

One If by Land, Two if by Sea, Three if by Format: British Debate is Coming

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The rise of the popularity of the debate format known as British Parliamentary, or World Universities, debate style has surged in the past five years. This format, international in scope and scale, has attracted a lot of attention in the United States, where it continues to spread from New England and California toward the center of the country. This essay reviews the first three books that attempt to make this style accessible for students and instructors who wish to introduce or improve the teaching of this format on their campuses. Specifically, Neill Harvey-Smith's (2010) *Practical Guide to Debating*, Steve Johnson's (2009) *Winning Debates*, and Ian Lising's (2011) *Across the House* are reviewed for their ability to assist the interested teacher of the British Parliamentary format.

Writing in 1923, Professor A. Craig Baird wondered if the British style of debating had an advantage over American debating formats. He wrote, "the English debating style is philosophical and literary, just as ours is practical and legal. The differences, quite pronounced, are not due so much to contrasted debating systems as to markedly differing national experience and training" (Baird, 1923, p. 221). Connected to the national character, so to speak, made debating in America more "legal" and less "literary" than the British style. Baird points out that Swarthmore College and the Debating Association of the Colleges of Pennsylvania have decided to try the Oxford format in the next year. Baird wonders, "Is this movement merely the desire to seek after some new thing in college forensics? Or does the British plan have sound educational merits that justify its general adoption?" (Baird, 1923, p. 216).

Baird's question echoes today in a university debating climate that is similar to his own. Debating clubs and societies in 2013 are making the choice to turn to the British format, called British Parliamentary (BP), or Worlds Debating, with a stunning rapidity. Like Baird, we are right to wonder what changes come with the shift to a British format. Unlike Baird, we have some guidance, and more on the horizon. The most recently published texts on British Parliamentary debating will be welcome to those seeking to understand this trend in competitive debating, and invaluable to those who are making the shift to BP.

The Oxford, or British, format that Baird was concerned about is not the BP format. Baird would be somewhat pleased that BP has taken on the idea of time limits and rigorous judging. He feared the open nature of the British format of debating would discourage participation in collegiate debate among students. However, this does not eliminate Baird's critique of British debating completely. Baird's specific questions are still asked today by many coaches and teachers considering the transition,

Will the adoption of the British system mean a loss of collegiate interest in debating? Will the students who follow this judgeless system submit to the thorough preparation characteristic of the conventional American debate? Will they continue to respect sound reasoning based upon broad and exact knowledge of the question? Under the British system will they develop more ardent convictions? Will they have a less artificial and more attractive forensic style? Will they argue with more conversational ease and directness? (Baird, 1923, p. 216)

There have been a few changes since Baird considered this question, most notably the alteration

of the British format of debate – parliamentary, open, and judgeless – into the British Parliamentary format which is directly judged, not open to just anyone, and attempts to maintain the parliamentary style while being as competitive as any other debate format in existence. These changes have not invalidated the critical questions facing any debate director deciding which competitions to attend – improvement of style, reasoning, and thought are possibly the only reasons why someone would want to participate in intercollegiate debating. Fortunately, the rapid expansion of BP debating is not unique to America, but is a worldwide phenomenon. Three recent textbooks – Neill Harvey-Smith's (2010) *Practical Guide to Debating*, Steve Johnson's (2009) *Winning Debates*, and Ian Lising's (2011) *Across the House* – that deal directly with teaching BP debate address Baird's concerns directly in different ways, and will be reviewed here.

There is a reason why these books are new, and British debating is not so new. In Britain, the idea of a speech communication department is unheard of. Debate programs are student run, student directed, student instructed, and frequently they are student founded. Bring up the idea of a professional debating coach to a debater from the British style, and you get a mix of ridiculousness with a dash of fantastic admiration. In short, British debaters find the idea of professional coaching to be literally awesome. Having the faculty supervision that Baird suggests is not possible on the other side of the Atlantic.

The rise of the British format (called Worlds format these days due to its rapid global expansion) in the United States has created a market for textbooks that could be used in argumentation or debate courses. Two of the three first books entering the field of Worlds Debate textbooks are authored by those who competed in the format, and one from a traditional American coach

who moved into the format by choice. All three books represent something more than just introductory lessons in a new competitive format – they all highlight the need for a *tactical* approach to teaching argumentation, a big difference from the vast buffet of argumentation books currently available to instructors.

