GETTING THE STORY RIGHT: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN ACADEMIC DEBATE

by Kelly McDonald & Jeffrey W. Jarman

While the idea to extend a narrative paradigm into academic debate is not a new one, this essay argues for a pluralist, non-paradigmatic view of narrative within the context of academic debate. First, this essay addresses applications of narrative to debate as paradigm or exemplar; second, it analyzes the criticisms of this paradigmatic approach; third, posits our theory about the application of narrative; fourth, extends some conclusions regarding the application of narrative and implications for the practice of academic debate.

Narrative as Debate Paradigm

Bartanen (1987) argues, "Perceived as narrators, debaters present competing stories relevant to the topic area. They recount ideas of others and events of the past and try to account for those ideas and events. Interwoven, necessarily, are their own experiences and perceptions." Consonant with the outlook on truth seeking within debate, a judge does not seek the truth, but a truth among competing stories. Finally, Bartanen points to the dangers of current debate practice embedded in the metaphor "argument is war" and points to debater as storyteller as a possible remedy.

In their 1985 article Hollihan, Riley, and Baaske call for "academic debate [to] move in the direction of a "communication style" which manages to preserve many of the best elements of the policy-making systems theory perspective -- the emphasis on careful and deliberate considerations of policy alternatives -- while also teaching debaters to make arguments that appeal to and have meaning for broader audiences." Turning to Walter Fisher's work on the narrative paradigm, the authors point to narrative as the pluralist "exemplar" they desire debate to emulate. Narrative becomes the means to open the debate community to larger audiences, including university administrators, politicians, and the general population. For debaters, narratives are the vehicle to enact their "social knowledge," thereby locating their claims in particular historical moments. Moreover, the narrative format would allow debaters to attend to the value dimensions of the many different policy alternatives".

Many of the functions described by authors who advocate a paradigmatic view of narrative in academic debate are useful and constructive. Hollihan, Riley and Baaske (1985) argued that a narrative approach to debate would not change the rigor and research of the activity of policy debate. Moreover, the authors contend the narrative mode would increase the argumentative repertoire of competitors.

> Debaters and debate critics would continue to possess a very shrewd and well-defined sense of argument. They would still be involved with research, and through this research they would learn how the "experts" in the field evaluated stories. Thus rather than sacrificing rationality, debaters would be enriching their education by supplementing their rational arguments with narrative capability.

Debaters, according to Hollihan, Riley, and Baaske would receive more preparation in real world argumentation through a paradigmatic view of narrative in debate. Additionally, programs may benefit, they argue, as a narrative approach would increase accessibility and openness to debate activities.

Continuing their earlier work, Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley return to the narrative paradigm for guidance in the conduct of academic debate. One central concern they cite is the distance or removal of the critic as an active participant in the process of adjudication. The authors claim they are searching for a means to increase debater involvement and engagement with issues.

> We want debaters to create compelling arguments that audiences will find impossible to ignore. Thus debate can train its participants not just for leadership roles in society, although we hope and expect that debaters will continue to become leaders, but also to serve as critics of the values being promulgated in our society.

A narrative perspective would be important for shaping the experience of individual debaters for future leadership as well as forcing them to make MORE compelling arguments. Additional benefits cited by the authors include elevating public knowledge and judgement, as "[a] narrative perspective celebrates the ability, wisdom and judgment of the public;" increasing judge and participant interaction in co-creating the debate as the process of "constructing, communicating, and evaluating their respective understandings of the world" would engage judges and participants in a highly dialectical process; increase the focus on context and biography of sources, thereby giving greater emphasis to the warranting function within argument; and finally help reduce some barriers to competition created by lack of prior high school debate experience.

Criticism of a Paradigmatic Application

Gass (1988) represents the strongest critique of the Application of a narrative paradigm in academic debate. Rejecting any paradigmatic solution to the problems within debate practice through narrative, Gass advances the expert model for argument construction and evaluation. He makes three basic arguments against the narrative paradigm. First, Gass says the narrative paradigm lacks the precision needed for academic debate. Grounding his argument in the differences between "pure" and "applied" theories, Gass contends that "pure theories" do not require precision because they attempt to "explain, understand, or interpret phenomena."

