

During the third phase of our meeting Will Baker initiated a discussion on the creation of an Urban Debate League Association. Possible UDLA functions include: technical assistance on league administration and implementation, information exchange and database management, college guidance and summer scholarships, fundraising assistance, and national networking activities.

At the conclusion of Ideafest II and in the days following I have been very optimistic about the prospects for this effort. I was impressed at Ideafest II by the large areas of agreement exhibited by a very diverse group of individuals. There seemed to be a conceptual consensus in most areas. I was also pleased that it was a meeting of debate coaches and administrators in which solutions were the major focus. This meeting was very low on pointless complaints, and full of practical ideas for solving real problems. The ingenuity of the group was also quite impressive in their ability to find unique solutions to problems mentioned by various program administrators and planners.

This is a very unique moment in American debate history. We have a great chance to unlock a vast intellectual storehouse of forensic treasures in millions of students and unleash that power on a world crying out for creative answers to our many problems. It is both an opportunity and a responsibility which I hope that we, as a national community, are up to. Based on Ideafest II, I am optimistic.

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MEMOIR OF A FORMER URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE PARTICIPANT

Edward Lee

As another year of competitive cross-examination debate ends, I am once again engaged in my seasonal reevaluation of my role in debate and the profound impact it has had on my life. The invitation to participate in Ideafest II and contribute to the forum intensified this reflection. I am left pondering the unique position I occupy as one of the initial graduates of the Atlanta Urban Debate League (UDL) program and as the current Co-director of the Tuscaloosa Debate League (TDL). These experiences have given me the rare opportunity to participate in debate outreach programs as both a participant and a facilitator.

As participants, coaches, and supporters of debate, we constantly speak of its transformative power and innate value. However, the lack of diversity in debate creates a bias in the samples we use to test the reliability of debate as a determiner of academic success and employability. As educators and activists we must transform the image of debate from an extracurricular endeavor for children of affluence to a pedagogical tool desperately needed to prevent an ever-increasing number of academically underprivileged children from wasting away in misery and hopelessness. As a former UDL debater, my personal achievements prove the power of the activity to accomplish this end. What I can contribute to the Ideafest dialogue and the community at large is a former UDL participant's chronicle of debate as an answer to our failing educational paradigm.

Memories of my initial foray into competitive high school debate have dimmed with the passage of time. However, thinking back to six years ago, I am concomitantly bombarded with memories of my disdain for contemporary teaching practices and bell hook's depiction of the "Homeplace" as a site of resistance in her book *Killing Rage*. Ms hooks speaks of the debilitating fear that would overwhelm her as she ventured from her all Black section of a small rural Kentucky town to school in a predominantly white downtown district. She was deeply disturbed by the terrorizing gaze of white men as they interrogated her Blackness. The gaze was powerfully destructive because she could never offer a spoken or unspoken rejoinder, to do so would provoke the racialized sexual violence her grandmother constantly alluded to at the kitchen table. It was not until she reached the edge of her grandmother's

Edward Lee (B.A. University of Alabama) is a graduate student at the University of Alabama and Co-director of the Tuscaloosa Debate League.

yard that the sense of terror slowly began to dissipate. The Homeplace provided her with an impenetrable fort capable of resisting the most insidious forms of patriarchal racist/white supremacy. The Homeplace prepared one for the day-to-day dangers that came with living in an oppressive society that promulgated acts of violence against individuals solely on the basis of the color of their skin, their class, gender or sexuality. The Homeplace should not be considered the place you eat, drink, and sleep. It is any institution created to shelter and empower people to speak out against their oppression and the subordination of others.

The educational system of the United States is supposed to serve this function. Theoretically, it is the first line defense in the fight to liberate all children. However, schools across the United States are derelict in their duty to provide children with a safe haven -- a site for resistance. The failure of our educational system follows the same pattern as other domestic social ills. People of color are disproportionately sacrificed by a system unable to generate enough resources to guarantee a minimum living standard for all its citizenry. In urban inner-city ghettos, barrios, reservations, and "poverty pockets" throughout the United States, schools are funded at one-half the budget of more affluent institutions only a few miles away, children leave school before graduating at alarming rates, and high school campuses are war zones instead of places of intellectual inquiry.

The horrendous conditions of schools cannot solely be blamed on funding. There is a unique synergy between lack of funding and anachronistic pedagogical practices creating what can only be described as a chronic educational crisis. With an educational system that resembles automated manufacturing practices, one easily understands why more African-American males enter prison each year than colleges and universities. The educational system does not provide a Homeplace. Instead of being sites for resistance, schools are instruments of socialization. Instead of teaching the art of questioning, students are instructed to conform to dominate social paradigms. Instead of breeding creativity, free independent thought is discouraged en lieu of memorization. For those oppressed by these paradigms, this is a tough and at times impossible pill to swallow. Resistance to a pedagogy based on forced indoctrination into a classist, sexist, and racist culture can only be seen as a logical act of self-preservation for many. A pedagogy that instills talking to without listening, commands without allowing dissent, and unwavering loyalty to repressive regimes prepares its constituency for two options. They can expect either a lifetime of competing for alienating entry level jobs or a lifetime in the penal system. Like our current educational practices, both options discourage a free exchange of ideas and demand a high

degree of conformity. If you have any doubts about this assessment, all you need to do is investigate the ballooning pool of applicants at your local fast food chain and the swelling profit margins of the private prison industry.