The tactical, as defined by de Certeau, makes use of time over place. “It is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (1984, p. xix). Strategy privileges place as a locus of power and advantage, “when a subject of will and power. . . can be isolated from an ‘environment’”(de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Our traditional treatment of the production of argument is to teach the priority of particular theoretical constructs, whether they be from Stephen Toulmin, Douglas Walton, Chaim Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Frans van Eemeren, or the litany of other theorists whose insightful work populates our theory smorgasbord. Unfortunately, the act of debating – as reliant on timing and situation as it is – becomes servile to the ‘truth’ of the theory, always secondary to the assignment of our “in the moment” articulations to the place of the analyzing theory. As Baird (1923) notes, what we have are differences of cultural approach to the act of arguing – a difference that each of these books tries to contend with through a de Certeauian tactical in the face of the often overwhelming strategic.

The authors of the books examined here are not from the field of rhetoric, communication, or argumentation studies. They are practitioners of the art of argument, and the sparse theory in these books is a testament to that. In a tactical fashion, “they are able to combine heterogeneous elements” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Something sophistic is resurrected through these books, collections of tips on how to approach the place of the tournament from a position of weakness, with only time

and fractured knowledge on your side. These books will each be a welcome addition to the debate director or coach who values teaching how to construct and present good arguments to varied listeners. The major difference between them is not in quality, but in preference – how the instructor approaches argument, either tactically or strategically. The more one views it toward the strategic, the more one will prefer an approach that sees debate as a skill set, applicable to any situation. If one views it from the position of tactics, one sees it as a practiced art, difficult, if not unproductive, to distinguish from the moment of speech. These books comfortably occupy positions on the strategy-tactic spectrum that offer a vast wealth of instructional assistance to teachers of any view.

The distinctions between the texts only vary in the sense of what you might want to accomplish by assigning them. They do make assumptions about the level of debate competition the reader has been exposed to, or wants to engage in. Johnson's (2009) book appeals to those who have been to and are thinking of participating primarily at competitions. Lising's (2010) book has a broad appeal for those starting to think about competition, and who are curious and want to do well at one. Harvey-Smith's (2011) book provides the most information for those interested in starting a club of their own in this format, from the ground up, and full of practical examples. For the recruiting debate coach assigned to teach an argumentation course, any of these books would serve well for recruiting new team members.

Johnson's *Winning Debates*

The most familiar of these texts to American debate eyes will be Johnson's (2009) *Winning Debates*. Harkening back to Thrasymachus's *Knock-Down Arguments*, the book is a collection of move and counter-

move that best helps the intermediate debater figure out a new stance, grip, or swing for their game. If there is something left out, it's the begged question: Why wrestle at all? Although Johnson's (2009) book does contain moments of philosophical reflection that try to address this question – such as the very enjoyable section on debating “paradox,” this light stitching is not enough to present a compelling, holistic book for an introductory student. This is the most strategic of the three books, seeing debate as the accumulation of skill sets, orders of operation, and lists of commonplaces that the debater can deploy in any situation. The situational is subjected to the structure, and it works well as a text. For a student in an argumentation class, the instructor is going to have to do a lot of intermediary work. If the student has some debate experience, it will be easier. Johnson's (2009) book is the best of the three for the debater transitioning from an American format to Worlds.

Johnson's (2009) book is so meticulously and carefully constructed that you would think it is a tactical military manual. This book was written for the purpose of preparing individuals for top global competition in the Worlds Style. For that reason, it might not be the best book for an introductory argumentation or debate course. Johnson's thorough coverage of strategies for debates is the highlight of the book. These strategies are direct and practical, and appear to be forged from experience and experiments in tournament competition. For example, Johnson offers long lists of “concept sets” which he includes in the tradition of commonplaces extending back to Aristotle. Johnson's use of the commonplaces, stasis theory, presumption, and other familiar ideas from rhetorical theory will be welcomed by those professors who would like some guidance for their feet as they tread into unfamiliar debating turf. The ideas and strategies are refreshing compared to the all-

too-familiar move in many argumentation textbooks of expecting students to construct a sensible argument from pages of overwrought argument theory meant more for criticism than production. Johnson here focuses on the theory as it serves production, never going too deep or too tangential, and always leaving plenty of room for the intrepid debate professor to supplement her instruction with additional theory articles.

