing focus on debate as merely a game. An indication of this development is advocacy of a purely game-oriented approach to debate theory. A large literature has developed on this subject.[3] Another indication of the movement toward treating debate as a game is the trend toward what might be called the professionalization of coaching. It is a commonplace that fewer and fewer coaches are professional academics concerned with teaching argumentation and advocacy.

If the activity shifts toward an emphasis on debate as merely a game, as opposed to an educational game, that will drive debate toward practices that produce competitive success, but may not be tied to the educational goals of the system.

A third factor influencing debate practice is what might be called the culture of debate. One dominant trend in the evolution of debate culture has been away from authority of all kinds. This is obvious in the way that debaters speak to judges, the informality of debate dress, the rejection of any kind of restriction on argument practice in debate, and a growing focus on radical positions that deny the existence of any pre-existing standards of rationality.

Clearly, there are advantages to this culture. The opposition to hierarchy, for example, may lead to an egalitarian activity. On the other hand, the opposition to authority in all forms may make it difficult to push debaters toward audience adaptation and other skills that are necessary for successful advocacy.

A fourth factor is the inversion of the normal relationship between student and teacher. In most educational settings, the teacher establishes minimum assumptions for a course, provides guidance to the student, and ultimately decides on the acceptability of assignments and other materials. This relationship occurs because it is the teacher who "teaches" the student.

In debate, however, the situation is somewhat different. There is a strong argument that in debate it is the students who wield most of the power. The pressure on coaches and judges to follow practices that students favor is quite intense. No judge wants to be labelled an old buffalo. And the pressure on judges to avoid intruding any personal views within the

[3]One of the most influential advocates of the game approach is A. C. (Tuna) Snider. See e.g., Alfred C. Snider, "Games Without Frontiers: A Design For Communication Scholars and Forensic Educators," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 20 (1984): 162-170; A. C. Snider, "Fantasy and Reality Revisited: Gaming, Fiat Power and Anti-Utopianism," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 24, (1987): 119-129.

debate process is particularly strong. The effect of this situation is to reverse the normal student/teacher role. Coaches are discouraged from teaching students with their ballots result. Perhaps this explains why so few completed ballots are returned to debaters. The emphasis is exclusively on who won and why, judgments that can be handled in an oral critique. There is almost no emphasis on using the ballot to improve overall argumentation skills. All of these factors result in a situation in which it is the students who essentially control the agenda.

While I certainly favor an unbiased judging perspective in which the individual puts aside his/her personal opinions on the issues under debate, a system in which coaches are discouraged from teaching, because that would violate the dominant view, is problematic.

Finally, technology influences the current state of debate pedagogy. Today, with the availability of on-line research resources, debaters have access to a wealth of information on any topic 24 hours a day. And if one team is using those resources than all others are pushed to do so as well. The result has been the creation of a tournament system in which there is no time to relax, no time to visit interesting sites, and little time to socialize. Yes, debaters now have access to more research material, but at a significant cost.

In summary, the greatest force influencing debate pedagogy is the debate process (the structure of the activity). But a focus on debate as merely a game, debate culture, the inversion of the normal student-teacher role, and technological developments have combined to negatively influence debate and lessen the degree to which it can fulfill pedagogical functions.

With the problems facing contemporary debate in mind, it is next important to outline the characteristics of a pedagogically sound program.

A PEDAGOGICALLY SOUND DEBATE PROGRAM

What should a pedagogically sound debate program look like? First, such a program should provide a range of opportunities for students, some emphasizing rigorous argumentative analysis in competitive debate and some emphasizing the development of advocacy skills necessary before an audience. If students are to fulfill all three primary goals they need to participate in activities that both force development of research and argument skills and require skill in advocacy.

What about the contest between NDT and CEDA? The important issue is not which organization "wins." Rather, the focus should be on providing students with chances to debate at an appropriate level of competition. We should support all forms of debate that fulfill a pedagogical function. In that regard, it is time for NDT and CEDA coaches to put aside rivalry and consider the best system for their students.

