

THE ROLE OF THE CRITIC AND THE AUDIENCE-CENTERED MODEL OF DEBATE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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In 1982, Robert Rowland noted that the choice among judging paradigms is the dominant issue in academic debate. In 1985, Robert Weiss suggested that CEDA critics should evaluate debate rounds from the audience-centered approach and avoid the meta-debate over possible judging paradigms. Now in 1988, it is time to address the judging implications of the audience-centered model. This paper will: (a) identify the theoretical foundations of the audience-centered model, (b) identify the problems faced by the critic within an audience-centered approach, and (c) propose potential changes to help to resolve the tension caused by the audience-centered model.

Foundations of the Audience-Centered Model

The audience-centered model represents a judging perspective which presumes differences among audiences that require debater adaptation. CEDA's continued theoretical commitment to the audience-centered model has been advanced in the last seven years. The organization's initial objectives justify and support an audience-centered approach. Howe (1981) indicated that CEDA's initial objectives were quite specific. CEDA debaters were to find a balance between the use of evidence, analysis, reasoning, and persuasive delivery. Howe perceived CEDA as an alternative to NDT debate which had become uncommunicative. According to the initial objectives, CEDA debaters would be rewarded for adapting to the expectations of each judge. The initial objectives provided the foundation for the development of an audience-centered model by elevating the importance of audience diversity in the delivery of persuasive messages.

Second, the audience-centered model is perpetuated in CEDA's concern for audience analysis. Miller and McVay (1984) placed audience analysis at the center of CEDA ideology. They suggested that CEDA can assume a leadership role by offering a comprehensive curriculum in the art of audience analysis and adaptation in academic debate. An audience analysis approach suggests that each round is unique and that the debaters must be willing, as well as able, to adapt to judge differences. Additionally, Miller and McVay perceived CEDA as a vehicle that enabled participants to develop communication skills that were transferable to real world scenarios. Audience analysis provides the core for the audience-centered model.

Additional support for the audience-centered model comes from Weiss (1985) on the audience standard. Weiss identified the role of the critic in the audience-centered perspective. He noted that judges could choose among several interrelated "postures":

(1) 'I am your audience. Convince me.' (2) 'I represent an audience. Give me what I need in order to grant my assent.' (3) 'I am a forensic educator. I'll decide if you deserve to be allowed out in public.' It further interlaces the postures of (1) this is what an audience would respond to and (2) this is what an audience should respond to. (pp. 43-44)

Weiss' article clearly identified the responsibilities of the critic in maintaining the audience-centered model in CEDA debate.

Finally, a review of CEDA literature indicates a commitment to the audience-centered model (e.g., Howe, 1981; Tomlinson, 1981; Miller & McVay, 1984; Brydon, 1984; Biggers & Gotcher, 1984; Cirlin, 1985; and Weiss, 1985). Weiss wrote that "the standard to which it (CEDA debate) subscribes is that of the public forum. . . . This approach asks whether the arguments which are being used are suitable in nature and quality for public argumentation" (p. 43). While it is unclear how Weiss conceptualizes the public audience, CEDA's commitment to the audience-centered model represents a concerted effort for competitive debate to adapt to audience expectations.

Overall, CEDA's initial objectives, its focus on audience analysis by the participants, its interrelated postures for the judges, and its literature suggest that CEDA is theoretically committed to the audience-centered model. However, CEDA's encouragement of the audience-centered model provides very real problems for the critic in its application to the practical matters of a debate round.

Problems for the Critic

First, the audience-centered model requires the critic to take a more active role in the communication process within the debate environment. The more active role requires the critic to select from a variety of "postures" from which to view the debate contest. While the prescribed postures may limit meta-debate on possible judging paradigms, these judging postures are a priori to the debate contest and not open to deliberation by the participants.

