

## JUDGING CEDA DEBATE: A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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In recent years, many scholars have approached the study of human communication from the perspective of general systems theory.<sup>1</sup> In its most basic form, "A system is a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes."<sup>2</sup> In examining CEDA debate as a system, it is clear that one of the most important "objects" in the system is the judge. In a system, objects mutually influence one another, and a change in one part of the system produces change in others.<sup>3</sup> This is clearly the case with the relationship between judge and debaters. As Jack Howe writes, "If judges give their ballots to debaters who best represent the true ideals of CEDA, directors will be more inclined to produce teams that reflect these ideals, and the debaters themselves will happily conform."<sup>4</sup> These ideals are characterized by Howe as an "emphasis on the skills of communicative, persuasive speaking, on audience adaptation, and on argument and analysis as well as effective use of evidence ..."<sup>5</sup> Yet we are all aware of judges who vote for the "fast-talking, evidence-happy debater who prefers a clever case to one that is soundly on the topic."<sup>6</sup> I maintain that if we are to uphold the desirable ideals of CEDA, while discouraging the undesirable debate practices, it is the judge who must become an active part of the CEDA debate system.

Mine is not the first effort to apply systems theory to academic debate. Brock et al., wrote Public Policy Decision-Making: Systems Analysis and Comparative Advantages Debate over a decade ago.<sup>7</sup> As the title indicates, their focus was on policy debate. However, they make an important point about viewing debate itself as a system.<sup>8</sup> In particular, they call for an open systems approach to debate:

Current practices would also be modified by decreased emphasis upon formal logic and increased emphasis upon persuasion... Looking back to traditional argumentation theory, one can see that forensic concepts such as deductive logic and stock issues were the primary standards recommended for evaluating debate. Yet these standards were appropriate in analysis of a static reality or an essentially "closed system." However, in a process reality deliberative debate relies more heavily upon inductive reasoning and an "open system" model for analysis, which we tend to associate more with persuasion than formal logic. When no formal answer exists, persuasion influences an audience to accept one of the competing alternatives. The standard for deliberative debate is audience acceptance, not a "truth standard," so the process automatically becomes more subjective, shifting emphasis from formal logic to persuasion.<sup>9</sup>

If an open systems model for policy debate leads to an acceptance of audience-oriented standards for judgment, it should be even more applicable in value topic debate. The standards suggested by Brock et al., are not unlike those implied by Howe's statement of ideals for CEDA debate. Clearly, a "truth

standard," based on traditional argumentation theory, stock issues, and the like, cannot be readily applied to matters of value, where "truth" is subjective at best.

The importance of an open systems approach to judging cannot be over emphasized. In many ways NDT debate owes its decline to a closed system of judging. The practice of seeding judges, providing strike sheets, and minimum round requirements, assured a "closed" pool of judges for the "best" teams. Break-neck speeds, mounds of evidence, and trick cases became accepted within the closed system of the national NDT circuit. A closed system, however, "moves toward entropy in successive stages because it fails to adapt to its environment."<sup>10</sup> When NDT debates did come into contact with the environment, in the form of administrators of colleges and speech communication professionals, the result was frequently to discontinue the activity. In some parts of the country, NDT debate has virtually disappeared. Throughout the nation, CEDA seems to have expanded and NDT to have declined. I take this to be due largely to the fact that CEDA was an open system, responding to its environment, while NDT was a closed system.

I fear, however, that CEDA may now become a victim of its own success. As more and more judges with NDT training and background judge CEDA rounds, many of the practices which were once rewarded in NDT (spreading, speed, overuse of evidence, and trick cases) are now appearing in, and winning, CEDA rounds. There is a danger that CEDA, and particularly CEDA judging, may become a closed system. Winning debates may depend more on evidence and speed of delivery than on audience adaptation and persuasive communication.

How can CEDA maintain an open system of judging? There are at least three steps we can take. First, we can bring back debate before "real" audiences. Why must debates take place before an audience of one? We ought to encourage more debates before "lay" audiences. Winning could be based on audience voting, utilizing devices such as the "shift of opinion" ballot. I can anticipate the complaint that such audiences are not trained critics. However, far weightier matters, even cases of life and death, are tried before a jury of twelve ordinary persons, who have no formal training in the law. If CEDA is to be an open system, it needs to interact directly with its environment in the form of "real" audiences.

Second, since there is a limit to the opportunity for full-fledged audience debates, we ought to employ single judges other than debate coaches.

Anyone who has attended the excellent San Francisco State University Attorney Judged Debate Tournament is aware that outstanding judging can be found among the practitioners of the legal profession. Attorneys seem to have little tolerance for the undesirable practices that have begun to appear in CEDA debate. Subject matter experts might judge debates on economics, foreign policy, and the like. University faculty in communication and other disciplines, who are not involved in debate coaching, are certainly competent judges of argumentation and persuasion. If our debaters cannot adapt to audiences such as these, one wonders how much they are gaining from the activity. When they enter the post-college world, as businesspersons, attorneys, politicians, parents and just plain citizens, they need to adapt to a variety of audiences, not just trained debate coaches.

Finally, to the extent that we must rely on debate coaches as judges, I recommend that we open our minds to different approaches and standards of adjudicating debate. Must we always decide the debate on the basis of the "flowsheet?" Should delivery, courtesy, cross-examination skills, etc., only be rewarded by points on a ballot, but not by wins in the rounds? We need to think of ourselves not just as debate coaches, but as acting in the place of a "real" audience. How would we expect real audiences to react to a given debate? How would we react ourselves were we to see these practices in a setting other than a debate tournament? When decisions can be based on these factors, rather than merely on who read the most evidence, then we will have gone a long way toward opening up the system of CEDA debate to a more realistic interaction with its environment than the closed system of forensic tournaments.

Certainly I have not meant to suggest that all judges are ignoring the persuasive, communicative, and audience adaptation ideals of CEDA. Many judges do reward those practices and penalize excessive speed, over-reliance on evidence, and non-communicative delivery. But we have a long way to go to open up our judging system. We need to both expand the pool of judges — to real audiences and competent non-debate coach judges — and open up the perspectives of our existing pool of judges. As CEDA matures into a more stabilized system, there is a real danger it could also become a closed system. If that day arrives, CEDA could find itself in much the same plight as NDT debate. We should ask ourselves, are our judging standards fostering the kind of debate we

would be pleased to show our department chairs, deans and presidents? If not, it is time to adapt to the environment and open up the system of CEDA debate.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Brent D. Ruben and John Y. Kim, eds., General Systems Theory and Human Communication (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>A. D. Hall and R. E. Fagen, "Definition of System," in Ruben and Kim, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard L. Brock, James W. Chesebro, John F. Cragen, and James F. Kumpp, Public Policy Decision-Making: Systems Analysis and Comparative Advantages Debate (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Jack H. Howe, "CEDA's Objectives: Lest We Forget," in Contributions on the Philosophy and Practice in CEDA, ed. Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association, 1981), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Brock et al.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 37.