Educated in the public school system of inner-city Atlanta, my high school experience was tragically similar to the one depicted above. My savior, like many others, was the Atlanta Urban Debate League. It provided the opportunity to question the nefarious rites of passage (prison, drugs, and drinking) that seem to be uniquely debilitating to individuals in the poor urban communities. In enclaves of poverty, there is also an undercurrent of nihilism and negativity that eats away at the soul of the community. Adults are hopeless. Children follow their lead and become hopeless. The solution is to offer people a choice beyond minimum wage or prison. Urban Debate Leagues provide that. Debating delivers a galaxy of alternatives and opportunity for those who are only offered hopelessness and despair. To this day, I remember learning that meat, violence, and the prison system itself were unnecessary elements of our culture that existed because they (predominantly) go unquestioned. Debating forces us to abandon predetermined notions of correctness in light of well-reasoned alternatives. Questioning the very nature of our existence is at the heart of the debate process. I am left wondering what would occur if debate became as compulsory in inner-city educational culture as football and basketball? Imagine graduating from high school each year millions of underprivileged teenagers with the ability to articulate their needs, the needs of others, and the ability to offer solutions. I am convinced that someone would be forced to listen.

Urban Debate Leagues offer a pedagogical tool that simultaneously opens the mind to alternatives and empowers students to take control of their lives. Half of the time, students are disseminating information and forming arguments about complex philosophical and political issues. In the other half, they answer the arguments of others. Self-reflexivity is an inherent part of the activity. Debating gives students the ability to articulate the partiality of all critical assessments. Contemporary educational techniques teach one side of the issue and universalize it as the only "truth." Debate forces students to evaluate both sides, and determine their independent contextualized truth. Additionally, unlike the current pedagogy, debate allows everything to be questioned. How often are you able to argue the merits of writings by Audre Lorde when compared to William Shakespeare with your English teacher? How often are you able to challenge your history professor on the "facts" about Christopher Columbus' expeditions or the necessity of nuclear weapons use

during World War II? The ability to question subjectivities presented as the objective truth makes debate uniquely empowering for individuals disenfranchised by the current system. It teaches students to interrogate their own institutionalized neglect and the systemic unhindered oppression of others. It is one of the few venues in which we are able to question authority.

Thank you to all those who gave me the gift of resistance. I once read "the cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is." This profound statement captures the essence my argument and perhaps is the reason why educational reform is not yet emancipatory: Debate allows students to take control of their educational destiny and at once make it a site of resistance. It allows those saddled with the baggage of poverty, racism, and sexism to construct their personal strategy for liberation. The Urban Debate League provides a space for us to learn what justice is because it forces us to learn from those disproportionately affected by injustice.

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BOOK REVIEWS Nicholas F. Burnett, Editor

Review Essay: Debunking, Critical Thinking, and Teaching Argumentation David Snowball

Debunking is a dangerous business: the intellectual world's equivalent of a bomb disposal operation. It requires a clear sense of our own limitations, a certain respect for the object to be disarmed, and exquisite care in operation. A sense of confidence in our ability does help. A childish sense of outrage, and the attendant urge to kick at things, does not. Done well, it is an invaluable service to the community. Done poorly, it further craters the intellectual landscape.

It is rarely done well. Why? At least three reasons come to mind:

First, we tend to approach these projects in a spirit of high dudgeon. We only attempt to debunk beliefs that have achieved something of a popular currency; there would, otherwise, be no reason to approach them. And there's nothing that arouses an academic's missionary ire quite like the sight of more intellectual clap-track being slurped up by a credulous mass. While these feelings are understandable, they hardly encourage intellectual detachment and self-skepticism.

Second, we tend to approach projects that require us to work beyond the scope of our expertise. The odd notions which catch the public's fancy often spill beyond the borders of any single discipline (a skeptical discussion of creationism, for instance, requires conversations in biology, geology, and history). In our attempts to respond to these notions, as scholars we often venture beyond our intellectual homes and into areas where our understanding is fragmentary and impressionistic.

Third, we tend to compromise our intellectual standards to reach our prospective audience. Having already observed that the public is incapable of clear thought (a distant echo of Aristotle's notion that rhetoric addresses listeners who "are not able to see many things all together" and who, thus, cannot be reached by dialectic reason or scientific demonstration), we tend to popularize our arguments by cutting corners and leaving out "the hard stuff."

Plato offers one of the great examples of the treachery of debunking. We know that he was maddened, especially in his youth, by the pernicious influence of sophistic rhetoricians. The essence of his critique is well known: rhetoricians dupe the masses into accepting things based on mere appearance, rather than on reality. His longest and most scornful assault on rhetoric is contained in *Gorgias*, a dialogue in which Socrates skillfully exposes the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the blowhard Gorgias of Leontini. But at what

David Snowball (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts) is an Associate Professor of Speech Communication at Augustana College.