Although not immediately coherent for most beginning students, there are several chapters that are absolute gems of instructional material. Johnson's (2009) finest chapter is on adjudication, which he sees as a constructive give and take, rather than an absolute judgment (it's worth noting that he is also the co-author of the adjudication chapter in Lising's book). This chapter is required reading for anyone judging subjective, speech-based competition. Of course, the American debating tradition here is not as well blended, as Johnson reverts to the idea of judging paradigms (or "models" as he calls them somewhat confusingly). The best portion is the "movement model," which suggests that debates should be decided on how far the judge has been "moved" by the speakers in relation to the original position that he or she held. Johnson writes rather honestly that, "The model also accounts for biases the adjudicator may possess and is capable of rewarding teams that challenge those biases" (2009, p. 237). It is nice to see a debate book admit that the arguments made in debates come into the world pre-judged, versus the older and somewhat tired assumption that objectivity is not only the best position from which to judge debates, but an easily accessible perspective. Johnson's movement model would be an excellent pedagogical element to bring into the argument or debate classroom to help students find a workable way to peer critique one another's debates, or, more theoretically, to generate workable models of

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's Universal Audience for situations outside of the debate contest. The theoretical connection is mine, and not mentioned in the text. But it is just one of many examples where the argumentation instructor can connect theoretical reading to the practice of debating, making the students' moments of kairotic *inventio* illuminate theory, in a nice reversal.

Another element that is welcome in an argumentation textbook, but rare to find, is a clear articulation of the bare bones of putting together an argumentative speech. Johnson spends two chapters, and a substantial portion of other chapters, on the pressing need for organization and clarity, giving examples of lead-ins, thesis statements, and claims that students can understand and model in practices or in classroom exercises. The best of these come before the discussion of the rules of the Worlds format, but again, the book assumes you probably are already a little familiar with the basics of contest debate.

Winning Debates is the most theoretical of the three texts, but in a strange way. Occasional mentions of Foucault, Lakoff and Johnson, or Bitzer are dropped into chapters, but are not developed in a manner that either help the students understand the theory, or help the students apply those ideas to the art of crafting argumentative discourse. The best of this comes at the start with a chapter on the philosophy of debating, something that can be used to spark much student discussion in a classroom. But it feels out of place in a text that focuses on the generation of arguments and the generation of speeches that are designed to win debates in competitions. We are a long way from the ham-handed methods of the traditional debate course textbook, but the continued turning back toward that traditional model does reveal how comfortable the "add speeches and stir" model of theoretical instruction has infected our textbooks. Johnson's gestures in that direction with his

citation of theory are far removed from what other texts do. It's refreshing, but does lack a certain coherence. It's best to think of this book as a great collection of ideas, recipes even, for the student with some Worlds debating experience who wishes to find a toolkit of ideas that will help her improve.

Lising's *Across the House*

Contrasted to that tradition is a nearly purely *praxis* view on Worlds debating in Lising's (2010) *Across the House*. Lising, although an outsider to the American debate tradition in many ways, is at the dead-center of the international debating world. His experience as a competitor and a judge at the highest levels of international competition show throughout the book, with mixed results for the reader.

The book is best for those who are teaching a course on Worlds debating to those who have never encountered it before. Each section begins with citation of the Worlds Debating constitution, and then Lising (2010) riffs off of that with stories, expectations, instructions, and tips for how this rule affects speaking and debating in competitions. Some examples can't help but force a smile, as you are certain you are reading an autobiographical detail in coded form, whether it's about students' refusal to remove earbuds while waiting on pairings, or how it might be considered essential to use deodorant while participating in a tournament in warm weather. Lising's amusing anecdotes reflect a teaching practice and style different from Johnson's approach, coming from the halls of American speech communication research. Less a book that highlights theory to back up the approach to invention, Lising's book highlights the particulars that face the debater as she begins to move toward productive argument. For example, Lising gives a very detailed account of how research should be conducted,

and specifically how to construct particular research files on different issues. Such a direct approach might not be appreciated by instructors who have their own preferred methods of researching, but for a course where competition is a possibility, or for someone interested in trying out the format, this sort of direction is essential.

