

## PROPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS: A NEED FOR FOCUS IN CEDA DEBATE

Tim S. Dixon  
University of California, Los Angeles

Chris R. Leslie  
University of California, Los Angeles

In 1960, television history was made when John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon faced each other in a series of presidential debates on public television. Although the debates effected voting behavior, critics of argumentation would ask if a "debate" actually occurred. In Kennedy's allotted time to refute Nixon's arguments, he spent a mere 34% of that time actually responding to what Nixon had said. The other 66% was used to raise issues that were not scheduled to be debated in the time period. Likewise, Nixon was also non-responsive to Kennedy's arguments and spent only 27% of his refutation period answering his opponent's challenges.<sup>1</sup> While both Kennedy and Nixon had intercollegiate debate experience, they were guilty of spending the majority of their time violating the most fundamental rule of debate - the necessity to clash. As in the Nixon-Kennedy debates, this fundamental rule is also being violated in many CEDA debates, however, this latest violation is not due to political aspirations, but results from absent or misguided propositional analysis.

Propositional analysis acts as a primary guide for argumentation on any dispute. Since the issues to be proven vary in every proposition, establishing the nature of the dispute is essential for meaningful discussion. Argumentation scholar Glen Mills concurs: "In practice, the classification of a given proposition is an almost indispensable step in analyzing it, because each kind of proposition has distinctive proof requirements."<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, CEDA debaters have often either ignored or misused propositional analysis and, thus, have inadvertently omitted a prerequisite for effective argumentation. The result of improper or non-existent propositional classification is two teams interpreting a proposition differently, resulting in a debate without clash where debaters develop their argumentation on entirely different planes and a judge is left with no way to objectively adjudicate the round. Thus, in this paper, we will define the two reasons for the absence or misapplication of propositional analysis, demonstrate the effects of a poor propositional focus, and finally, give some guidelines and implications for debating.

### The Causes of Absent or Misguided Propositional Analysis

There are two misconceptions which encourage CEDA debaters to over-emphasize either value or policy implications. The first misconception is that

CEDA debate is limited to exclusively debating values. The proponents of this view have defined CEDA debate as value debate on the presupposition that this was the intent of its founders. Although we believe that there was an intent to open the possibility of value debating, we disagree that CEDA is exclusively limited to debating values. The CEDA Constitution itself demonstrates this, as its only reference to value debate is that one value proposition should be offered on the ballot for selecting each semester's resolution. Whether or not the value proposition is actually selected is a different matter. Tomlinson points out the mistake made by some in the forensic community that CEDA is cemented to debating propositions of value.<sup>3</sup> Further, Bartenan concurs that CEDA propositions tend to vary in their nature from topic to topic, ranging from value to quasi-policy.<sup>4</sup>

Since value debate is not the only form of non-policy debate, we need to determine the other types of propositions that may be debated in CEDA. Tomlinson reminds us that in CEDA's early years, from 1971-75, the topics selected for use were propositions of policy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the CEDA community was recently asked if it wished to debate a policy proposition in the future. Although this issue was narrowly defeated, one can see that policy debating in CEDA is not taboo and at some point we may again debate a policy proposition. Because so much theory has been written on debating policy, we will refrain from discussion on this subject and instead concentrate on the types of non-policy debate that currently exist in CEDA.

Zarefsky<sup>6</sup> and others identified several types of non-policy debating. We will limit our paper to the three types of propositions that have been debated in CEDA for the last ten years. The types are quasi-policy, fact and value. Quasi-policy propositions are defined by Zarefsky as propositions that do "not advocate a specific plan of action, yet one is implicit within the statement of the proposition."<sup>7</sup> Embank and Auer noted that the proposition of fact "simply calls for the ascertainment of certain truths or factual bases ... It is one that can be settled by reference to available and authoritative sources."<sup>8</sup> It is not concerned with belief or with the wisdom or desirability of adopting a plan of action. Finally, Matlon explains that "a proposition of value is a qualitative judgement about a person, object, act, situation, program, institution, concept or idea. It is an assertion about the worth of a thing and therefore, it cannot be an objective statement of fact, assessable in terms of truth or falsity."<sup>9</sup>

