IN SEARCH OF TOPICALITY: DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXTS

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One of the reasons often given by schools for beginning a CEDA program is the desire to escape the unusual or "squirrel" affirmative cases frequently encountered in NDT. This article is an effort to explore some of the approaches available to negatives in CEDA to protest cases they view as non-topical.

For meaningful debate to occur both teams must share an understanding of the focus of the topic. Capp and Capp amplified on this conclusion:

> Failure to agree on the meaning of terms early in debate may prevent a clash of arguments; unless a direct clash occurs, there will be no intelligent debate.[1]

Considering the educational emphasis of CEDA, it is particularly appropriate that topicality serve as a substantial issue in each debate. Vasilius argues that topicality is of paramount importance in debates without plans, value debating.[2] As other authors in this booklet indicate, concern for topicality has a prominent role in the tradition of CEDA.

As with most debate concepts, the nature of topicality has been related almost exclusively to policy debate. Consequently, the affirmative plan has been the central element in most topicality challenges. As Thomas noted:

> The affirmative is vulnerable to topicality attacks (1) when the plan fails to fully implement the resolution in all of its terms; (2) when the plan goes beyond the requirements of the resolution; or when the case does not justify all of the proposed changes in policy required by the resolution.[3]

Though the third topicality attack concerns the case, it is based on justifying the changes in policy embodied in the plan. It is this justification argument that is closest in character to challenges now employed in CEDA debates. The remainder of this article will examine some possibilities for negative topicality arguments.

As a voting issue, topicality attacks and defenses deserve the same support due to all other critical arguments. The merit of topicality arguments must be based on the reasoning and evidence used to sustain them. Unfortunately, this is not always the case as "some teams (only) complain, 'We came a long way to debate this case.' The only criteria for topicality appears to be the distance each team has traveled."[4]

One too frequent form of topicality defense is the dictionary definition. Dictionaries are designed to detail the meaning of a term in all its contexts, of which the debate proposition is only one. As a result, dictionary support is not by itself sufficient to demonstrate the resolution has been properly interpreted. It is this shortcoming that led Pellegrini and Stirling to claim that dictionary definitions "are seldom fruitful for argumentative purposes."[5]

Where can debaters turn for insight into the meaning of a proposition if dictionaries fail? Nobles offers the suggestion that the meaning of a term should be consistent with the controversy's context.[6] Such rational advise does direct us toward a valuable resource for debate, the historical context of the resolution.

The importance of the historical context is illustrated in two ways. First, the resolution develops from a public conflict. Windes and Hastings explain:

> Every proposition possesses a background or history all its own; the proposition did not suddenly happen; it emerged from a complex process of controversy evolution. From the inception of a situation which created basic original concerns to the focusing of those concerns through the proposition, this evolutionary development demands the study of the advocate.[7]

Though Windes and Hastings were detailing the development of propositions for public debate, their reasoning is equally applicable to academic debate. The committee that selects the alternative resolutions for CEDA has worked to choose questions that reflect contemporary controversies. The resolution committee focuses on topics that have already evolved to being debated in public forums.

Other writers have stressed the value of the context of the controversy to debaters seeking the resolution's meaning. Luck, Paulsen and McCown advocated the use of societal context for interpreting any topic. "Not only would recognizing a context and background for the proposition render the process of definition sensible," the authors claimed, "but the context could itself serve to define the area of controversy."[8] A similar view of proposition analysis was supported by Eisenberg and Ilardo who declared that resolutions are best understood "by considering the situation and context from which they emerged."[9]

If it is the intent of CEDA to recreate the conditions for audience-debating, then it is vital that the participants and the audience share common meanings for the terms of the proposition. The failure to understand the context of the public controversy leads to a debate that "is a fruitless, academic exercise."[10] A number of methods have been proposed to help debaters decide whether their interpretation, or another team's, is justified by the context.[11]

The value of the historical context is exemplified in a second way. Those debaters who wish to define terms will find that authorities in the current controversy are best able to designate the meaning of the topic's language. As Naylor and Unger proclaimed, "One of the surest clues to meaning is how a term is used by contemporary scholars, critics and activists."[12] Again, analysis of the proposition's historical context is a superior means for interpreting the resolution's meaning.