In contrast , "applied" theories require precision because they function to regulate, instead of explain phenomenon. Academic debate, because its theories act to regulate behavior, rather than explain it, requires precision. Gass argues that the narrative paradigm does not bring the necessary precision the activity requires. For instance, it provides no guidelines concerning how to resolve issues such as conditionality, counterplans, permutations, stock issues and fiat power. Without explaining how narrative rationality would resolve competing theoretical questions, Gass believes that the theory fails to provide the necessary precision required by academic debate.

A second criticism of the application of the narrative paradigm to academic debate is that narratives have a lower standard of evaluation than traditional arguments. Gass believes that the role of debate should be to teach students how to construct and test arguments as experts. However, the standards of narrative fidelity and narrative probability do not serve that end. He suggest two problems:

First, the assumption that lay audiences attend to, let alone understand, complex policy issues appears to be somewhat fanciful. Second, even if lay audiences occasionally do succeed in this regard, academic debate should employ a higher standard of argumentative excellence than is accepted by the norm.

His argument is a direct refutation of the claims made by Hollihan and his co-authors. Hollihan and others contend that debate should be geared more toward the average citizen. However, Gass' point is that we should not teach our students to debate for the average citizen because they pay very little attention to policy issues. Moreover, even if they did, he argues that we should hold debaters to a higher standard. He suggests that the expert model would provide a better standard of evaluation than would narrative rationality. He says that the problem is that debaters and judges act too little like policy makers. In fact, he suggests that use of the "expert criterion in debate rounds--one which simultaneously recognizes the judges as an expert on argument, and one who is well-versed on the topic for debate--establishes a higher standard of argumentative excellence than does the narrative perspective."

Gass' third criticism concerns the adverse impact on judge intervention that the narrative paradigm would have on academic debate. He argues that the standards of evaluation (narrative probability and narrative fidelity) would require more judge intervention. His argument is that "some judges might refuse to accept arguments that failed to 'ring true' with their belief systems, despite compelling evidence" and that "other judges might accept arguments that struck sympathetic chords within their belief systems, even when those arguments were not accompanied by adequate evidence." He believes that the problem is that the narrative paradigm utilizes the judge as the referent for the quality of argument, therefore inviting intervention. Within the narrative paradigm, arguments are right or wrong based on particular judges. An expert model, he argues, would avoid this problem because it appeals to other outside information to verify claims and not to the judge's personal beliefs.

While these criticisms of the narrative paradigm do have merit, they too are not without problems. [We do not take issue with specific recommendations for debate which Gass presents or the expert model he advocates. He is advancing a claim for much of what already exists.] However, what we do suggest is that his particular criticisms of the narrative approach may go too far. Instead, we would like to highlight a few of the comments he makes which can be useful in reconstructing a role for the narrative which combines the best of the expert model and the narrative perspective.

First, Gass is correct in arguing against the narrative paradigm in academic debate. We agree that the introduction of the narrative as a metaphor for the activity could have an adverse impact on theoretical positions and argument evaluation. However, this criticism should not be taken as a general indictment of narratives in debate. Stories can be useful, while at the same time acknowledging that debate is not a story-telling activity.

Second, the role of debate as a training ground for future experts is also important. As Gass suggests, the words "expert" or "elite" should not be devil terms. What is important, however, is that we begin to transform what it means to be an expert. Strict adherence to traditional notions of expertise need to be abandoned. What we suggest is that debaters broaden their conceptions of what constitutes evidence and authority. Too often, the perspectives of the marginalized are not given adequate space, even when they have something significant to contribute. We propose utilizing the narrative to broaden what is considered relevant for experts to evaluate. What is needed is a conception of argumentation which would include traditional forms of argument as well as narratives.

Finally, we also agree that any prescription for debate should minimize judge intervention. Gass is correct to argue that debaters do not want to have to debate a judge whose ideas and "arguments were kept secret from him or her during the debate, and whose objections were made known only after the ballot was completed."

However, the ability to minimize judge intervention should be buffered against the need to make debate arguments as inclusive as possible. The more arguments debaters have available to them before the round begins the greater the likelihood that they can appeal to a judge and preclude intervention. Opening debate up to include narratives, then, can facilitate a reduction in judge intervention.

Narrative at Middle Ground

There are two divergent views of narratives within academic debate: one which supports the narrative paradigm citing a need to make debate more open to the general public; another as which holds that debate should train students to become experts. We believe that there is a middle ground to resolve this dispute. Treating narratives as evidence instead of paradigms allows for stories to be introduced into debates without compromising the expert orientation of the activity.