The second misconception is that since values, facts and policies are intertwined, the focus of argumentation can be on any level arbitrarily chosen by the debaters, regardless of the wording of the proposition. For example, Matlon's article on "Debating Propositions of Value" suggests that "values are seldom, if ever, argued in a vacuum. They are closely intertwined with statements of fact and attitudes about policies."<sup>10</sup> The intent of Matlon's statement is to demonstrate that since values, facts and policies are interrelated, in any debate some value, fact and policy considerations may occur. However, the two non-focal considerations are not independent and should only be used as support for debating the focus of the proposition. For example, we refer to facts to help understand value argumentation. These facts should be a complement to the value argumentation and not a substitute for it. Since values, facts and policies are all interrelated, many debaters incorrectly assume that classification of a proposition is unnecessary, which again results in weak propositional analysis.

The last few CEDA resolutions are examples of confused propositional analysis. The Fall 1983 CEDA resolution, "Resolved: that U.S. higher education has sacrificed quality for institutional survival," was interpreted by some teams as a factual proposition and their argumentation focused on a determination of whether or not quality had increased or decreased and the causes thereof. However, other teams interpreted the proposition as a quasi-policy proposition and debated the implications of an increase in educational quality. The Spring 1983 resolution, "Resolved: that the Constitutional Rights of privacy are more important than any other Constitutional Right," was interpreted by some teams as a value proposition in which they weighed the value of one right compared to another in accordance with an established value hierarchy. Other teams interpreted this proposition as quasi-policy and proceeded to advocate or condemn actions involving privacy, such as banning psychotropic drugs, strip searches and prior sexual history in rape trials. The Fall 1982 resolution, "Resolved: that a unilateral freeze on nuclear weapons production and development by the U.S. would be desirable," was interpreted by some teams as a quasi-policy proposition in which they would look at the advantages or disadvantages of nuclear freeze policies. Other teams interpreted the proposition as a value proposition and proceeded to weigh values such as life and peace in the abstract, seldom applying them to nuclear policy.

Although with the propositions different interpretations appeal to different debaters, problems arise when two teams with different interpretations debate against each other and either can't or won't come to terms with the opponents' concept of the proposition. Teams adhering to the first misconception will only debate values in the round, while those holding true to the second misconception are likely to overemphasize an inapplicable policy, fact or value implication. In either case, the team bearing a misconception is likely to offer a position which is not relevant to the specific proposition, thus incorrectly, if at all, refuting their opponents' argumentation.

#### The Effects of Absent or Misguided Propositional Analysis

The negative effects of this lack of propositional analysis may seem obvious. Yet, in many debate rounds where this problem has occurred, discussion over resolving the nature of the dispute ranges from limited to non-existent. The implications of this are threefold. The first consequence is extreme confusion and lack of clash. An example is the resolution on higher education. When one team debates the proposition as factual and exclusively discusses what has occurred and is occurring to educational quality, and, in the same round, the other team debates from a quasi-policy position and argues what should happen to educational quality, it is equivalent to an affirmative arguing, "Resolved: green is a mixture of blue and yellow," and having the negative respond, "That's not true because green is an ugly color, and therefore money should not be green." The negative claims do not clash with the affirmative case or the proposition - neither the case nor the proposition discuss the effects of increased quality, only whether or not changes in quality are actually occurring. Two entirely different lines of argumentation are being presented, one of which is inappropriate for the proposition at hand. Unfortunately, the type of argumentation is not proposition-specific. Clearly, reference to previously cited propositions shows that this type of non-clashing argumentation is commonplace.

The second ramification of incorrect propositional focus involves the judge's ability to make an objective decision. When an affirmative bases their case on one propositional interpretation and the negative chooses another propositional focus as the premise for their argumentation, the judge must decide the round on which propositional interpretation he believes is true. In most rounds this is completely subjective because neither team attempts (or spends too little time) to justify their interpretation of the proposition. An

example can be found in the previously noted privacy proposition. When an affirmative argues the proposition as quasi-policy and advocates a ban on psychotropic drugs because they invade privacy and the negative argues from a value interpretation and says that the right to free speech is a higher value than privacy, then the judge cannot properly adjudicate the two non-clashing positions. After all, while the arguments of both teams may be simultaneously 100% correct, the judge must independently apply these arguments to the proposition and decide which line of argumentation correctly interprets the proposition. The actual arguments the teams present become immaterial because the round is decided on whether the judge believes the propositional focus is quasi-policy or value. Hence, the issue that actually decides the round is often not argued by the debaters. Vasilius notes that when debaters argue on separate planes, they "run the risk of having apples and oranges debate, with the critic as the fruit selector."<sup>11</sup>

