

# For the Reunification of Forensics

## by David M. Cheshier

As it has from the beginning, policy debate continues to impress its internal and external audiences very differently. Former participants now distanced from the event and newcomers encountering it for the first time often express horror at the high speed and jargon-ridden delivery characteristic of the national and many regional circuits. As Judge Foote argued in the February *Rosstrum*, one can cite high delivery rates, the proliferation of generic arguments, and jargon as the greatest problem; others argue institute instruction is the culprit. These critics are likely to point to growth in Lincoln-Douglas debate as evidence of dissatisfaction with policy debate among forensics educators.

Meanwhile, policy practice proceeds, preoccupied less with these concerns than with restoring higher participation rates. The emphasis within policy coaching circles has not been, by and large, responsive to external critics - rather, the emphasis has been on how to market debate (accepting its arcane nature) to new audiences, including urban and disadvantaged student groups, and on retention, especially of women.

Why the disconnect? I think the main explanation is that policy debate coaches continue to be more persuaded by the successful outcomes of debate involvement they see than by the criticisms made by those with a more distant vantage point. After all, students attracted to policy debate usually participate with undiminished enthusiasm, and for many coaches the toughest problem is getting students to spend *less* time on debate and more on other important activities in their lives. Every so often a departing or graduating student expresses thanks on the debate listserves; I saw one recently where a graduating debater credited the event with saving his life.

### Defending Practices

Other educators defend our practices as educationally sound. The argument is often made that if participation in a highly technical jargon-saturated activity disqualifies it from educational support, we'd have to cancel programs in particle physics, organic chemistry, philosophy, mathematics, literature, medicine, and most of the other specialized fields that characterize the curriculum. Others more controversially claim debate's main benefit is not communicative at all, but exists solely in the realm of devel-

oping critical thinking and research aptitudes.

I don't know a single debate coach who thinks the event is perfect. And many offer their defenses and attacks in a more nuanced way than I've expressed them here. Some who have profound concerns about debate remain silent out of concern for arming the opposition. But that can make conversation about improving things more difficult.

Naive attackers and defenders both have it wrong. Policy debate is not dying - there is even evidence high school participation is making something of a comeback. But I believe we need to take our critics more seriously, and I want to suggest a reform that will accomplish some necessary changes.

When our critics complain about the communicative shortcomings of the event, they have a valid point. Too many of our students are incomprehensible. Too many policy debaters gasp constantly, articulate poorly, and drone on in monotone pitch. And more importantly (since I agree an activity is unfairly dismissed when judged by its worst practitioners), we collectively do too little to remedy the situation. Students who talk superfast benefit more (in the wins they achieve through opponent drops) than they suffer (through lowered speaker points).

I think it is also time to admit that, brilliant exceptions, aside, our students are too often unable to make a speech outside the highly technical confines of fast debate. For too long we have fooled ourselves by asserting that fast speed and technical proficiency have strong spillover public speaking benefits. Put our best debaters into a more routine speaking environment, we say, and they will persuade alongside the best. But the reality is very different, and the Emperor isn't fully clothed. Those students who have *only* been trained in fast debate are more often than not inept and unpersuasive in audience situations. They often find it difficult to comprehend or appreciate what it means to make an eloquent speech.

Why? Because contemporary debate cannot be relied on to fully educate our students about all the necessary components of persuasion. Our rules and training emphasize certain dimensions of eloquence,

but they are insufficient to the broader demands of skilled public argument. Yes, we teach our students to speak economically, which does produce a spare speaking style our society finds persuasive. And we train our students exceedingly well how to manufacture and refute good arguments, surely essential to persuasion.

But we do not teach students other vital skills involved in moving an audience to action. Our activity is ill-suited to teach its participants how to arrange ideas to make them most powerful, how to use humor to interest an audience and sustain interest, or how to deliver a speech without stylistic distractions. Our training in these areas, if it exists at all, is minimal and peripheral. We tell students not to wave their arms around, but some coaches tell students not to gesture at all since it might distract the judge from flowing. We pay lip service to such "old fashioned" concepts as eye contact, but we know the technical demands of debate make them impossible to employ. And in the rare case when students do look up they are likely to see the top of the judge's head, for she too is busy flowing. We tend to tell students to let their argumentative choices be solely determined by their best evidence, when the truest or most persuasive arguments for a judge may not require any evidence at all.

Many programs try to involve their students in public debates as a way of diversifying their forensic experience without (God forbid) making them attend an IE tournament. But the public debates I've seen were heavy with jargon, not that interesting to watch, and not even that argumentatively enriching. Others might cite the growing popularity of the "eloquent overview" which now begins most top-flight rebuttals. Although I tend to think they go on too long, the main concern I have is their argumentatively perfunctory nature. Eloquence is separated from argument, rather than made its integral component; Fifteen seconds of persuasion kicks things off, and then it's back to argument as usual.

Debate's increasing technical demands arose in part because of the accelerating speed of delivery. But debate has become an isolated activity because of another structural change in forensics (at both the college and high school levels) that is often

acknowledged, but whose consequences are seldom explored. With the rise of a national level debate circuit, the debate and individual events worlds were wholly separated in many places. Today, many debaters never attend or compete in an individual events tournament, and (sadly) vice versa. Most coaches only actively develop student interest in one area or the other, and worse discourage double participation, a fact that fosters stereotypical thinking and name calling.