Lising's (2010) attention to delivery, vocal moderation, and other specifics about the body compare nicely to Johnson's (2009) nuance on the construction of arguments. This is not to say that Lising's book is lacking on that topic – it's just scattered over several chapters, and integrated into the specifics of the roles each debater plays during a debate. Lising's chapter on "Matter" is more focused on research, whereas Johnson's long discussions about arrangement and invention blend the two, key for someone who comes from a strategic theory of argumentation versus Lising's more tactical approach.

Lising's great strength is that his book could easily be used for a public speaking course, or other production course, due to the very accessible language and detail on the speech act itself. Phrasing such as, "using colloquialisms in a formal speech is like wearing denim shorts and an 'I'm with Stupid' t-shirt to the prom. You might get away with it, but is it really worth it?" (Lising, 2010, p. 67). Such casual style appears on every page, making the book incredibly accessible and approachable.

Across the House, however, promises a lot more than it delivers. The title of Lising's book comes from the tradition of giving compliments to an opponent – as he says, "an old school form of cheering on your competitor in the greatest display of sportsmanship possible" (2010, p. 4). Lising's whole textbook is a reminder that not only is there life after debate, but you will be inevitably cast into that life. The skills and concepts explored and learned via Worlds debating must be anchored outside

of the competitive tournament, and Lising's book does remind us of this frequently. For example, when discussing the role of evidence in BP, he writes

Building a library of information necessary to win a World Debating Championship will not come overnight. In fact, it will be the long-term commitment to acquiring information that will help not only in a possible career in competitive debating, but in life as a whole. (Lising, 2010, p. 20)

Unfortunately, many times, we are left wanting a few more examples to bolster these real world applications, which, although obvious to the evangelical debater or debate instructor, often are mysterious to the novice debate student. What he offers in terms of accessible style is lacking in exercises, or formula – which is exactly where Johnson's book excels.

The only theoretical moments in this book occur with a particular freshness that will assist students in the construction of speech or debate assignments and provide some new directions to seasoned teachers of the art. Contrasting this with Johnson's (2009) book, suitable for the student asking, "How do I make my speeches better?", Lising's (2010) is a lot more useful for the student engaged with the question, "How do I make speeches now?" For example, in Chapter 13, Lising suggests the use of "rhetorical criticism" as "an excellent technique to help the debater analyze the matter used in a round in a clear and thorough way" (2010, p. 83). The advice given is practical and remarkably free of relevant citations to the titanic literature on the subject, in which even well-read scholars can become bogged down while explicating. But a savvy professor could easily supplement this portion of the text with a favorite scholarly essay in criticism – thus introducing the student to the value of scholarly literature from the

field of rhetoric by connecting it with the act of crafting a persuasive and compelling speech. Lising's book is well-suited for a course focused on doing well in competitive debating, but offers a bit more from the tactical side of debating. Johnson's book and Lising's book are both suited for competitors, but where Johnson fails, Lising provides fillers for those gaps that the inexperienced student (or instructor) will have. Lising does not provide the detailed strategic depth that Johnson offers. The promise of Lising's book is there, but the instructor will have to fill in a lot beyond the rules of a Worlds competition and the interpretation of those rules by a master. We do have instructors in the classroom for a reason.

Harvey-Smith's *Practical Guide to Debating*

Ending on the other side of the spectrum from Johnson's (2009) offering of improvement, and Lising's (2010) suggested starting places, is Harvey-Smith's (2011) *Practical Guide to Debating*. The newest of the three, it is a book that lives up to its title. There is nothing in this slim volume that could be considered even remotely unnecessary. From the outset, Harvey-Smith prepares us for what's to come: "Debate is something you learn by doing. There are a thousand resources and rules you could read before standing up and speaking for the first time. Ignore them – they will overload you" (2011, p. 7). This seems like good advice for the beginning student, but after reading the book, it seems like a first principle for the construction of this text. For the instructor who wants a bit more detail in putting together logical speeches or argument construction, this book will disappoint. But if the instructor wishes to teach a course based solely on student production of argument, it would be hard to find a better text to supplement classroom exercises and instruction. In many ways, this book is a necessary corrective to an American textbook field full

of overwrought, 300-page tomes more interested in conveying curious approaches to argument than giving advice to those engaged in one.