The third effect of the lack of propositional analysis is the denial of resolutorial intent. The purpose of the resolution is to limit the common-ground for the debate. But the resolution is no longer limited if its boundary can be ignored. Indeed, scholars of argumentation such as Ewbank, Auer,<sup>12</sup> and Terris,<sup>13</sup> note that the initial step in debating a problem is to determine its nature, be it fact, quasi-policy or value. As definitions are vital to explain and limit the scope of debate, propositional analysis serves the same function. A debate without propositional analysis results in teams arguing on different premises, clash being diminished, the judge's decision becoming subjective, and the proposition being ineffective as a tool for limiting the scope of the debate.

#### Guidelines for Propositional Classification

Since we have established the importance of propositional analysis, it is essential that we offer some guidelines for propositional classification. Initially, we shall delineate between the quasi-policy proposition and the other two forms. Propositions of fact and value are similar in that neither advocates a specific or implicit plan of action nor the desirability of said action. The proposition or quasi-policy is unique in that its phrasing advocates an implicit course of action. Examples of propositions of quasi-policy include the Fall 1982 CEDA resolution advocating the nuclear freeze and the 1980 CEDA resolution advocating compulsory national service for all qualified U.S. citizens. The distinguishing feature that separates quasi-

policy propositions from policy propositions is the lack of a specific plan of action. Zarefsky notes that "arguments cannot concern themselves with the mechanics of a plan - a particular finance, enforcement or administrative mechanism."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the burden of the affirmative is to defend a broad set of policies, not a specific proposal. While in a quasi-policy debate they need not present all the detail of policy implementation, the affirmative must demonstrate propensity for solvency within propositional guidelines in order to claim an advantage from correcting the harm delineated in their first affirmative. Similarly, disadvantages should apply to policies in a general nature versus tangential considerations such as funding disadvantages and Board mis-, mal-, or non-feasance. If a negative is arguing a disadvantage to an implied policy, he should label it as such. Trying to disguise an argument as a value objection is inappropriate and merely perpetuates a worn-out misconception. If it is a disadvantage to a quasi-policy, it should be labeled a DA. Labeling it as a value objection does not fool the judge and misrepresents what the debater is arguing.

While both propositions of fact and value are devoid of policy implications, they differ from each other in many respects. Propositions of fact "are those which are concerned only with the truth or falsity of assertions."<sup>15</sup> Ewbank and Auer previously noted that propositions of fact differ from propositions of value or quasi-policy in that they are "not concerned with belief or with the wisdom or desirability of adopting a plan of action."<sup>16</sup> The Fall 1983 CEDA resolution on higher education is one example of a factual proposition. By comparison:

"propositions of value are those which assess the worth of the subjects in dispute. They assert that something is or is not beneficial; they call for approval or disapproval of a belief or an idea. They differ from questions of fact in that, whereas in the factual question the tests of facts are generally agreed upon, and may be secured by a consultation of qualified experts, as a rule, in those of value no such agreement exists ... In other words, propositions of value attempt to declare that to be true which can never be accepted as a fact, but which may be accepted as probable, if made to conform to certain approved and applicable standards of judgement, of taste, or of weight."<sup>17</sup>

The Spring 1983 CEDA resolution on the Constitutional Rights of privacy is an example of a value proposition.

In debating a proposition of fact or value, the appropriate criteria for decision-making can be found by reference to the definitive-designative model explained by Zarefsky, Matlon and others. In either situation, it is essential that the debaters establish a reasonable criteria and then show how they meet

that criteria. Although the model for decision-making for fact and value debate may be the same, the issues and how they are debated still mandate a different propositional interpretation. For example, the decision-rule in basketball and football is the same (both teams try to accumulate points with the winner being the team with the most points), but simply because a winner is decided in the same way in both games does not mean that one may carry a basketball from one end of the court to the other or that it's okay to dribble a football.

Using these guidelines and our past propositional examples, a debater should be able to examine the words and phrasing of a proposition and determine the nature of the dispute by applying the guidelines to that proposition.

