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RESPONSE

Sonja K. Foss

To respond to the effort to integrate intercollegiate debate and invitational rhetoric requires that I begin with an acknowledgment of my standpoint, the perspective and experiences out of which my response develops. I never competed in intercollegiate debate and, in fact, I do not recall ever seeing such a debate. I do not know the basics of debate – *taglines, flow, and power tagging* mean nothing to me, and I certainly never have experienced a fear of the dreaded counter-warrant. My only experience with intercollegiate debate has been that when debaters enroll in one of my presentational speaking classes, I inwardly groan because I think to myself that they are going to be arrogant and talk way too fast. I offer my perspective, then, from a standpoint of ignorance about intercollegiate debate.

Because I have no experience with intercollegiate debate, I have chosen as my starting point not debate but the nature of the world in which we currently live. I believe that one of the major communication problems we face is a pervasive atmosphere of unrelenting contention that Deborah Tannen calls the *argument culture*. In this argument culture, we tend to respond to people and ideas in an adversarial frame of mind with communication designed to attack, criticize, and oppose, even when our goals might better be accomplished with other modes of communication. We see evidence of this adversarial approach to understanding and approaching the world in, for example, negative political advertisements, the lack of civility that has come to characterize debate in political and legislative settings, the hostile and abusive language in which many private and public interactions are conducted, and the increasing use of physical violence as a means for resolving differences. In the face of this argument culture, I believe that communication scholars and educators have a responsibility to try to counter this culture by helping students develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to use communication to create a more civil and humane world. Cindy Griffin and I developed invitational rhetoric in part to provide an option for rhetoric rooted in respect and civility rather than domination and contention.

Intercollegiate debate seems to me to teach skills that are antithetical to invitational rhetoric and to the achievement of a civil and humane world: it is an activity that perpetuates

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rather than intervenes in the argument culture. For this reason, I offer revolution as a rhetorical option for dealing with the incompatibilities between debate and invitational rhetoric. I suggest that the fine debaters who are working on this issue develop something apart from CEDA and NDT instead of trying to change those structures to make them more compatible with civil and humane values.

I suggest revolution for two reasons. The first is rooted in my belief that the effort to change others violates their value and integrity. By trying to change CEDA and NDT, we engage in the effort to change others and thus violate a fundamental assumption of invitational rhetoric, which is that rhetors do not have the right to make others acquiesce to what they believe is the best way. I am becoming increasingly clear in my understanding that we do not have the right to impose our perspectives on others. Just as we want to be allowed to create our own life experience, we have to let others do the same. Such a stance does not simply mean tolerating others and their perspectives because tolerance still suggests disapproval; it suggests that we believe others ought to be doing things differently from what they are. Instead, allowing means appreciation of the differences among individuals, a stance of the joyful allowing of another person to be different from us. Revolution – rather than evolution – allows those in intercollegiate debate to debate as they choose. Those who want to engage in interaction in other ways can do that, without trying to make those involved in CEDA and NDT change.

A second reason I offer revolution over evolution is that I am becoming less convinced that strategies of opposition are effective as a rhetorical option for creating change. Feminist theorist Sonia Johnson suggests that what we resist persists (*Going* 26-27), by which she means that whatever receives our attention and energy is what thrives and is maintained. When we oppose, bang up against, and struggle to get individuals or things to change, we give those persons or things power. By bestowing our belief and energy on them, we reinforce them as reality; we become their accomplices as we strengthen them. My guess is that if debaters interested in invitational rhetoric proposed some of the changes they are suggesting to CEDA and NDT participants, CEDA and NDT simply would reinforce their systems – they would strengthen, refine, and embellish the edifice of intercollegiate debate and would subvert and co-opt in subtle and creative ways those who are trying to make changes in that system.

Instead of working within the CEDA and NDT systems to create change, I suggest as a rhetorical option living in the world the way we want the world to be (Johnson, *Wildfire*

251). This option involves figuring out how we want our world to be and then living in ways that enact that world. Our focus should be not on doing something now to create something different in the future. Instead, because what happens in the present is always and automatically creating the future, how we behave now is what we get in the future (Johnson, *Wildfire* 37). If we want a future world in which people respect one another, do not try to dominate one another, and work cooperatively, we have to respect one another now, engage in non-dominating acts now, and work cooperatively now. If we want to have interactions among students on the basis of communication skills that contribute to the creation of a civil and humane world, then we have to engage in such interactions now.

What I am suggesting is that those of us who are interested in exchanging ideas rooted in the model of invitational rhetoric simply go off and engage in a different style of intercollegiate interaction concerning communication (notice that I am working hard to avoid calling the event *debate* because I suspect that term is not going to work for us anymore). Although I do not have a clear idea of how such an exchange would look, it probably would be less a competition of ideas in a marketplace and more a process of joy in the development of ideas together. We would move away from the notion of having the best idea win, and our focus instead would be on coming up with ideas and letting the individuals involved choose whether those ideas are ones in which they want to participate. The basic question would be not whether an idea is true or is the best idea but whether it is an idea in which an individual wants to participate. The process also probably would be characterized by the development of communication skills such as working together, respecting one another, affirming one another, and building on and extending ideas. I suspect that the process would not involve a judge because no one else can decide for us what we should think or the ideas in which we choose to participate.

I am excited about the possibilities that lie before us in terms of debate and invitational rhetoric. I know that, despite my preference for revolution over evolution, those involved in this endeavor will pursue the path for developing their ideas in the way they believe is best, and I trust their competence in doing that. I applaud the fine work they have done on this project so far and wish them much success in their journey.

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RESPONSE
Cindy L. Griffin

Like Sonja, I have never participated in or been to a debate. As I listened to the demonstration debate between Kristina and Amanda at the National Communication Association Convention, I felt a bit like an alien who landed in this classroom trying to make sense of what was going on. I know from my own perspective that I can't think and work in the structure of debate, even as it was modified in that demonstration. Throughout the whole experience I kept asking myself, "do I feel safe, do I feel valued?" I actually felt quite nervous. So, I do know that I've probably never participated in or even seen a debate because I am uncomfortable with this kind of interaction – I consciously choose not to participate in the kind of debate that we teach on our campuses.

On a slightly different note, though, I am very impressed with the work done here. I am honored by the amount of time and attention given to this project and to have our ideas taken so seriously: to have them thought through in a way that was systematic and careful is wonderful. The authors of the essay and the individuals involved in the debate asked hard questions about the nature and possibility of an "invitational debate" and, although they may not have offered all the answers to the questions they posed, they did create an environment where we can begin to consider the possibilities for such a framework. I want to thank the authors and participants for starting this project. It is incredibly ambitious and I also would like to know how it progresses.

I have a slightly different perspective on change than Sonja does, although it is not at odds with her position at all. Before the debate, you asked us to respond to the question of whether change should be evolutionary or revolutionary. My answer is "yes," it has been and can be both: change is both revolutionary and evolutionary. This response comes from my own life experiences, a series of metaphors, as well as how I search for examples of change. I almost always begin to try to understand the nature of change feeling intimately connected to and with other people. Because of this orientation, I believe that when I make changes in my life, those changes affect others. I try to consider the nature of my evolutionary or revolutionary changes and how those alterations will affect others.

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