

THE CASE FOR URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES

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Emory University supports expanding opportunities for debate competition for traditionally underserved populations such as women, people of color, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. The Barkley Forum of Emory received grant support from the Phillips Petroleum Company and the National Forensics League in April 1991 to create the Urban Debate League program and the Summer Scholars program of the Emory National Debate Institute (ENDI). Both programs targeted high school participants. After six years of grant support it has become clear that policy debate programs targeting inner-city students and teachers benefit all involved. An examination of the underlying assumptions of these programs will hopefully encourage others in the debate community to consider ways in which they can help to augment the participation of traditionally underserved populations.

The U.S. education system needs to be reformed to meet the demands of the twenty-first century. This is true for several reasons. First, many public schools are inferior. The Supreme Court in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* ruled that education must be equal for all students, and not separated along racial lines. Over forty years after the *Brown* decision, United States public schools do not reflect this constitutional requirement: They are largely segregated and largely inadequate (Kozol 202). The result is chilling: "Thus the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives" (Kozol 56). The externalities of such a policy, in addition to fundamental injustice, include a weakened economy as entrants to the labor force are of decreasing quality, and the heightened risk of civil unrest as the education gap increases the income gap between the "haves" and the "have nots." Junior high school students are especially vulnerable because of the physical changes of adolescence and the increasing significance of peer approval. The academic tracking system affects the self-esteem of many junior high students. Those for whom traditional education is alienating are often tracked in remedial

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programs despite their intellectual potential, often at the cost of their academic self-esteem for the rest of their secondary school tenure.

Second, demographic trends require educational reform:

As the twenty-first century approaches, education is facing a serious dilemma. The 'typical' student that . . . education . . . [is] designed for is an endangered species. Highly motivated . . . white middle-class students from two-parent families are becoming scarce in most school systems. . . . [D]ivorce, delayed marriage, delayed childbirth, declining fertility rates among white middle-class women, increasing fertility among poor minority women, and the influx of immigrants from Mexico, Asia, and the Caribbean will completely alter the way educators will administer schools and instruct students. Unless the education profession makes reforms to accommodate these students then the year 2000 will not bode well for education and society at large. There will be a large pool of middle-class, white aged [persons] who will be asked to support financially the poor, nonwhite public-school children who are being taught by middle-class white female teachers trained in the pedagogy of the 1960's and who work in schools with administrative structures and hierarchies designed for schools in the 1900's. (Irvine 126-7)

Junior high students are especially adrift during this demographic transition and vulnerable to peer influence. Gangs have established an increasingly strong foothold in this age group (Jones). Educational reform is required to encourage pedagogical techniques which will counter the unhealthy influence of gang membership with healthy forms of school-based peer interaction.

Third, education must provide equal access to information. Bells currently ring in schools at all levels to signal the end of fifty minute classes, and to prepare students for factory shifts characterizing an industrial age which no longer exists. The twenty-first century is already identified as the information and technology age, and "[i]n the next century, the single greatest determinant of economic success will be the ability to use computers and access the Internet . . ." ("Tearing Part 7" A10). Education must reform in a way which will guarantee equal access to computer technology. The results are significant to the future of the nation: "The most powerful force driving the division between rich and poor is the computer. It separates working Americans into two camps: those with a good education, for whom the computer revolution has brought great benefits; and those lesser skilled Americans who perform good and honorable work . . . now being replaced by

technology" ("Tearing Part 1" A10). Students attending schools with inadequate or non-existent computer resources are already being disenfranchised from the information age. Incentives need to be built into educational reform to encourage the skills necessary to use and apply computer-based information.

Fourth, the narrative character of education must be reformed. The predominate educational format is the lecture where the teacher narrates information to a listening student. The result ignores authentic inquiry:

The contents [of narration by teachers] whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of . . . narration . . . [which] become . . . alienating. . . (Friere 52-3)

Education is but one of many factors alienating adolescents. This is not, however, a justification to retain an inadequate system. While students do

have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store . . . in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire 53)

The task of applying knowledge is critical to meaningful educational reform. Each student deserves and needs the opportunity for experiential education; for intellectual self-discovery; for a pedagogy that motivates authentic inquiry; for a pedagogy which allows students to "own" their learning.