#### Propositional Analysis As A Voting Issue

Earlier we explained how propositional analysis is now the decision-making criteria applied by many critics in debates where the two teams analyze the focus of the proposition differently. We would suggest where a team disagrees with the focus of their opponents' argumentation that they develop counter-argumentation explaining why their opponents' analysis of the proposition is unreasonable and their interpretation is correct. Thus, the debaters can argue criteria for their line of argument and the judge can then decide the debate on issues argued in the round rather than on issues he resolves independently. We would also suggest that if the affirmative presents a reasonable interpretation of the focus of the proposition that the negative clash and argue with the affirmative case on that level. It is not our intent to discourage legitimate propositional interpretations. In CEDA, the debaters can argue either apples or oranges. But if the affirmative is reasonably interpreting the proposition as apples, it is illegitimate for either negative speaker to ignore the affirmative focus and argue oranges. The second negative has no carte blanche to avoid clash with the proposition while arguing off-case. Propositional analysis may be argued like topicality. Debaters should refer to reasonability theory in developing standards for argumentation.<sup>18</sup> Abusing the focus of the resolution is a procedural violation because it has the same effect as abusing the privilege to define words of the resolution. Also, like topicality, abusing the words and intent of the resolution can and should be an absolute voting issue. Arguments by both affirmative and negative must be within the realm of the focus of the resolution. If not, they neglect to determine the validity of the resolution and should be given no weight in the round.

### Conclusion

We have attempted to resolve the lack of clash that occurs in many CEDA debates by showing CEDA is not limited to debating values, while showing that although facts, values and policies are debated in CEDA the focus of the resolution should not be lost. It has also been demonstrated that classifying a proposition is indispensable, since without focus effective argumentation is impossible. Further, we have presented guidelines for debaters to better understand the nature of any given proposition, since previous classification of CEDA resolutions has been misguided or non-existent. Finally, since debaters may interpret resolutions differently, we have suggested how propositional analysis can be developed as a voting issue. By employing propositional analysis as a primary guide the argumentation in CEDA debate can be enhanced.

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>John Atwood, "Presidential Debates: The Gap Between Issues and Answers," *Psychology Today*, January 1980, p. 20.
- <sup>2</sup>Glen E. Mills, *Reason in Controversy: An Introduction to General Argumentation*, (Boston, Allyn and Bacon) 1964, p. 42-3.
- <sup>3</sup>James E. Tomlinson, "CEDA As An Alternative," *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*, Fall 1981, p. 15.
- <sup>4</sup>Michael Bartenan, "The Criteria for a Good CEDA Debate Resolution: Some Problems, Implications," *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*, Fall 1981, p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup>Tomlinson, "CEDA As An Alternative," p. 15.
- <sup>6</sup>David Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument," in *Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument*, ed. Don Brownlee, (N.P. CEDA) 1980, p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup>Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument," p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup>Henry Lee Ewbank and J. Jeffrey Auer, *Discussion and Debate*, (New York, F.S. Crofts and Co.) 1947, p. 79.
- <sup>9</sup>Ronald J. Matlon, "Debating Propositions of Value," *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 14 (1978), p. 195-6.
- <sup>10</sup>Matlon, "Debating Propositions of Value," p. 194.
- <sup>11</sup>Jan Vasilus, "Value Proposition Debate: A Pragmatic Approach," in *Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument*, p. 54.
- <sup>12</sup>Ewbank and Auer, *Discussion and Debate*, p. 78.
- <sup>13</sup>Walter F. Terris, "The Classification of the Argumentative Proposition," *Readings in Argumentation*, ed. Jerry M. Anderson and Paul J. Dovere, (Boston, Allyn and Bacon) 1968, p. 123.
- <sup>14</sup>Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument," p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup>Russell H. Wagner, "Three Forms of Propositions," *Readings in Argumentation*, p. 127.
- <sup>16</sup>Ewbank and Auer, *Discussion and Debate*, p. 79.
- <sup>17</sup>Wagner, "Three Forms of Propositions," p. 127.
- <sup>18</sup>For a potential reasonability model to Donn W. Parson, "Reasonability: the Last Refuge of Scoundrels," *Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation*, ed. George Ziegelmueller and Jack Rhodes, (Annandale, Virginia: SCA) 1981.