Second, the time and work commitment to debate should be tied to the pedagogical function. This means that coaches should push students to excel, but recognize that if debate

Third, coaches should define themselves first and foremost as educators and run their programs accordingly. It takes an act of courage to orient a program toward a student's well-being in twenty years, as opposed to beating Harvard in the next debate. But such a choice is quite revealing for guiding educationally defensible program development.

Given this very brief sketch of a pedagogically justifiable program, it is appropriate to consider actions that could be taken to improve the quality of debate.

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE THE FUNCTIONING OF ACADEMIC DEBATE

The most obvious solution to several of the problems that I have mentioned would be regulation. In this view, debate organizations should establish standards for appropriate behavior and clean up the problem. While obvious, this idea is not a good answer at all. First, regulation without culture change will produce no substantive change. If coaches and debaters do not believe in the regulation, they will find a way to circumvent it. Second, regulation often produces backlash and could make some of the problems facing debate still worse.

Rather than regulation of practice, I think the best solutions fall into the areas of systemic modification, professional development and culture change.

SYSTEMIC MODIFICATION

By systemic modifications, I mean changes in the process of debate that do not require regulation of the actions of judges and debaters in a given round. I think that the primary actions in this area should relate to providing increased opportunities for audience debating and breaking down barriers between NDT and CEDA.

Those who attack the style of debate as foreign to the real world have a point. The solution to that problem, however, is not to try and force debaters to use ordinary life advocacy skills. Efforts to require such a change won't work. Moreover, the style of debate practice has evolved in order to maximize argumentative discussion in the format.

Therefore, the real need is to provide alternative outlets for competition in which debaters will be forced to adapt to a variety of audiences. One possible move in that direction would be for the American Forensic Association (AFA) to establish an audience debate clearinghouse that would include all schools wanting to host or participate in audience debates. The purpose of the clearinghouse would be to encourage schools to offer audience debate opportunities to their students. Through those opportunities debaters would be pushed to learn the importance of audience adaptation and other basic rhetorical skills.

In addition, a ranking system for audience debate might be created that would encourage schools to host a minimum number of audience debates each year. The chance to

barriers to audience debate are very low, such a system also might broaden debate participation.

Another idea along those lines would be for the AFA to create a ten person United States Debate Team. That team would be picked each year at the Speech Communication Association (SCA) convention via an audience-style elimination tournament. To be eligible to join the team, debaters would have to be juniors or seniors, participate in at least six NDT or CEDA tournaments a year, and maintain a minimum GPA, while making progress toward graduation. The members of the United States Debate Team then could function in a manner similar to foreign national debate teams and participate in audience debates across the country. Because there would be ten members of the team, the AFA would not need to fund any kind of debate tour.

The U.S. Debate Team idea is based on the assumption that debaters would try hard for the honor of being labelled a member of the "UNITED STATES DEBATE TEAM." Who wouldn't want to be able to their parents that he/she had represented his/her nation on the national team? The desire to be on the team would push debaters to hone their advocacy skills and would provide an incentive for schools to schedule audience debates. The team also would provide a chance for NDT and CEDA debaters to get to know each other.

Finally, in the area of systemic modification, the forensic community should provide opportunities for NDT and CEDA debaters to compete against each other. The conflict between the two organizations is harmful. The best way to get rid of the conflict is to provide opportunities for competition on a neutral topic between members of the organizations. In my last year running the program at the University of Kansas, my best NDT and my best CEDA team were one and the same--Tim Mahoney and Matt Roskoski. I think they got the best of both worlds by competing in both activities. Their competition also helped break down some attitudinal barriers among NDT debaters about CEDA. Opportunities for joint competition would achieve this same aim for the larger forensic community.

The way to change debate practice in order to improve the degree to which debate meets the advocacy goal is to change the incentives facing debaters. By providing both increased opportunities for and rewards with audience debating, debaters can be encouraged to develop advocacy as well as strong argument invention skills. By reducing conflict between NDT and CEDA, greater opportunities for appropriate participation can be provided to students.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The second area in which action is needed to improve academic debate is professional development. Debate coaches face an extremely difficult task. Debate is an all-consuming activity that easily can eat up all of one's professional time. Yet, coaches must not only work in this activity, but also teach and conduct research. To make matters worse, professional

organizations in argumentation and speech communication do not serve as support groups for debate coaches. And the inversion of the roles of coach and debater places still greater pressure on a debate coach.