The basis for this approach lies in the expert model of debate as advocated by Gass. His argument is based on the reliance of authority-based reasoning to advance and test claims. The key element is the knowledge used to warrant the claims advanced. In a separate article, Winebrenner posited evaluative criteria for consideration of expert knowledge in the warranting of claims. He suggest two relevant standards useful when evaluating expert testimony: first, what is the nature of the author's qualification and second, are the reasons for conclusions present in the evidence. Using these criteria, and the expert model which is interested in the production and evaluation of knowledge, narratives function as evidence. Treating narratives as evidence, based on these criteria, can fulfill the functions of narratives as well as maintain the argumentative rigor desired by the expert model.

First, narratives do have an epistemological function. Too often critics of the narrative paradigm tend to overlook the benefits of narratives choosing to focus on the specific problems of application. It is important to keep in mind that narratives do provide knowledge. A story has the power to convey information and humanize a situation which might be unavailable in other formats. For instance, issues of racism and discrimination seem aptly suited to discussions via narratives. Statistics and facts

seem less capable of describing racism than a story. An example of this comes from Cornell West (1993) when he describes several instances of racism:

> This past September my wife, Elleni, and I made our biweekly trek to New York city from Princeton. I dropped my wife off for an appointment on 60th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues. I left my car--a rather elegant one--in a safe parking lot and stood on the corner of 60th Street and Park Avenue to catch a taxi. ... I waited and waited and waited. After the ninth taxi refused me, my blood began to boil. The tenth taxi refused me and stopped for a kind, well-dressed, smiling female citizen of European descent. As she stepped in the cab, she said, "This is really ridiculous, is it not?" Ugly racial memories of the past flashed through my mind. Years ago, while driving from New York to teach at Williams College, I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, "Yeh, and I'm the Flying Nun. Let's go, nigger!" I was stopped three times in my first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. (And my son, Clifton, already has similar memories at the tender age of fifteen.) Needless to say, these incidents are dwarfed by those like Rodney King's beating or the abuse of black targets of the FBI's COINTELPRO efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the memories cut like a merciless knife at my soul as I waited on that godforsaken corner. Finally I decided to take the subway. I walked three long avenues, arrived late, and had to catch my moral breath...
> When I picked up Elleni, I told her of my hour spent on the corner, my tardy arrival, and the expertise and enthusiasm of the photographer and designer...As we rode back to Princeton...we talked about what race matters have meant to the American past and how much race matters in the in the American present. And I vowed to be more vigilant and virtuous in my efforts to meet the formidable challenges posed by Plato and Du Bois. For me, it is an urgent question of power and morality; for others, it is an everyday matter of life and death.

The point of the story is to illustrate the massive inequalities which are associated with racism. Simply counting the number of times racist behavior occurs does not do justice to the claim. Only through a story can the significance of the problem be understood. In this way narratives serve an epistemological function.

Second, narratives can function as evidence within the academic debate context because they fulfill the criteria established by Winebrenner. Narratives do meet the requirement of expertise. When establishing claims of authority two issues are involved: either the author is knowledgeable on the subject (expert) or s/he has some experience which make their comments relevant. When individuals relate or retell actual events from their life experience, they are accorded the later type of expert status. Other stories are created by authors who have some level of education, expertise, or training in a given field and are accorded expert status of the former type. These stories draw on the first type of authority. It is also possible for certain stories to utilize both levels of authority, as with Cornell West: he is a professor of cultural studies and a victim of racism.

Not only do stories fulfill the expertise requirement, they also meet the standards of warranting claims established by Winebrenner. His argument is that we should not accept arguments which are only conclusionary. Rather, a basis for the claim should be explicit in the evidence. He writes: "an authoritative inference involves expert opinion, but presents that opinion in a manner which reveals the thinking of the authority...Such testimony not only identifies the opinion a witness holds, it identifies the inference upon which that opinion has been based. Opinions which combine substance with deference create a stronger web of proof than do opinions which rely upon deference alone." Stories clearly meet this criteria. The development of the story functions as pieces of evidence in support of the claim. Each example within the story further supports the major claim. The plot functions to warrant the claim of the story. The plot ties together each of the small descriptions into an argument. For example, in the Cornell West story, the refusal of a taxi to stop only for a black man functions as evidence of some racist act. In this manner, the necessary components of a story would fulfill Winebrenner's requirement that

evidence contain within itself warrants for the claims.