I'm a true enough believer in policy debate to know well the standard defenses of our practice. Yes, higher rates of delivery do enable students to more comprehensively attack fallacious reasoning, and they permit the introduction of more positions. Yes, jargon and an emphasis on efficient delivery have their place in the technical worlds our students will later inhabit. And yes, the creation of separate circuits has permitted students in debate to obtain a more highly focused education in reasoning skills.

But we pay a steep collective price for these changes. We coach students with unsurpassed reasoning skills who lose moot court competitions because they are told they talk too fast, who cannot give a speech in their church or before a civic club without experiencing panic. Our activity has become so technically specialized it cannot be watched by lay observers, even in modified public debate formats, and its specialization turns otherwise intelligent students away from participation. Too often our high level debate rounds are unenjoyable. At many tournaments, the nation's best coaches simply don't judge -- they either cannot watch it anymore, or just can't face the prospect of working through another boring "spew-down." Or, putting the point more directly to coaches who do judge regularly: How often do you judge debates at the top of the national circuit that you really *enjoy* or find intellectually stimulating?

Some ad hoc changes in the air will not solve these problems. For instance, some coaches have reacted to debate's increasingly technical nature by turning their debate programs over to young college students or recent alumni. Yet this only accelerates disturbing trends. How can we expect our most recent graduates, many of whom do not have a longer term sense of educational mission (since they are often coaching only briefly), to reform or even have the skill, training, and time to improve practices so far eroded?

Some demand the death of summer institutes. But the evidence pools and research experience resulting from those programs beneficially immerse students in the topics they debate, equalizing the power of well- and under-funded programs. The best institutes spend time educating students about how to argue more effectively, more clearly, and more intelligently.

Others have insulated their circuits from national pressures. They have thrown up travel restrictions, discouraged institute participation, and more aggressively enforced local norms for speed and evidence use. While these changes have revitalized some areas, they do so at a high cost. Their brightest students end up denied the opportunity to participate in the highest level debate, and so, while protected from excess, they are also denied access to the best we have to offer as an educational community.

#### **Program Modification**

By contrast to all this, I believe one modification in how we administer our programs and institutes can start to bring our activity under control without forcing us to toss out evidence briefs and debate like Ross Perot. We can preserve the vast research skill acquisition benefits of debate without putting speed monitors on students. In addition to common sense proposals made by others (that directors judge more, that teachers more actively assert control of the institute work product, to name just two), I offer a simple addition:

***We should return to the practice of insisting that students supplement their participation in policy debate with competitive experience in individual events. And we should work to reintegrate tournaments so coaches can enter students in multiple events on a single weekend.***

I'm not proposing that debaters mandatorily participate in poetry reading contests, or even necessarily in humorous or dramatic interp, nor an age bar to debate participation. But we should begin forensics training by teaching all students the mechanics of persuasion or oration, and of extemporaneous speaking, and we should encourage students to retain their doubled involvement all the way through their high school careers.

Such double participation teaches students a maxim too frequently forgotten when students specialize in either IE or debate: *good arguments will be dismissed if they sound bad, and bad arguments will be accepted if they sound good.* Oratory teaches its students to have an apprecia-

tion for eloquence; it teaches participants to have an interest in what will persuade, and how to adjust their rhetoric to achieve a change of attitude. Extemporaneous speaking teaches the same skill, as well as introducing students more fully to the world of current events, and impromptu eloquence. Both events teach students the basics of research and the mechanics of argument organization. And competition in these events drive home an appreciation for the importance of clarity and eloquence that cannot be achieved in debate.

#### **Benefits of Reintegrating**

Reintegrating individual events with debate would achieve many benefits. It would induce a natural restraint on the excesses of debate practice, by (in essence) installing an eloquence regulator in our students. It would restore the ability of our students to make persuasive speeches when called upon to do so. It would alleviate burn-out in debaters who are often recruited in the eighth grade, and who frequently attend four or even five institutes during their high school career.

Reintegration of our circuits would have benefits for the broader world of forensics overnight and administration. It might bring occasionally out of control students back under the direct oversight of mature forensic educators. And it would produce a educational outcome we'd be prouder to put on display for parents and administrators.

Committed debate-only coaches often react to this idea by saying: "I can barely keep up with the demands of debate coaching, let alone become a specialist in other activities." But the reality requires the effort. And it was only ten or fifteen years ago that what I am calling for was the norm everywhere, not the exception. Those who most effectively succeed given the present arrangement would be hard pressed to defend the view that argument quality then was so much poorer than it is now, despite their efforts to shape strategy and tactics.

If circuit reintegration is to happen, it has to start in high schools. Once students reach college their minds are firmly set about the respective merits of debate and individual events. And once students start attending institutes, peer pressure has already shaped their biases. Only after some major debate directors make the change can colleges and institutes put into place curricular changes to reinforce their decision. Only when enough students want integrated summer training will institutes adjust ac-

cordingly and be able to stay in business.

Reintegration of the forensic events can strengthen IE training as well. Our orators need the research and thinking skills that policy debate provides, lest they become mere entertainers or demagogues. Every student should learn how to argue better, whether they end up "specializing" in extemporaneous speaking or policy debate.

To my friends who find solace in the suggestion that "only policy debate faces difficulty," my response is this: We will rise or fall together, for it is rightly the quality of the *overall* outcome on which we are judged. And unless debate and individual events each contribute to the training of our students, none of our activities will grow for much longer.

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