

ELIMINATING THE ABUSES OF CEDA DEBATE:
THE DEBATE JUDGE AS A REFEREE

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When CEDA debate was first introduced, it was hoped by many that CEDA would become a form of debate with few of the undesirable characteristics of traditional (or NDT-style) debate. It was hoped that the cross-examination format, the use of value topics, and a different pool of judges would prevent CEDA debate from sharing the abusive characteristics of NDT debate.

While CEDA has achieved many of its initial goals, many observers suggest that CEDA debates suffer from traditional debate weaknesses. The rate of delivery in CEDA debates has become faster and faster, with some speakers bordering on incomprehensibility. Instead of developing arguments, speakers rely on numerous underdeveloped arguments. While CEDA has accomplished a great deal, there is still much to be done in order to achieve its initial goals.

This problem is hardly new; the issue is, what can reduce incomprehensibility, while retaining the intellectual benefits of debate? I do not think that the problem of incomprehensibility or speed is caused by malice on the part of any individual participants. Debaters and judges do not want to see the quality of debate deteriorate. The problem is caused, at least in part, by the time limits imposed on debaters. These limits create an incentive for teams to present large numbers of arguments in a short period of time. The result is that debaters attempt to speak at the fastest rate of speed that is acceptable to judges. At the same time, responses are presented in the most concise (and sometimes cryptic) manner that is acceptable to the judge. Teams also become incomprehensible out of self-defense; they fear if they do not speak rapidly, the other team will do so, and thus slow, persuasive delivery would be strategically unwise. As a result, even the first affirmative speech is now given at a rapid rate in order to preempt first negative arguments.

Some have suggested that the solution to the problem of speed, shallow analysis, and incomprehensibility lies with the judge. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for the judge to eliminate the problem. Judges are often reluctant to do much, partly because of peer pressure, but also because the only weapon they have at their disposal - the ballot - is a very clumsy tool. When both teams are incomprehensible, one of the teams must be awarded with a win. In addition, the debate teams will still face time pressures. They must choose between not responding to arguments made by the other team and speeding up. Few teams will be confident enough to trust the judge to agree with their choice as to which arguments they need not cover. In the heat of a round, teams often respond to a spread with a counterspread, regardless of the judge's nature.

There is another alternative that has not been discussed, but which might be useful in addressing the problem of incomprehensibility. I would propose that the debate community modify the rules of debate in order to give the individual judge powers analogous to that of a referee. Such a rule would stipulate that debate can take place only if the speakers communicate arguments in an understandable manner. If a speaker is not understandable, the judge would be permitted to interrupt the speaker in the middle of the speech and request that the speaker slow down. If a second warning is given, the judge would decrease the speaker's speaking time (say, 15 or 30 seconds per warning). This penalty can be repeated if the violation continues.

This rule would not only give the speaker immediate feedback, but it would penalize, rather than reward, incomprehensibility. If a speaker wants to present eight minutes of arguments in four minutes, he/she can speak as rapidly as he/she wishes; the opponents, however, could respond to these arguments using a reasonable delivery with no penalty.

This modification would undermine much of the incentive teams have to go rapidly. While the determination of what constitutes incomprehensible delivery might vary from judge to judge (and perhaps even from round to round), ideally the judge should apply a reasonably consistent standard to all the speakers in a given round. Thus, a team that wishes to analyze issues in depth need not worry about the opposition using speed, in place of quality argument, to defeat their position. The judge could act to ensure that all arguments are presented in a reasonable manner.

The time penalty may be extended to such practices as answering a partner's question during cross-examination, or talking during another's speech. These practices are disliked by many judges, yet penalizing that team with a loss is too extreme. The time penalty is both an immediate deterrent to undesirable behavior and, since it is less severe, the penalty is more likely to be invoked. In addition, the penalty can be applied to both teams in a round.

The judge may wish to interrupt the debate for other reasons. For example, it might be useful for a judge to interrupt a speaker making overly cryptic responses with a command to "explain". This might not impose any penalty on the debater, but it would signify that the judge does not feel that the response being made satisfies the minimum standards for an argument. The speaker can either explain the argument in more detail, or drop the argument. This "no-sanction penalty" would also inform the other team that they need not respond to the argument unless it is developed more fully.

