

COMPETITIVE HIGH SCHOOL SPEECH AND DEBATE: AN EFFICIENT DELIVERY SYSTEM FOR EDUCATION

by Curtis G. Hier

This article makes a case for curricular speech and debate. It is the hope of the author that coaches will share some of the ideas contained herein with administrators whom they may be lobbying for speech and debate classes.

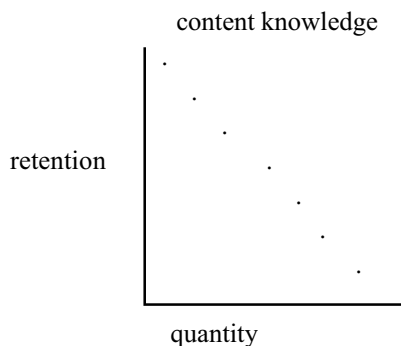
E.D. Hirsch of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, and cultural literacy fame makes a solid case, in his new book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, for why we ought to provide children with a wide base of knowledge so that they can flourish, or at least adequately function, in society.

Providing students with such a base, he argues, is an egalitarian pursuit. The playing field of education can best be leveled for children of the socio-economic underclass by giving them the “tools of power—the ability to read, write, and communicate.”

Hirsch is highly critical of those who consider “discovery learning” to be the panacea of pedagogy. What it comes down to is that a taxonomy of cognitive skills is a hierarchy, with each level being a prerequisite for the next. The higher order skills cannot be developed in a vacuum; they must be developed from a base of extensive content knowledge.

Taking Hirsch's argument seriously, the question becomes how to deliver this extensive content knowledge efficiently.

I begin with a delivery model that I've patterned after a simple production possibilities model I learned in Economics 101.



The frontier curve represents 100%

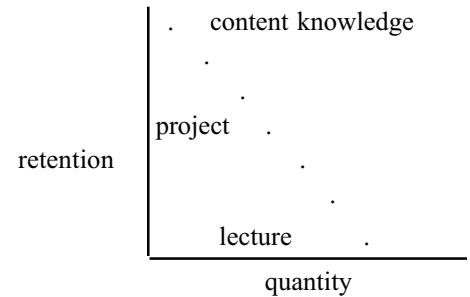
time-on-task.

As all teachers know, 100% time-on-task is the most elusive of holy grails. We can't ever achieve it, but if we COULD achieve it, a tradeoff between knowledge quantity and retention would necessarily occur, according to my model. That is precisely because the “hands on” methods that produce more retention tend to deliver the quantity of content knowledge less efficiently.

Many practitioners of “hands on” strategies, particularly those with an affinity for cut and paste-type projects, give all too little attention to the quantitative demands of education. These teachers tend to be more project-driven than curriculum-driven.

Among the project-driven teachers are those who make frequent use of the academic field trip. Traveling three hours round-trip (not including gathering time, standing around time, and the customary McDonalds diversion) to spend one hour at a museum, while missing a calculus, physics, French, and history lesson, is not efficient. Rarely does the one-hour trip to the museum help develop the higher order cognitive skills. Many times these experiences are loosely tied to the curriculum. What's worse is that often the curriculum is subservient to the trip.

On the other end of the possibilities spectrum—the lower right one—is the lecture method. The lecture method is maligned by the project-driven teacher as a hopelessly boring and tedious delivery system. I contend that it is a method eschewed by many teachers who don't really know how to do it well. I'll never forget the brilliant lecturers I had in college, whom I will always admire. Nonetheless, I must confess that, while efficient as a delivery system, spewing out an endless barrage of terms and facts and data is not conducive to long-term retention, even when followed up by rigorous examination.



The successful lecturer in high school, where classroom ratios of students-to-teacher are usually quite manageable, combines his/her lively lectures with lively discussion. He/she embraces the occasional project that fits the curriculum nicely and doesn't lose too much time to setting up and taking down. He/she produces an acceptable mix of quantity and retention.

My personal goal over ten years has been to exceed an “acceptable” mix of quantity and retention. I've perhaps found what I'm looking for in competitive speech and debate. As a history teacher on staff at a small rural school in Vermont, I created a co-curricular, after school debate club. We became competitive at local tournaments fairly quickly. In my tenth year I was granted an academic class in Lincoln-Douglas debate.