In other words, the role of the critic is no longer determined by the debaters in a dialectical exchange of ideas but is assumed by the critic before the round begins. The role of the critic would seem to be transformed from an impartial judge of arguments into a representative of the "public" with particular needs and interests demanding reinforcement or change.

This viewpoint poses problems for the number of critics who view themselves as *tabula rasa* (Gaske, Kugler, & Theobald, 1985), open to any judging paradigm the debaters construct as appropriate for evaluating arguments. The audience-centered model presumes that the critic embraces a particular posture before the round begins, therefore, a significant portion of the round is predetermined and the debaters are not

longer given the opportunity of debating whether a particular judging paradigm is appropriate for the round.

Ironically, in pursuit of reflecting audience adaptation, the audience-centered model may deny the debater his/her most important rhetorical strategy—altering the audience's "terministic screens" for understanding the world. CEDA theorists have already proposed judging postures that limit the debater's ability to determine the decision-making process. For example, Ulrich (1985) introduced a system whereby a judge acts as a referee penalizing teams for such activities as incomprehensible delivery, excessively rapid delivery, talking out of turn, and rudeness. Howe (1985) advocated "clipping the wings" of teams that employ imaginative interpretations of the resolution. Cirlin (1985) advocated judging decisions based on the extrinsic credibility of the speaker.

While judge intervention is not a new phenomenon for academic debate, the audience-centered model provides increased legitimacy for direct intervention by the critic. The intervention is not limited to punishing inappropriate communication behavior but can be extended to argument selection. Howe (1981) suggested that judges should give their ballots to debaters who best represent the true ideals of CEDA, then directors will be more inclined to produce teams that reflect these ideals, and the debaters will happily conform. The difficulty created by the audience-centered model for critics is the identification of the "true ideals" of CEDA. Allen and Dowdy (1984) examined judging philosophies of CEDA and NDT judges. Their results indicated more diversity among CEDA judges than NDT judges. They noted, "diversity indicates differences and inconsistencies, what works for Judge A may not work for Judge B" (p. 77).

The differences and inconsistencies might suggest that critics are having difficulty formulating and utilizing a posture on the true ideals of CEDA. When the critic imposes a posture on the debate round, the judge's role is transformed from an evaluator of argumentation to an active participant in the creation, refutation, and even presentation of arguments. The audience-centered model is not conducive to claims of *tabula rasa*. The judge is no longer a blank slate but an evaluator with preconceived notions of what should and would be accepted as valid argumentation. Therefore, the critic becomes a gate-keeper with the responsibility of determining acceptable argumentation strategies according to the "true ideals" of CEDA as viewed by the individual critic.

Second, the audience-centered model encourages the critic to be a representative of the public realm. Brydon (1984) wrote that "when debaters enter the post-college world, as business-persons, attorneys, politicians, parents and just plain citizens, they need to adapt to a variety of audiences, not just trained debate coaches" (p. 87). The audience-centered model encourages critics to evaluate debate contests as representatives of public audiences. We are not suggesting that the audience-centered model requires the trained debate critic to abandon their knowledge of debate conventions, nor their special knowledge about argumentation. However, the audience-centered model does encourage the critic to assume the posture of a real world representative; this causes a significant problem in the debate round.

In a pluralistic society, it is difficult to consider oneself a representative of all society, given the particularities of gender, class and race. Therefore, as a representative of a particular public audience, the critic seems to be justified in deciding the round on issues that may not have been addressed in the round. For example, if the critic considers him/herself to be a representative of the communist party, the audience-centered model allows the critic to ignore those arguments that he/she believes are the result of a misrepresentation of the "real world." In fact, the audience-centered model would seem to encourage decisions based on the personal biases of the critic—whether those biases are concerned with good argumentation or the critic's conception of a just society.