This proposal, by itself, might not change the peer pressure on individual judges, but it might provide a more attractive alternative to judges who dislike current debate practices, yet think that a loss is too severe a penalty. At least one college debate coach currently tells teams during the debate to slow down and explain arguments (without the time penalties), and debaters seem to adapt to that judge. If endorsed by the debate community other judges may follow this lead.

Some of the details of this proposal would need to be worked out. Judges should probably notify both teams in advance about the practices that would be penalized (and the judge could inform the debaters what constitutes unacceptable delivery). In cases of multiple judge panels, guidelines for the penalties need to be developed (I would recommend that only one judge need call a penalty to invoke a sanction).

Some may think that such a system of penalties may detract from the decorum of debate. This would only be the case if the debaters use abusive styles, in which case the decorum would already be damaged. In addition, it is my hope that, after a phase-in period, few if any penalties will need to be invoked simply because unacceptable behavior would be deterred by the penalty.

On the other hand, this system will give the debaters immediate feedback, and they will have the opportunity to correct their behavior immediately. Rather than providing delayed feedback, the judge will be able to directly alter the behavior of the debater. The educational benefits of the judge's feedback will be enhanced. Rather than sitting passively, the judge can directly improve the quality of the debate. (Although this does not mean the judge can inject views of the quality of a specific argument in the round; that should be addressed by the other team. The judge's in-round intervention would be limited to violations of accepted norms of delivery, minimum standards for an argument (applied evenly to both teams) and an enforcement to the rules of debate).

This proposal might be supplemented by other regulations. For example, a regulation that prohibits debaters from asking their opponents for responses during a debate, but which permits them to ask the judge (if taking a flow) for responses and stating that if the judge could not explain the argument it would be dropped out of the debate might encourage judges to slow down debates that are too fast for the judge (since the alternative would be to face the embarrassment of not understanding a response when the judge failed to take advantage of the opportunity of slowing down the round). This would permit the debaters to be as fast as desirable, as long as the debaters were understandable; when the debaters no longer are understandable, however, the judge would

have both the power and the incentive to reduce the speed to an understandable rate.

These modifications have the potential of addressing some, though not all, of the problems with delivery in current CEDA debates. This proposal could have a direct effect on the problem of incomprehensibility, and at a minimum will help ensure that judges who are tired of incomprehensible delivery can take direct actions to reduce the problem in those rounds that they hear. If, after this proposal was in effect, judges still complain about speed, inadequate development of arguments, and incomprehensibility, they will have nobody to blame but themselves.

Appendix

Sample Rules for Judge-Imposed Penalties

Individual judges are authorized to penalize teams violating commonly accepted norms by deducting time from the speeches of the individual speaker violating the norms:

A. Mechanics. If a judge thinks that a debater is engaged in unacceptable behavior, the judge should give the debater an oral warning. If the behavior continues, the judge shall deduct 15 seconds from the speech of the violator for each additional violation. The judge shall notify the violator orally for each subsequent violation.

B. Nature of Violations. Violations that may justify the imposition of a penalty include, but are not limited to:

1. Incomprehensible delivery
2. Excessively rapid delivery
3. Talking out of turn
4. Rudeness

C. Non-Penalty Warnings. A judge is encouraged to orally communicate to a speaker if an argument does not meet a minimum standard for an argument, but failure to do so in no way indicates the argument is above this level.

D. Pre-round Warnings. Judges are encouraged to talk with debaters about the standards for delivery and minimum standards for arguments that the judge will impose in the round.

E. Multiple-Judge Panels. If there is more than one judge in the room, any judge can impose a penalty.

F. (Optional) Requests for Responses. Debaters may not ask the opposing team for responses to arguments, except during the cross-examination period. If a response is unclear, the debaters should ask the judge for the response (if the judge is taking a flow). If the judge cannot explain an argument, that argument should be disregarded by the judge and all participants.