

CAD FORUM

Introduction to the Special Issue on Digital Debate and Assessment

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Contemporary Argumentation and Debate's mission has long been to provide a venue for professional forensics educators to share their research and observations. As the larger educational landscape undergoes dramatic revision, speech and debate are not immune from these changes.

In this special issue, we have chosen to identify two important dynamics that are currently transforming higher education and debate: (1) the increasing prevalence of academic assessment, and (2) the rising use of technology. These two trends are working together to dramatically influence the learning environment for today's students. Over the course of the past two years, panels were organized at the National Communication Association annual conference and outstanding papers were commissioned from that research. This issue therefore reflects several years of consideration and inquiry by some of today's leading forensics professionals.

Over the last few years, assessment has been something of a buzzword in academic circles. The rising cost of college tuition has been one of many factors driving greater interest in demonstrating the utility of specific educational programs. For many educators, assessment may be something that they can

recognize the theoretical utility of, even if they are leery of how it applies to their curriculum. This dynamic is especially prominent for the resource-heavy demands of intercollegiate forensics. Especially in times of modest university budgets, there are consistent pressures for directors of debate and forensics to demonstrate the necessity of programmatic funding.

The first two articles in this special issue accordingly provide a valuable effort to close the conceptual gaps between intercollegiate debate and assessment. Sarah T. Partlow-Lefevre authored “Arguing for Debate: Introducing Key Components for Assessment of Intercollegiate Debate Programs,” which represents the single most comprehensive effort to make assessment usable for debate professionals. She not only explains the growing trend of assessment, but also discusses how these approaches should be utilized by debate programs. Partlow-Lefevre identifies a four-step assessment cycle of establishing expectations, reviewing team practices, gathering evidence, and evaluating the results. These materials are provided in very specific terms and she offers sample instruments for different program models. The entire essay treats assessment as a process that must be customized for a specific institution. Finally, her essay examines a series of different types of evidence that may be valuable for assessment programs. She explores how a director can utilize media coverage, photographs and video, academic performance, time logs, student evaluation, pre- and post-tests, self-report surveys, diversity measures, cumulative results sheets, rankings and awards, and alumni success. This essay should be considered the foundation for assessing debate programs.

Shifting from the broader demands of assessment to specific instruments of assessment systems, Sarah Stone Watt provides “Authentic Assessment in Debate:

An Argument for Using Ballots to Foster Talent-Development and Promote Authentic Learning.” Her piece makes a compelling case for a revision of contemporary understandings of ballots and post-debate evaluation instruments. Her work assesses the scope of concerns with current post-debate evaluation practices and explores how these instruments could be better understood as expressions of authentic learning processes. Nicely framing debate within the broader search for accountability within higher education, Stone Watt identifies how debate could best be understood as a “high-impact” practice. Further adding value for any director of debate and forensics, she discusses the importance of measuring growth and improvement in students throughout their academic careers. This perspective is a valuable addition to any of the current discussions of the role of debate assessment and balloting and her conclusions offer powerful suggestions for future reform.

Stone Watt’s discussion of electronic balloting is also a useful transition to the ubiquitous role of technology in modern debating. Within intercollegiate policy debate, which is the foundation for much of the second half of our special issue, the dramatic expansion of technological use in debating is obvious to even the most casual observer. The process of researching and constructing arguments had already moved to a larger process, but now the means of debating and sharing these research materials have also undergone a digital transition. Debating today requires a consideration of how the students, their arguments, and their technology work together. Travis Cram’s contribution, entitled “Putting Debate Back Into Debate: Digital Debate and Evidence,” is a valuable examination of this nexus of competitive practice and technological utility. He contextualizes paperless debate as part of a larger paradigm of “debate as information

production.” His critique of this perspective draws upon foundational concepts of argumentation and debate. Cram’s conclusions offer a provocative means of ways to enhance the utility of the research skills taught through policy debate.

R. Jarrod Atchison’s and Ian Miller’s “Open Source Debating: The Justifications and Responses to Deacon Source Version 1.0,” offers an institutional view of how one of the nation’s most prominent debate programs has pioneered efforts to make research fully transparent. They describe Wake Forest University’s transition to an open source model of evidence and argumentation where all of the collected documents used in their speeches are publicly available. Their research offers significant insights into the process of abandoning the traditional notion of evidence as purely private good, even in a competitive environment. This case study then expands to consider the reflection both of their program, but also to the participants at one of the largest and most prestigious tournaments. The combination of both internal and external perspectives on this transition is a significant addition to our understanding of how technological change is manifested in debate programs.

Each of these articles provides a novel perspective on challenges that are redefining debate practice, as well as the craft of being a professional debate educator. We are proud to include this special issue in the concluding issue under our editorship.

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