In other words, the audience-centered model requires the debater to discover the judge's soul.¹ However, to discover the judge's soul, the debater is required to have detailed information concerning the judge's background, education, biases, postures on debate, etc. The information that is critical for the debater to be able to adapt is often unavailable. The debater may lack previous experience with the critic. Judging philosophies may not have been collected and distributed. The critic's posture may not be fully developed or may even be in transition. The audience-centered model places the debater, as well as the critic, in a situation that requires information that may not be readily accessible.

Third, as the audience-centered model approaches its objective of complete audience adaptation, pressure increases for critics of the debate rounds to be actual representatives of the public realm. The audience-centered model encourages tournament directors to substitute trained debate critics with lay-critics that may lack special training in argumentation and debate. The tendency for real world representatives has been demonstrated in the increased number of lay judges at tournaments, special attorney judged tournaments, no flow tournaments, and student judged tournaments. While the representatives of the public realm may be experts in their respective fields, there are no guarantees that they are prepared to fully appreciate the rules governing the debate contest. The debate activity is bound by rules governing speaker duties, time constraints, speaking order, rebuttal limitations, etc. The contestant is taught to follow and expect the enforcement of these rules but they may be irrelevant to the critic representing the public audience. Consequently, what has been traditionally accepted as appropriate debate convention may not be applicable to an audience-centered model. For example, the accepted convention of no new arguments in rebuttals may not be appreciated by the critic unfamiliar with traditional debate practices.

Often after a lay-judged round both the critic and the debaters are confused, angry, and frustrated. When this scenario occurs the fault is often placed on the debaters for not "properly adapting" to the lay-critic. However, Withycombe (1986) surveyed debaters and noted that debaters will adapt speaking style, as well as argument selection, if they are provided with adequate information about or from the critic. Nevertheless, as noted previously, the debaters often lack essential information on how to adapt, rather than not merely wanting to adapt.

The lay-critic often leaves the round frustrated and angry about the speed, the analysis, the use of evidence, and the perceived futility of the debate activity. But often

the critic is thrown into a round with the thorough instructions of "vote for the team that best persuades you" or "this is value debate you can do it." This is not fair to the critic who has donated his/her time and may be extremely competent but unfamiliar with debate conventions. The critic is not prepared for what happens and the debate activity suffers because the frustrated critic is disillusioned and questions the real world value of debate.

The debater is frustrated because the lay-judge poses a problem for which the debater often does not know how to solve. The debater is often at a loss on how to approach the critic. Should they inquire about judging philosophies? What does it mean that anything goes? What does it mean that the critic has debate experience? The debater is taught to respect the role of the critic, but a critic that is a real world representative may be guided by postures that are unknown, foreign or misunderstood by the debater.

While the audience-centered model represents a significant step for academic debate in the training for audience adaptation, the model poses special problems for all concerned—the experienced debate judge, the lay-critic and the CEDA debater. For experienced critics, it requires them to assume a posture on the ideals of CEDA and to intervene directly in the debate round to enforce the ideals. For the lay-critic, it poses the special problem of being unfamiliar with the conventions guiding a debate round. For the debater, it requires adaptation to judge idiosyncracies, often without the critical information essential to make the needed changes.

The audience-centered model seems to be consistent with the diversity of audiences that make-up a pluralistic society. Whether in the debate community or society-at-large, our students will encounter a plethora of audience expectations, preferences, and dislikes. However, if CEDA wishes to pursue the audience-centered model, then a variety of changes may need to be implemented to resolve the problems created in the debate contest.

First, the audience-centered model does not lend itself to theoretical pronouncements concerning the "true ideals" of CEDA. The audience-centered model respects the diversity of perspectives brought into the round by the critic. If the critic prefers a debate round which is "slow" and "humorous," he/she has the right and responsibility to inform the debaters. The debaters fail to adapt at their own risk. However, if a critic enjoys a round that is "fast" and "serious," then he/she also has the right and responsibility to inform the debaters.

What united the founders of CEDA in the early 1970s may or may not be the principles driving the forces of CEDA in the late 1980s; therefore, attempts to impose a priori principles concerning the form and content of debate rounds independent of the particular critic is inconsistent with the audience-centered model.

