

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON VALUES AND CRITERIA IN LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE: THE CASE FOR CONTEXTUAL STANDARDS

by
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Since its introduction as a National Forensic League event, coaches and competitors have debated over proper roles, if any, of value premises and criteria in Lincoln-Douglas debate. If Lincoln-Douglas debate is to fulfill its potential as a pedagogical vehicle for critical thinking, superior speaking, and persuasion within a discussion on contemporary public affairs, it must be able to support reasoned decision making and application to the empirical world as called for by current Lincoln-Douglas debate resolutions.

In this essay, I will argue that given the current brevity of the L-D time format, a reconceptualization of the role of values and criteria is necessary and that contextual values, rather than abstract values, should be used in high school Lincoln-Douglas debate. I begin the essay noting that values and criteria are used in everyday life and that training in explicit decision rules is an important pedagogical goal. After making several observations about the current treatment of values and criteria in contemporary Lincoln-Douglas debate practice, I will introduce several new standards and provide several examples that illustrate my point. I will conclude with a discussion on the real-world benefits of the changes that I am advocating.

Values and Criteria Are Part of Everyday Decision Making

Whether we consciously recognize it or not, individuals and organizations use values to guide their behavior and criteria to judge the rightness, appropriateness, or effectiveness of that behavior. For example, students might set a goal to become more time efficient and would apply certain standards to determine if they were successful. Are they completing more assignments in the same amount of time? Is the quality of their work substantively better? Are they able to finish their homework in less time that will allow them to work on other tasks or have more recreational time? Although the goal was the same, there were slightly

different standards of measurement applied to that goal. Therefore, by selecting a value, or goal, and applying the appropriate standard for success, we can properly and consistently determine if, in fact, students were successful in becoming more time efficient. In the business world, companies value success, but how they measure or attain success is very different. For example, a young company's criterion for success may not be not attaining profits but instead, gaining market share which is essential for long term growth.

We make value judgments based on choices within contexts which is a significant oversight that we make in current Lincoln-Douglas debate practice. Very rarely in the real-world do we think about the overarching value of "justice" or "social progress" when discussing public affairs subjects similar to those framed in Lincoln-Douglas debate resolutions. Instead, we think of instrumental values which are lower level values that have a more direct relationship to the subject matter.

A concept that is familiar to most people is the notion of applying criteria to values, for a criterion serves as a standard by which to measure attainment of the value or the degree of success. There are a number of ways to think about criteria and some of the most common are:

- **Standard of measurement**, which establishes a unit measurement such as dollars or other measurable standard.

- **Selection mechanism**, which establishes a course of action given certain conditions. For example, John Rawls' Difference Principle stipulates that resources should be distributed equally and if there are any remaining inequalities, they should be distributed to favor the least advantaged.

- **"Finish line,"** which merely signals success once a certain condition has been met or reached. For example, economic equality is met when all citizens have basic

needs met.

- **Means of attainment**, which sets a path to reach the value or goal. For example, a very robust debate can be over achieving the value of economic prosperity. Should we adopt a "trickle down" economic plan based on tax cuts for the rich and corporations or increased government spending on social programs?

- **Filtering mechanism**, which isolates only certain issues related to the resolution. For example, successful debaters have used this type of criterion to persuade judges to accept only human rights-based arguments when determining trade policies.

Given a value or goal, most students can identify ways of determining proper criteria, given some coaching. The two most common stumbling blocks are to try to apply several standards of measurement, some of which might conflict, instead of a single criterion and thinking too narrowly about what constitutes a criterion.

The Essential Need for Training in Value Premises and Criteria

Given the fact that we use values and criteria everyday, Lincoln-Douglas debate can and should be an event where proper value premise development and appropriate criteria selection are emphasized. There are several vocal opponents of the use of value premises and criteria in Lincoln-Douglas debate but many of their criticisms are based on the fact that many students do not use them correctly. This is hardly adequate reason not to use such a valuable decision making tool. While I am in agreement with other argumentation theorists who have made the claim that values and criteria can be implicit or less formalized, I believe that those are more advanced models of argumentation better suited to mature varsity high school competitors or collegiate debaters. If we are willing to adopt a more empirical view of values and criteria in high school Lincoln-Douglas debate as reflected in the empirically-based L-D resolu-

tions of the past several years, explicit modeling can be very educational to our students. Equally advantageous is the usefulness of goals and decision rules to assist judges, especially lay judges, in rendering well-reasoned decisions.

