

Preparing Students for Future Careers

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No matter what course I teach or what extra-curricular activity I serve as faculty sponsor for my underlying concern is, “In what way will this benefit my students in their future careers and lives?” Certainly, there is specific information I wish to impart in a given course, but the bottom line is what usefulness does the course have for the student in the future. In this way I suppose I am a pragmatist and a utilitarian and some might drum me out of the Academy. I now bring this perspective to my examination of debate.

I spent many years as a judge in NDT and CEDA debate circles, and I confess I at first approached the notion of IPDA debate with a bit of an elitist attitude – I already *knew* what real debate was! Real debate was NDT and CEDA debate and it involved great quantities of research and evidence. It involved intricate argument and counter-argument, deeply thought out cases and refutation. This wasn’t the type of thing that could be prepared for in a few days after learning the topic nor could it be evaluated by a lay-person.

Then --- wait a minute – what are my standards? If my standards are that the students’ future careers and lives be benefited shouldn’t I stop and see if this is the case before I rush to judgment?

Research has revealed that the ability to communicate effectively is the most valuable skill an individual can have. All of us who teach in this field are well aware that study after study reveals that employers are searching for potential employees with oral communication skills. They are looking for people to work in business, forestry, computer technology, chemistry, geology, politics, or any one of dozens of other specialized fields but they all want employees who are skilled communicators. Which form of debate most enhances the ability to communicate?

IPDA instructions tell debaters they should focus on their audience and adapt to it. Speak clearly and persuade your audience with argument, logic, and use evidence only to the extent that it can be done without resorting to reading from written materials during the round. Judges are told to vote for the “best debater” in the round and that person may either be the one who persuaded them the most or the one who is the “best speaker.” In view of these evaluation standards, debaters speak at a normal speaking rate, not so slow as to drag, but slowly enough that a reasonably educated person who actively listens can understand and follow the arguments. Debaters look at the judges. Studies show that eye contact is the single most effective nonverbal indicator of willingness to communicate and is a primary means of increasing the perception of immediacy (Richmond, McCroskey & Hickson, 2008). Debaters also stand upright with an open body position

with pleasant facial expressions, thereby completing the visual impression of immediacy; the best physical display for approachability and nonverbal communication of willingness to communicate (Richmond, McCroskey & Hickson, 2008). They speak at appropriately loud volume with varied rate and pitch, and if they follow the directions for IPDA they are alert for nonverbal feedback and make appropriate adjustments to their rate and volume in response to the feedback they receive from their judges. During the round IPDA debaters receive nonverbal feedback regarding their oral communication skills from judges. Following rounds they receive written feedback through the ballots cast by judges since two items on the ballot explicitly address communication delivery skills – they receive speaker points for the item “delivery” and for the item “appropriate tone” which is partially derived from nonverbal factors. No doubt a third point value item, courtesy is also influenced at least somewhat by the speaker’s nonverbal behaviors as well. On a nonverbal level IPDA seems to be teaching debaters good communication skills. This is important in view of the findings that, depending upon the specific message and context, 60 to 85% of the meaning of messages is transmitted nonverbally (Burgoon, Buller & Woodall, 1996; Richmond, McCroskey & Hickson, 2008).

How do NDT and CEDA fare in this regard? Since the focus in both of these forms of debate is upon presenting a very detailed case in which virtually every claim is supported by multiple pieces of evidence and then each speech thereafter must respond to every claim with arguments that are supported with multiple pieces of evidence (and all of these arguments and pieces of evidence have to be explained) and then of course there are counter-arguments and conflicting pieces of evidence whose relative merits need to be discussed as well as the credentials of the people who produced the evidence – and lots of other things that you probably already know and that it really isn’t appropriate for me to go into here since I’m not writing about how to debate in NDT or CEDA – the debaters are talking *very* fast. A typical debater who is going to enjoy any degree of success will be speaking at least 200 words per minute. Debaters in final rounds at the NDT national championship a decade ago were found to average well over 300 words per minute (Louden & Southworth, 1996) and they were on a path of continuing upward speed that had continued ever since the first NDT tournament in 1949. I guess it is no surprise then that they are looking down the entire time and there is zero eye contact. It doesn’t particularly bother the judge since the judge is busy looking down furiously writing to take a flow of the debate in the manner that has been learned in lots of specialized practice. That covers the auditory factors and the eye contact discussed with regard to IPDA debate, the other factors found that were parts of immediacy are also absent with NDT and CEDA Debate.

The typical debater in these forms of debate is standing with head bent down and is clutching either prepared written materials or the podium throughout the speaking period. There are some noteworthy exceptions to this. I remember one slender young man who would begin his constructive speeches by first taking a firm grasp on each side of the lectern, then taking a huge audible gasp of air. As he began to speak at an extremely rapid rate he sank slowly into a deep deep knee-bend. As he reached the bottom of the deep knee-bend he stopped speaking rose to a standing position while taking a very audible breath, and resumed speaking as he sank into another deep knee-bend. He

repeated this process over and over throughout the 10 or 8 minute speech. It was my firm belief that despite his relatively unimposing stature that he must have had the strongest thighs on the circuit. I also believed that there were many judges who were blissfully unaware of the behavior since they never looked up while he was speaking. Another, relatively large, young man, discovered he could keep his articulation clear while speaking very fast if he spoke in a shrill falsetto. It was very strange to have a man with a smooth baritone voice suddenly break into a rapid fire above soprano voice during debate rounds. In the days in which debaters were expected to dress for rounds and most debaters (and judges) were male there was also the incident in which one of the young men removed his sport coat due to the warmth of the room while he was speaking. After the speech he apologized to the judge for having taken his coat off saying "I'm sorry but it is just so hot in this room I couldn't take it." The judge replied saying that he didn't mind and would have done the same himself then commented that "Heck its all guys in here anyway, as hot as it is in here I wouldn't care if you dropped your trousers." The next debater went to the lectern and as he began to speak unbuckled his belt and proceeded to undo belt and pants and let them fall to his ankles and presented his entire speech with his pants around his ankles. Since the judge was looking down busily writing a flow of the arguments being presented he didn't realize what had taken place until the end of the speech when he looked up and saw the young man standing there with his pants around his ankles. All three of the young men I have singled out to describe routinely won top speaker awards at major tournaments. How could this happen when this is clearly not what we would refer to as quality speaking – good use of delivery factors? No. Speaker awards in NDT debate are awarded on the basis of coverage of arguments and presentation of evidence, not on the basis of delivery. Clearly NDT and CEDA debate do not do as good a job at preparing students to have the nonverbal delivery skills that employers are looking for when they say they want employees with good oral communication skills.

Research is also a valuable skill. While IPDA does help students develop research skills, NDT and CEDA debate place greater emphasis on research and I believe that we must concede that students gain greater knowledge of in-depth research with NDT and CEDA than with IPDA. Since these two forms of debate use the same topic all year it may be that they develop greater skill in the evolution of complex argumentation (at least on a single topic) as well. So in this area I must give the advantage to NDT and CEDA. I must, however, concede that after examining the forms of debate and considering the skills that potential employers are most interested in IPDA appears to be more beneficial for students future careers unless the student is planning to pursue a career that is limited to bibliographical and evidentiary research alone.

References

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