My debate class came about after years of lobbying my administrators. Invariably they would respond that the school board would never accept it due to financial constraints. One evening in a school board finance committee markup of the debate budget a board member asked, “Why aren't we teaching this as a class?” Thus my class was born of the board's own initiative.

The key to exceeding the “acceptable” mix I've described may be to shift the possibilities curve out. If the frontier curve represents 100% time-on-task, theoretically the way to shift it out is to create more classtime. Quite literally that's what happens with speech and debate. The competitive nature of the activity inspires kids to seek additional knowledge in the form of

after school practices, summer institutes, and weekend tournaments. Thus the classtime expands.

I would submit that perhaps there's another way to shift the curve out. That is by helping students develop greater information processing skills. No other activity comes close to policy debate for developing these skills. Following a fast-paced speech and responding to each of its points with little preparation time is the ultimate information processing challenge. Extemporaneous speaking and Lincoln-Douglas debate require the processing of large amounts of information also, but not quite to the extent of policy debate. These skills translate to an increase in content knowledge down the road.

Speech and debate events help to develop the higher order cognitive skills better than any other academic activities I know. The content knowledge gleaned is extensive. My Lincoln-Douglas debaters, over the past couple of years, have become amateur experts in diverse areas such as feminism, oppressive governments, doctor-assisted suicide, and business ethics. Their knowledge of basic philosophical concepts is amazing for even the most serious of college-bound high school seniors.

Speech and debate are almost completely discovery activities. Students select their poetry readings or their prose readings in speech. They select their arguments in debate. If one of my Lincoln-Douglas debaters "discovers" that other debaters are using Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as a theoretical framework for their arguments, undoubtedly he/she will ask me, "What's Kant's categorical imperative?" Sometimes I'll just answer. Other times I'll direct the student to a dictionary of philosophical terms.

I don't expect a beginning debater to read Kant, but occasionally one of my advanced debaters will decide it's time to.

One could say that my curriculum is project-subservient. That is, the national topic wording committee creates the topic area for the project, hence guiding my curriculum. However, both debate and speech are primarily skills-based. The content is a by-product, albeit a significant one. As far as which needs to come first, that is really a

chicken-and-egg-type question.

The tournament trips we take are long. We miss school on Fridays a lot in the winter. The calculus, physics, French, and history lessons are missed. The tournament is not the delivery system, though. If it were, then IT too would be inefficient. The tournament is the equivalent of the lecturer's test. It provides the leverage for the teacher to get the student to achieve as well as the crucial feedback for the student.

Most importantly, Hirsch's "tools of power" are passed on to the students in the form of writing skills, researching skills, oral communication skills, and vocabulary. Regardless of the implications to my model, the fact is speech and debate offer students tremendous rewards and are indeed an efficient delivery system for education.

(Curtis G. Hier coaches at Fair Haven Union (VT) HS)

My assessments of the various speech/debate events in terms of skills provided are based upon my own coaching experiences. My intent is not for people to compare the various events, but to realize that all of these activities help to develop a wide array of skills.

	D	LD	Ex	Im	OO	IE	C
Research Skills	+	+	*	+	+	*	+
Interpretation Skills	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Rapid Info. Processing	+	+	+	-	-	-	*
Notetaking Skills	+	+	-	-	-	-	*
Analytical Skills	+	+	+	+	+	*	+
Application Skills	+	+	+	+	+	*	+
Refutation Skills	+	+	-	-	-	-	+
Evaluative Skills	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Persuasive Skills	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Writing/Editing Skills	+	+	*	*	+	-	+
Creativity	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Interpersonal Skills	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Content							
History	+	+	+	*	+	-	*
Literature	-	*	-	*	*	+	-
Philosophy	*	+	*	*	+	-	*
Current Events	+	+	+	*	+	-	+
General Vocab.	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

+ Extensive

D=Policy Debate

* Considerable

LD=Lincoln-Douglas Debate

- Minimal

Ex=Extemporaneous Speaking

Im=Impromptu Speaking

OO=Original Oratory

IE=Interpretive Events

C=Congress