Criterial mechanisms are decision rules that guide individual, organizational, and societal actions. When we teach our students to carefully craft a rule that sets a standard or standards for making a decision, we will have empowered them with a tool that will serve them well for the rest of their lives. In the competitive forensic setting, judges will find themselves intervening far less often when bright-line standards for evaluation are explicit in the debate.

Existing Guidelines Support the Use of Values and Criteria in Lincoln-Douglas Debate

One of the original tenets of Lincoln-Douglas debate was to emphasize discussion on the value premise and criterion. NFL L-D Guideline #1 (a-c), found in the 2000 NFL Appendices on page TA-6, sets clear standards on the format and focus of a Lincoln-Douglas debate:

- “Establishing [sic] of a value premise...”
- “Establishing [sic] of a values criteria...”
- “Clash in the debate based upon the values criteria and/or the value premise.”

Yet, over twenty years after Lincoln-Douglas made its debut as a high school event, there is still no consensus on the use and application of the value premise or criterion. Ideally, both are identified and applied in the round. But more frequently, values are identified in the affirmative constructive speech and then paid lip service in rebuttals, values are mentioned in the affirmative constructive, then completely ignored, or values are not mentioned at all. Defenders of the latter practice claim that the judge should be persuaded by the debaters to render a decision. But my response to them is “based on what?” Despite the trend in collegiate and high school policy debate of providing judging philosophies or even post-debate oral critique, that practice is still nascent in L-D debate and some regions even discourage the practice. Thus, left with no way of knowing which standards judges will use in rendering decisions, unless our students can read minds or auras, debaters are literally walking into the debate in hopes of presenting the “magic bullet” argument and leaving the decision to the personal standards of the judge.

Coaches who advocate the no values/no criteria philosophy contradict themselves when they preach about audience analysis and adaptation. How are our students expected to obtain this information? The bottom line is that debaters must be allowed to take responsibility for their advocacy, as they will be expected to in the real world and include their value premise and criterion to set the decision rule for the debate.

In fact, judges want value premises in the round and consider criteria an important part of the debate process. Mitch Gaffer’s study on current Lincoln-Douglas practice and opinion published in the November 1999 *Rostrum* found that 78% of judges at the 1999 NFL National Tournament consider value premise/core value a mandatory part of Lincoln-Douglas debate. (Judges rating question 3D a “4” or “5”). The Gaffer Study also revealed that 69% of judges consider criteria essential to clarify the value premise/core value. (Judges rating question 3i a “4” or “5”). It seems that we are witnessing a growing trend that judges are looking for goals and decision standards in the round. The problem is that current practice falls short of those legitimate expectations.

Problems With Current Practice in Lincoln-Douglas Debate

Most Lincoln-Douglas debaters identify a very abstract value such as “justice” or “progress” and try to apply it to a specific empirical context stipulated in the L-D resolution. The result is a lack of context and precision because abstract values are “too high” for empirically-applied L-D resolutions to be adequately analyzed in just 13 minutes. This is tantamount to using a meat ax when, in actuality, a scalpel is required. Additionally, current practice is actually counter-productive to the educational goals of debate because it promotes shallow analysis and is difficult for judges to understand.

Judges do not see the “value” in contemporary value debate rounds because use of overly abstract values results in a loss of meaning and relevance as it is applied to the resolution. In fact, using the highest, most abstract value is *exactly the wrong standard* for today’s applied Lincoln-Douglas debate resolutions. Those debaters who claim that their value should be upheld because “it is the highest value in the round” are not only setting themselves up for a much tougher argumentative burden, but they are actually providing reasons why

their value should not be used by the judge.