This book is not for the intermediate student, but for the beginner and possibly for the veteran who has plateaued in competition. Harvey-Smith (2011) offers a “back to basics” appeal in his book that reminds us what the point of structured, competitive debate is: to teach people how to get their complex ideas across to varied audiences. All three books could be said to do this, but where the first two books focus on debate skills seen inside and outside of their deployment, *Practical Guide* treats competition as the arena where good debating arrives and thrives. For Harvey-Smith, there’s little worth in discussing argument per se, one must simply do it, and do it a lot to understand it – the book lives up to the word “practical.” Harvey-Smith has written a fully tactical guide to debate, even including varying examples of hypothetical student speeches done in different ways with adjudicator commentary. These sustained examples, offered side by side, make Harvey-Smith’s book unique. There is a tradeoff: what Harvey-Smith could offer in the form of late tournament elimination round strategy, judging adaptation for various competitive environments, and other insightful moments from someone who has had intense competitive experience tends to fall away as he spends his time on the general elements of practice for good, convincing rhetoric. He also offers very clear direction to those wishing to start their own debate club, from initial exercises to the steps involved in hosting a tournament. In comparison, Lising (2010) offers a guide to hosting the World Championships, while Johnson’s (2009) discussions generally assume the presence of a seasoned instructor somewhere nearby. Harvey-Smith offers a concise and clear guide that takes its title to heart. You won’t find Johnson’s martial resources of

commonplaces or Lising's detailed analysis of each paragraph of the rules of competition in this volume. Harvey-Smith offers a guide to almost pure practice, attending to the speech as the theory, and the theory of argumentative speaking as production. In short, Harvey-Smith offers *praxis* from the bottom up.

Each text is excellent within the confines of what makes it different from the others. Some of the differences come out clearly, such as the way each author treats a staple of debate in their own words. Examining all three on one example will clarify, in an anecdotal form, what the overall style of the book is like. Here is each author discussing, in their own words, the concept of proof. First, we have Johnson's (2009) treatment:

Debaters must generate, organize, and present compelling evidence on behalf of their possibility. The evidence may be factual, drawn from qualitative or quantitative representations of data more commonly known (respectively) as examples or statistics, or it may take the form of argument: theories, values, and beliefs are types of evidence that require logical substantiation to be convincing. Regardless of the situation, winning debaters will be adept at choosing and utilizing the evidence most likely to convince the adjudicators of the strength of their preferred possibility. (p. 173)

This quotation's focus and assumption becomes clear when read against Lising's (2010) treatment of the same issue:

Evidence is the material used to support the arguments used in a speech. Without substantiation, a speech relies too heavily on assertions to maintain integrity. The toughest thing about assertions is that they are quite easily shut down as speculative and inaccurate. This destroys the credibility of the

speech (and the speaker for that matter), and the round denigrates into a simplistic pageant of opinion. Evidence becomes vital as the 'proof' that general statements can be based on, not the other way around. (p. 21)

Harvey-Smith's treatment of it is implicit, and done through a sustained example of a debate on legalizing prostitution. But this snippet is valuable for comparison: "In competitive debating, *stating* and *explaining* are key to getting your points across effectively. Without a good command of logic and evidence, your points will not convince adjudicators. But you should not overlook *illustrating* your points as well" (Harvey-Smith, 2011, p. 45).

Hopefully, this example clarifies the total approach of each author. Johnson's (2009) list of types of evidence and proof concentrates on the competition, illustrating to competitive debaters what specific concerns they should have about evidence. Lising's (2010) approaches the person who is newer to debate, justifying evidence for the student, and Harvey-Smith (2011) treats evidence as almost synonymous with 'reason.' Each author's approach and theoretical commitment suits different instructor styles and different student levels. Perhaps the best approach is to select each book by the level of student experience. Each text is a full course itself in this format, but the debate instructor will only be disappointed with any of them if she chooses a text that clashes with her idea of how to best approach the teaching of advocacy.

Baird (1923) would no doubt be in awe of the rapid expansion and large presence of the British style in the United States. No midnight ride necessary this time around, for the British have arrived with three excellent guides in how to approach this new format of debating.

Notes

1. Three hundred forty-eight institutions have attended one or more of the previous three world championships, held annually by a different institution in a different country than the year previous. A list is available at <http://goo.gl/xd9Ny>.

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