Second, since the audience-centered model suggests a more active role for the critic, then specific acts of judge intervention need to be delineated. Traditionally, the critic has been viewed as a passive and uncommitted evaluator of arguments with the decision based upon the arguments presented by the two teams. The audience-centered model no longer views the critic as a passive observer, but instead as an active participant in the

persuasion process. Implicit within this view is the notion that the debaters are actually engaged in an effort to change the attitudes or behavior of the critic. Consequently, the audience-centered model seems to encourage judge intervention based upon particular critics' reservations about arguments presented in the debate round.

Currently, no systematic procedure exists for setting the parameters regarding judge intervention. In fact, judge intervention may already be a fact of debate life. However, judge interventions should be open and not a hidden part of the decision-making process. If our students are to be expected to "persuade" the critic, the students have a right to know the critic's reservations. Perhaps, an optional ten minutes could be added to the debate round for the critic to ask questions. While debate exists for the educational promotion of critical advocacy skills, we should not forget that this process is placed within a competitive environment where winners and losers are announced publicly. It is imperative that special care should be taken to insure fairness during times of judge interventions.

Third, while the audience-centered model does not necessitate the use of lay-judges, it would seem to encourage the use of lay-judges in an effort to mirror the real world, independent of debate conventions and terminology. The specialized terminology surrounding debate (topicality, hasty generalizations, value objections, off-case, etc.) as well as the specialized terminology of particularly complex social issues may need to be presented in less jargonistic or "elitist" fashion.

Recently, Fisher's narrative paradigm has been suggested as an appropriate paradigm for CEDA (Hollihan, Baaske, & Riley, 1987). It is still unclear what non-elitist argumentation might look like; however, debaters and coaches might find the narrative approach to case construction and refutation an effective strategy for lay-judged rounds (as well as others). At the same time our students should not be encouraged to dismiss the complexities of an issue for the sake of a good "story." Our students will leave higher education to enter a technical and complex world with few easy answers. A good story may be an effective rhetorical strategy but not necessarily a way toward understanding the issues that will permeate their post-college experience.

Finally, tournament directors, coaches, and judges must be vigilant in the collection and distribution of information concerning the critics evaluating the rounds. Judging philosophies, judge expectations, intervention techniques, and judge backgrounds must be made available to the participants. While nothing prevents a student from asking a judge about his/her background and preferences, we should be cognizant of the communication apprehension of our novice and advanced debaters in asking for this information. Conversely, nothing prevents the judge from volunteering the needed information. Procedures must be implemented to make this information available. For example, tournament directors should request a judging philosophy and background information on all judges. Schools not participating in the exchange of information would not receive the tournament's judging booklet. What is needed is a concerted effort by all concerned to provide the participants with essential information regarding the critics judging the debate rounds. This information is especially important since the

round is decided in the mind of the critic and not in the minds of the participants (Thomas, 1981).

In summary, if CEDA is to embrace the audience-centered model of debate, then we must re-evaluate the presuppositions of the debate contest to recognize this change. The apparent inconsistency between a priori postures and the audience-centered model must be resolved in light of the particularities of the individual critics. If judges are to endorse a posture before the debate round, then it is especially important that the participants be informed concerning intervention techniques, judging philosophies, judging expectations, and judging preferences. If lay-critics are to be utilized to simulate real world audiences, then coaches and students may wish to explore the narrative paradigm in an attempt to decrease the "elitist" nature of debate argumentation.

Notes

¹"Soul" is being used in the platonic sense. Plato viewed the soul as the complex nature of the individual. If a rhetor is to successfully use persuasion, then the rhetor must know the soul of the individual as well as what sort of speech would successfully move the individual. See Plato's *Phaedrus*, translated by W.C. Helmbold and W.G. Rabinowitz, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1981).

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