The first need in this regard is for development of a coaches organization that could provide professional development assistance. Such an organization might, for example, sponsor seminars on developing a research program, prepare a packet for young coaches about issues such as public relations, tournament management, and generally provide peer support for coaches. The organization also might create a tenure statement that commented on the unique demands placed on college debate coaches.

The obvious place to locate this organization is with the Guild of Forensic Educators that has been around for a couple years under the leadership of Mike Bartanen. The Guild could be expanded to more inclusively contain NDT and CEDA coaches. It could hold meetings in conjunction with the AFA meetings at the SCA convention or it might ask for some sort of affiliated status with AFA. Debate coaches need an organization that focuses on the unique needs of the coaching profession and not on broader theoretical issues relating to argumentation theory.

Second, it is imperative that NDT and CEDA coaches work together. Today's petty rivalry is destructive of the debate process. Coaches should support the hard work that others in the activity do, regardless of the particular form of debate. Again, the Guild of Forensic Educators could serve as the meeting ground for coaches in the two activities.

Debate coaches are often treated like second class citizens in their departments. But, in reality, we expect more out of forensic educators than of other academics. All of this means that we need to provide better social support to assist in the professional development of debate coaches.

CULTURE CHANGE

The third area in which change could improve the pedagogical functioning of debate relates to the culture of the activity. Culture change will be difficult, especially because it is the debaters, rather than the coaches who largely are determining the current culture. But culture change is possible, if a number of coaches act together. Again, a larger version of the Guild might help in this process.

I think that there are two primary areas in which culture change could improve debate. First, debate would be pedagogically more valuable if it were somewhat more formal and if there were greater emphasis on civility. It is hard to think of a real-world forum in which it would be acceptable for an advocate participating in an argumentative exchange to sit on the floor, facing away from the person listening to the argument, while dressed in jeans and a t shirt. Yet, I have witnessed debaters doing just that. It is also hard to think of an argumentative activity, where participants so often yell at or abuse those who judge the dispute.

I think that coaches and judges need to push debaters toward somewhat greater formality and much greater civility by clearly stating expectations in regard to both values. This action would make debate a better training ground for real-world advocacy; it also would made debate a much more pleasant experience for coaches. Change in this area may not be as difficult as it appears. Let two or three debate teams excel by making persuasive real-world arguments and others will imitate them. If it becomes "cool" to treat judges with dignity, even refusing to ask about a decision, then many debaters will follow that practice.

Second, forensic educators should use their ballots and influence to emphasize the importance of testing evidence and reasoning as well as presenting it. Perhaps one answer is to broaden the definition of evidence from "a quotation from someone," to include common knowledge and accepted principles for testing evidence and reasoning. Debaters need to do more than present prepared materials. As educators we need to push them more strongly in order to develop critical thinking skills.

Culture change can play a key role in improving the degree to which academic debate meets the goals of teaching critical analysis and advocacy skills.

CONCLUSION

Academic debate is the most valuable pedagogical activity available for training students in argumentation, advocacy, and research skills. The competitive process pushes students to excel and the result is often a life-changing experience. How many successful professionals do we know who say that debate changed their lives?

And academic debate is much better adapted to fulfilling the pedagogical functions that we have identified than other activities such as Oxford style debate. American debate demands that students present strong arguments, supported by solid evidence. Isn't that exactly what we want from our public servants and those with whom we deal in business?

And yet, stepping back from the competition in the activity, reveals serious flaws. We don't do as good a job as we once did of teaching advocacy skills. Nor do we do a good job of teaching debaters to critically analyze evidence, rather than merely look for counter-evidence.

The most important step in dealing with these flaws is for coaches to consciously harness competition for the purpose of education.

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