This understanding of narratives provides a Burkean "both/and" solution to the problem of narratives in academic debate. On the one hand, it maintains the usefulness of narratives within debate. Narratives are clearly powerful types of evidence which can and should be utilized in the construction of persuasive arguments. At the same time, narratives as evidence maintain the expert model of debate advanced by those opposed to narratives. The key is that debaters are still required to construct viable arguments with sound reasoning. The only change is that this interpretation would expand the realm of what is acceptable "evidence." Instead of relying solely on the policy-analyst expert, debaters and judges would be required to broaden their understanding of what constitutes an expert. Authority-based reasoning should include those who have knowledge about the claim advance. Clearly, anyone who studies racism or who has been the victim of racism or discrimination is in a position of expertise on the subject. Moreover, not only can we test their expertise on a given subject, but we can also test the validity of their argument without resorting to judicial intervention. Stories can be read for internal consistency. This is the mark of warrants within a story. Judges and debaters can evaluate how well the events of a story function to warrant a conclusion about the events. The fact that the events are told as a story, instead of some other format, does not preclude this type of analysis. Winebrenner's discussion of the role of testimony in debate is also instructive in applying narrative arguments. The dominance of authority evidence within contemporary debate practice, especially without complete or meaningful qualification for the source providing testimony, produces fewer warrants and increased unchallenged claims. Winebrenner illuminates the issue of warranting claims during a debate round.

Conclusion and Implications

General systems theory provides helpful instruction for the debate community as we seek to remain a vital and functioning system. Failure to sustain external inputs, the theory argues, will result in systemic failure as the elements breakdown and as chaos begins to emerge. The system of intercollegiate debate is no exception. The

continued health and vitality of the debate community requires changes and adaptations in practice. A willingness to change and adapt is certainly a beginning point. To that end, the recommendation from the First National Developmental Conference on Forensics also pointed to a need for openness within the system to changes as "debate educators should be open to considering innovations in debate theory which might improve the activity." Thus, this essay is an attempt to carve out some space for narrative within the current practice of academic debate, not as a paradigm which wholly defines the practice of debate, but as a significant area for evidence and warrants for larger claims advanced by affirmative or negative teams.

The warranting function or power of narratives for academic debate underscores the epistemological basis for narratives as a form of argument. Narratives also have axiological qualities as evidence for claims. That is, narratives can help debaters focus on unique issues, particularly as they affect marginalized groups within our culture and give voice to their concerns. Narratives have an ontological existence in debate rounds for much the same reason. The rhetorical force of narratives is the experience of the individual related through the story. Calling upon the narrative evokes the experience of the individual as proof. However, despite our interest in including narratives within the canon of debate "evidence" or "proof," we disagree with anyone who would claim that because they presented a narrative they ought to win the debate *per se*. It is incumbent on debaters to use the narrative evidence only for what it proves. Meta-debates over the tyranny of language or discursive thought/argument may or may not be appropriate in a given setting.

Using narrative effectively within the context of academic debate does not mean the community must discard all previous pedagogy, research and practices. Rather, we envision something of a Burkean "both/and." The value of narrative in the debate context does not necessarily have to be an all or nothing proposition. Every team or the entire community does not have to transform their argument behavior to recognize the benefits which Fisher, Hollihan, Riley, Baaske and Bartanen affirm. We would clearly oppose any efforts to divorce narratives from reason. As with any mode of

delivery (explicitly narrative or not) we believe debaters should draw reasons (inclusive of stories, narratives, etc.) from the relevant topic area which judge past, present or future actions. Evaluation cannot be dissociated from debate. One evaluates the probability and fidelity of a particular narrative through much the same process as evaluating the salience of disadvantages (or any other policy structured argument) in the current paradigm. As educators, our role should be to supplement the "traditional" theory and practice with instruction in the application of narrative.

In evaluating the appropriateness of different arguments and argument forms, we ask coaches to take more seriously the pre-round question, "Do we have a story?" Beyond a question of simple fidelity between the counterplan and disadvantages, coaches should encourage debaters to experiment with different modes of argumentation. The perspective we are advocating cannot account for all objections to forensics practice leveled by Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley. Perceived barriers to successful entry in the highest levels of competition in academic debate will likely remain whether debaters explicitly become storytellers in a Fisherian sense or in the tradition sense of coherent, detailed policy arguments grounded in external, authority evidence. The exactness and attention to detail debaters accord to the construction and refutation of arguments should not give way to any less rigid standards. Initial resistance within the debate community to new forms of argument or different bases for warranting claims should not be reason alone to reject the innovative practice. Further discussion, debate and clarification over the nature of the form and its epistemological and axiological implications for debate practice is necessary.