Use of abstract values and even worse, focus of the debate over competing philosophical theories, sidesteps or completely ignores the discussion over the actual debate resolution. Under the present paradigm, it is possible for debaters to discuss the same issues of “justice” or “freedom” despite changes in the resolution. Clearly, current practice is not promoting discussion on the range of issues that is demanded by frequent changes of debate topics.

There are a number of theoretical foundations upon which to base use of applied or contextual values. The following theorists have developed frameworks that support the issues identified in this essay:

- **Value clustering.** Milton Rokeach or Wayne A. R. Leys argues that for each idea, there are a number of values that are directly related. By using value clustering analysis, we can identify the most relevant values and make better decisions by using values which are the most relevant.

- **Cluster-Agon Method.** Rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke takes a similar but more theoretical approach compared to Rokeach and Leys to isolate the most relevant values to a proposition.

- **Resolutional Relevance.** Debate coaches Tom Murphy and Melinda Murphy argues that abstract values are not useful and that debaters should use values that are proven to be relevant to the resolution. It would be up to the debaters to provide that analysis but Murphy and Murphy points out that the process have significant educational benefit.

- **Intrinsicness Theory.** Communications professor and college debate coach Kenneth Bahm-Broda advocates that the best standard for evaluating arguments is how intrinsic, or directly relevant, it is to the resolution. By adopting intrinsicness standards to Lincoln-Douglas debate arguments and interpretations, we can encourage students to keep their arguments and focused on the topic.

With respect to criteria, current practice also reveals an underutilization of robust criterial standards in Lincoln-Douglas debate. The two most common are:

- **Value Maximization Standard**, which states “whoever best upholds [insert value here] wins.”
- **Cost Benefit Analysis**, which states “the good outweighs the bad.”

Neither of these so-called criteria provides clear, bright-line standards for judges to utilize in making a decision in the round because both beg the question for clear measuring standards. Adopting criteria mentioned earlier in this essay would go a long way towards implementing clear decision rules.

A Proposal for New Contextual Standards for Values & Criteria

The adoption of contextual values and clear criteria can keep debates focused and relevant to the resolution, assisting judges with decision making and making the debate more educational for students.

The new contextual standard for the value premise is simply that value premises should be directly related to the resolutional issue or conflict and that debaters must justify the selection of those values. It only seems logical that debaters should tailor their analysis to the requirements of the debate topic and be prepared to justify their selection of issues.

The new standard for criteria or decision rules is that they provide a clear “bright-line” standard for argument evaluation. Using any of the five suggested criteria (standard of measurement, selection mechanism, finish line, means of attainment, and filtering mechanism) would meet such a standard.

To illustrate my proposal, I will present some real world and debate-centered comparisons.

Topic: Business Success	Current Practice: Abstract Values and Criteria	New Contextual Standards
Value(s)	Success	Profitability
Criterion or criteria	Profit	Increase in post-expense revenues or shareholder value
Comments	Vague and offers no clear standard of evaluation	Isolates one type of success and offers clear standards for evaluation
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Topic: Justice	Current Practice: Abstract Values and Criteria	New Contextual Standards
Value(s)	Justice	Due process
Criterion or criteria	Protection of rights, due process	Consistent application of legitimate laws
Comments	Vague and offers no clear standard of evaluation	Isolates one interpretation of justice and offers a clear standard for evaluation

Conclusion and a Call for Discussion

At present, there is a tremendous amount of unrealized potential in Lincoln-Douglas debate. The opportunities to promote better critical thinking skills, tighter argument structures, better application of ideals and principles to real-world issues, and persuasive communication skills can be fulfilled by adopting contextual value premise and criterion standards in Lincoln-Douglas debate. The changes advocated in this essay need not be implemented by changing the NFL L-D guidelines. Instead, the debate community can adopt this model and integrate it into the way we train and judge our students. By tightening argumentative structures that more realistically connect theory to the empirical world, we teach students persuasive decision-making skills that are more relevant in to their studies and later professional life. I hope that this essay begins a vigorous discussion over the accepted practices in the National Forensic League’s most popular debate event.

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