It is clear that the educational system needs reform if it is to prepare today's students for tomorrow's world. Debate competition is a rich source of opportunity for providing educational reform; for leveling the playing field of unequal education; for lowering the institutional barriers of exclusion; for motivating interest in information. How does one redress the inequality inherent in public education? Competition in debate teaches the communication skills vital to educational reforms which are critical to the success of living

in a global society.¹ If one knows how to advocate on one's own behalf in a way that will be acknowledged by the listener, one does not have to resort to violence to get the attention of decision-makers.

How does one redress the computer access barriers in education? While greater communication skills generate appropriate advocacy for educational needs, debate competition offers potential for increased computer usage. The Internet is a rich source of evidence for both public policy and value debate contests, not to mention extemporaneous speaking and other forensic individual events. Free access to information removes competitive barriers to those from inner-city and rural areas who might not have access to excellent library materials. It can be argued that competition privileges hierarchies through the designation of winners and losers, designations of success and failure. As we enter the next century, however, we can radically redefine our understanding of "success" and "failure" as "recognition of academic merit," and "that which encourages academic merit." Competition is a powerful pedagogical tool. Competition is that which motivates students to more fully explore the information necessary to achieve the levels of academic merit to which they aspire. If a debate loss motivates one to the library or the Internet, one is accessing the information age. Interscholastic debate offers a creative structure for increasing access to knowledge.

How does one redress the narration sickness of the education system? There are certainly trends in education which encourage interactive and dialogic pedagogies, but few are as potent as debate. Teachers and students from many different schools from across the United States learn from each other as positions are built and evaluated in the laboratory of competition. A contest round reverses the narration pattern of traditional education. The student speaks to the teacher, referencing information that reflects an understanding of concrete knowledge grounded in research. Through the ballot or the oral critique the teacher reacts, refines ideas, and encourages the student, but the basis of their meeting is student driven; the basis uniquely relevant for student experiential education. In this way, students have an authentic learning experience, an experience that does not treat them like an object to be "filled," but as a person with whom a teacher shares. In fact, "education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction," in which the teacher presents himself to students as their necessary opposite (Freire 53). By considering their

¹ This position is thoroughly presented in the Snider and Uchida et al. articles.

ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence "by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students . . . to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization . . . [to] be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power" (Freire 56). All would benefit from the student-driven learning of competitive debate.

If debate competition offers a door through which the educational system can pass to find relevant praxis in the next century, why isn't the experience available to everyone? Public education is unequal, primarily with respect to financial resources.² Interscholastic debate is no different, having traditionally been the province of the affluent white male, the "endangered species" of the coming demographic changes in education. Educators need to aggressively pursue the removal of the barriers of exclusion. After six years of working with the Urban Debate League, we at Emory have come to some firm conclusions. First, the high school students with whom we have worked are unquestionably talented and motivated. Second, they have maximized their opportunities for college scholarships for debate. Third, the majority have thrived in college as a result of their training in critical thinking, communication, and research.

Fourth, the students and teachers from privileged backgrounds who have worked with the Urban Debate League populations have engaged a rich dialogue across the chasms of difference which has resulted in a thriving integrated policy debate circuit in Georgia; a circuit built on respect and mutuality. As one student from inner-city Atlanta noted, "When we are working on a disadvantage together, I see more of our similarities than our differences." Fifth, it is clear that many high school students never have an opportunity to participate because they are increasingly seduced by gangs and other forces at a younger and younger age. Traditional education alienates these students in junior high school, making them vulnerable to the promises of dangerous and reckless behavior; vulnerable to the way drugs might serve as anesthesia for the pain of a bleak present and hopeless future; vulnerable to low self-esteem and feelings of depression. Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders are not old enough to secure summer employment, but they are old enough to join gangs. By increasing our offerings of summer training programs to younger participants, it is our goal to "hook" them on educational competition. Other goals include enhancing the existing high school debate community in the Urban Debate League by allowing them

² The entire thesis of Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* demonstrates the point.

teaching and mentoring opportunities for the younger participants, and offering an activity that counters the alienation encountered in their educational settings.

There is so much that the national debate community can do to further efforts to increase access to competitive debate. If there is a trade-off between verbal and physical aggression, the establishment of a nationwide program of Urban Debate Leagues might be a step toward reducing violence in the inner-cities of America. Tournament debate has offered profound skills for many who have used them to achieve national leadership roles in government, business, and education, among others. It is only fair that all have access to such a rich experiential education.

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