Finally, treating narratives as evidence should have the effect of expanding what is considered authority-based reasoning. Winebrenner establishes a hierarchy of evaluating expertise based on "direct evidence", "associative evidence" and "accepted expertise". We suggest a redefinition of these terms to account for narrative authors. Winebrenner defines direct evidence of expertise as those individuals who have competence or knowledge within a given field. Direct evidence of expertise would be stories based on an individual's actual experience. Winebrenner defines

associative evidence as those individuals who have connections with particular institutions related to the topic. Associate evidence within the narrative paradigm would be treated similarly. That is, does the writer work in the area of study or have other institutional, related knowledge of the topic. Finally, Winebrenner defines accepted expertise as people who are recognized or legitimated authorities on a topic. Example of accepted expertise used by Winebrenner include staff writers for The New York Times and individuals who testify before congressional hearings. In the context of the narrative paradigm, accepted expertise is functionally unchanged. Social critics, George Orwell for example, are given expertise given the merit of their claims based on the predictive value of their claims or their explanatory quality on a given issue.

While the preceding examples may suggest particular forms or forums for the authors' stories, they also suggest the significance we attach to the substance of the stories. Bartanen's position strongly amplifies the significance attached to form. Drawing from the legal profession, Bartanen quotes Bennett and Feldman

> **. . .adequately documented but poorly structured accounts will be rejected because they do not withstand careful scrutiny within a story framework. Similarly, a well-constructed story may sway judgements even when evidence is in short supply.**

In suggesting the importance of form, the authors seem to understate the significance of substance. We do not want to suggest substance or support will in any way be slighted by form or presentation. Drawing from the positions of Hollihan, Riley, and Baaske, we believe the role of research and evidence will in no way be ignored by adoption of a narrative approach. Rather, any transition will necessarily involve looking at evidence and research differently.

The need to strike a balance between traditional and innovative forms of argument is necessary if the debate system is going to survive. Along with innovative forms of argument we need to have an adequate theory to guide its application. "Without coherent standards for thought and judgement and a method for applying them, our acts and judgments threaten to decay into empty gestures, rituals devoid of meaning or purpose, or con games whose

sole purpose is to gain power over others"
(Sherwin 551). This paper represents our
attempt to provide the standards and meth-
ods by which narratives can be introduced
into academic debate rounds with sufficient
compromise: the benefits of narratives with
the rigors of argumentation.

References

Bartanen, J. M. (1987). Application of the narra-
tive paradigm in CEDA debate. In D. A.
Thomas and J. Hart (Eds.)., Advanced De-
bate: Readings in theory practice and teach-
ing 3rd Ed. (Pp. 329-341). Skokie, IL:
National Textbook Company.

Bennett, W. L., and Feldman, M. S. (1981). Re-
constructing reality in the courtroom.
Rutgers.

Gass, Robert H., (1988, Fall). The narrative per-
spective in academic debate: a critique.
Journal of the American Forensic Associa-
tion, 25, 78-92.

Hollihan, T. A., Baaske, K. T., and Riley, P. (1987).
Debaters as storytellers: Narrative perspec-
tive in academic debate. Journal of the
American Forensic Association, 23, 184-
193.

Hollihan, T. A., Riley, P., and Baaske, K. T. (1985).
The art of storytelling: An argument for a
narrative perspective in academic debate.
In J. R. Cox, M. O. Sillars, and G. Walker
(Eds.), Argument and social practice: Pro-
ceedings of the fourth SCA/AFA confer-
ence on argumentation (pp. 807-826).
Annandale, VA: Speech Communication As-
sociation.

Sherwin, R. K. (1988). A matter of voice and
plot: Belief and suspicion in legal
storytelling. Michigan Law Review, 87,
5433-612.

West, C. (1993). Race matters. New York: Vin-
tage Books.

Winebrenner, T. C. (1995). Authority as argu-
ment in academic debate. Contemporary
Argument and Debate, 16, 14-29.

*(Kelly McDonald is the Director of
Forensics at Western Washington
University and is co-authoring a book
on Debate Watch '96. Jeffrey Jarman
teaches at the Elliott School of Commu-
nication at Wichita State University. This
paper was presented at the 1995 SCA
Convention.)*