

UNIQUE INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

by

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High school speech and debate events are often called educational activities, and for good reason. Students beginning their careers in forensics are typically looking for fun and friendship; what they discover besides is a unique intellectual environment where they can learn about philosophy, policy, government, and many other fields of knowledge not commonly discussed in the classroom. As a debater I was constantly surprised by how quickly new competitors come to recognize the inherently educational nature of their events. Now that my debate years are behind me, I am almost as often reminded by my friends of how important debate was in their intellectual development, coming at a time in their lives when they most sought self-understanding. Speech and Debate make

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In this article I want to focus on just one educational aspect of forensics activities, their ability to expose young people to global and international perspectives. Recent events have returned matters of international concern to the center of public consciousness, but for years domestic concerns in the United States have been emphasized almost to the exclusion of foreign affairs. High school curricula typically provide only a distantly historical perspective on international relations and today's national culture is remarkably inward-looking. Forensics events that have encouraged young people to explore international studies and to learn about global concerns have been performing a service that only becomes obvious after a catastrophe like the one suffered last year. It is important for today's youth to have an international perspective, and speech is one way to inculcate that outlook.

The relationship between forensics and internationalism is subtler than is immediately apparent. There are the straightforward cases where the issues up for discussion in rounds are international in nature.

Events like foreign extemp, student congress, and policy debate inspire students to read hundreds of pages of *The Economist*, *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, or, god be praised, *The Harvard International Review*.

Knowledge is acquired through research and opinions are formed in competition. In an amazingly short time, a teenager too bored with school to care can become a bona fide expert on nuclear arms treaties or first amendment rights or Guatemalan politics.

But there are also indirect educational effects associated with speech and debate that are relevant to the formation of a successful cosmopolitan perspective. Forensics takes parochial youths across the country, offering a glimpse of their own remarkable nation and the diversity it contains. Competition emphasizes clarity of thought and expression as prerequisites to changing minds and resolving conflicts. All the while, new ideas and perspectives are fairly considered regardless of who advanced them, teaching an important lesson on toleration. Those involved in international relations know that these are the experiences and skills that first and foremost—even more than objective knowledge—determine whether a global outlook succeeds or fails to spawn effective cooperation.

Anyone familiar with what actually happens in speech and debate rounds, on the other hand, knows that this picture of forensics is many ways an idealization. Coaches, whose commitment creates the possibility of this international education, work tirelessly to shorten the gap between the ideal and the reality. What many students and parents sometimes forget is how invaluable this service is, not just to the individuals involved, but to the health and well-being of our society. Ours is a time of national crisis, and in crisis we can begin to see the societal import of the work we do as laborers, researchers, police—and teachers.

Of course, not all speech events emphasize transnational issues and perspectives to the same extent or in the same ways. Nor should they.

The selection of debate topics is influenced by current events, and one can only assume that military and international topics will therefore be advantaged in months to come; but there is a limit to how far this preference can be carried without sacrificing other important kinds of lessons debate can teach. It would obviously be wrong to argue that debate should become a one-dimensional endeavor or that foreign extemp should be preferred over domestic. There is a lot young people can
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learn to become better citizens and there are as many types of expertise necessary for the administration of our society. Learning to view the world from an international perspective is perhaps not foremost among these experiences, but it is surely an important one, and too easily forgotten.

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