The affirmative should be able to demonstrate in any debate that their interpretation is consistent with the past and present debate occuring in the society. An affirmative defending compulsory blood donations on a national service topic should be required to prove that societal advocates of national service view blood as an integral part of the controversy. It may well be that inventive affirmatives will uncover legitimate arguments that have not been included in the public debate, yet the burden should still be on the affirmative to support their case as a proper extention of the societal conflict.

The problems associated with interpreting resolutions is not confined to topics, like national service, that evaluate policy alternatives. On both of this year's topics, affirmatives devised means of arbitrarily limiting debate. In comparing the goals of energy production and environmental protection, some affirmatives restricted discussion to the environmental impact of one energy source. Some affirmatives judged religious groups on the basis of one organizations activism on one issue (textbooks, homosexuals, etc.).

While these issues are truly part of the public debate, concentrating exclusively on them may misrepresent the societal controversy. Typically in such cases teams are misusing reasoning by example. Ziegelmueller and Dause suggest three tests that should be applied to these affirmatives.[13]

First, the affirmative must provide a sufficient number of examples. Generally affirmatives fail this test since they offer only one example. Ziegelmueller and Dause explain why this is inadequate:

> A number of cases must be considered in order to estimate the regularity of the characteristic. A single case may be sufficient to illustrate the generalization, but a single example cannot support the claim.[14]

Freeley reached the same conclusion that one example lacks strength. Freeley examined reasoning in other scholarly activity:

> Even a carefully controlled laboratory experiment is usually not acceptable as establishing a conclusion until it has been repeated with the same results by other competent scientists - and in medicine, not until thousands of cases have been studied.[15]

Clearly, analysis of only one example is unproductive.

The second test, whether the examples are typical, moves closer to the value of societal context. If the examples given are unrepresentative of the issues debated in the national arena, then the conclusion is equally suspect. It is much like judging the taste of an apple; we must know the affirmative has not chosen a rotten example.

The third test involves accounting for negative illustrations. While it is definitely not the responsibility of the affirmative to present the contrary cases, they must be able to support an on-balance judgment that considers all relevant examples.

Regardless of whether students participate in NDT or CEDA, the most immediate reward for most debaters is winning a ballot. Given that motive, debaters are likely to adopt many strategies, including improperly interpreting the resolution, as means of winning. Consequently, it is important that negatives, likewise, have a repertoire of arguments available to contest a case's topicality. If negatives will apply these tests of reasoning, along with the importance of historical context, then they will expand their options beyond references to length of travel. Such arguments would be in the tradition of CEDA.

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[1]Glenn R. Capp and Thelma R. Capp, Principles of Argumentation and Debate. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 95.

[2]Jan Vasilius, "Value Proposition Debate: A Pragmatic Approach," in Don Brownlee, ed., Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument. (CEDA, 1980), p. 51.

[3]David A. Thomas, "What Makes an Affirmative Case Topical?" The Forensic, 59, (October 1973), 16-18.

[4]Don Brownlee, "More on Ulrey and Black," The Forensic, 61, (May 1976), 15.

[5]Angelo Pellegrini and Brents Stirling, Argumentation and Public Discussion. (NY: Heath, 1936), p. 68.

[6]W. Scott Nobles, "Analyzing the Proposition," in Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, eds., Decision by Debate. (NY: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 156.

[7]Russel Windes and Arthur Hastings, Argumentation and Advocacy. (NY: Random House, 1965), p. 37.

[8]James I. Luck, James W. Paulsen, and F. Scott McCown, "The Role of Societal Context in Proposition Analysis," The Forensic, 63, (May 1978), 4-9.

[9]Abne M. Eisenberg and Josehp A. Ilardo, Argument. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 32.

[10]Wayne N. Thompson, Modern Argumentation and Debate. (NY: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 48.

[11]Luck, Paulsen and McCown, 9.

[12]Michael Naylor and James J. Unger, Second Thoughts. (Skokie, IL: National Textbook, 1971), p. 17.

[13]George W. Ziegelmueller and Charles A. Dause, Argumentation: Inquiry and Advocacy. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 95.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Austin J. Freeley, Argumentation and Debate. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981), p. 116-117.