

Editorial:

Lay Judging

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One of the most interesting dynamics of any IPDA debate tournament is to stand around in the hallways or in the prep areas and listen to the debates of the debates – the blow-by-blow analysis of how the argumentation went back and forth during the round. Eventually the discussion will come full circle to a description of whether the judge seemed to follow the arguments and “flowed the round” or whether the judge was a “lay judge.” It is usually at this point that the debater may say, “I think I won the round but with a lay judge – who knows?”

Alan Cirlin wrote in “The Origins of the International Public Debate Association” that he felt the use of lay judges was the most critical element of curbing the “lemming-like drive toward the excesses of NDT and CEDA”. The fledgling debate association was committed to “using real world, lay judges as the fundamental audience for our tournaments.” Cirlin “felt that having relatively untrained students, faculty, and community members judging would force the competitors to adopt effective oratorical strategies.”

While I embrace the IPDA foundation of using lay judges as a sort of “beachhead” against the excesses of traditional debate formats, I also find myself embracing a more realistic sense of lay judge utilization as the University of Central Arkansas prepares each year for the annual “End of Hi-BEAR-Nation” tournament. I encourage my Basic Oral Communication students each spring to earn extra credit by attending debate rounds and even serving as judges. However, I do not throw every one of my willing students into the judging panel for a reason that some IPDA purists would probably find objectionable. As many as a third of my late afternoon, evening sections are made up of international students – many who have only been speaking English for less than a year.

Technically, IPDA rules only set forth several guidelines for lay judges – they must be at least at the 9th grade level, of reasonable intelligence and the by-laws even state that “tournament directors are encouraged to use lots and lots of class or volunteer undergraduate students as judges.” However, is there not a point where our judges can be too “lay”?

When discussions ensue about how IPDA’s use of “lay judges” is refreshingly similar to the judicial system’s use of a “jury of our peers” there are several distinctions that have to be considered: (1) a potential jury member must have a fluent understanding of the language being spoken, and (2) litigants are allowed to test and then potentially exclude jurors who might be perceived as less than neutral.

Neither one of the above standards is considered in IPDA judging pools yet we are expected to embrace the use of lay judges as a foundational principle of IPDA debate that has had little if any modification since its inception.

However, there are situations that every debater has experienced at one time or another where lay judges have barely been present intellectually during a round, spending more time texting or browsing the internet on their smartphone while being expected to

adjudicate a debate round. Perhaps the multi-tasking being done by the freshman basic oral communication student just brings their intelligence level down to right above ninth grade level and so meeting the IPDA standard, but it undermines the communicative process if it is not addressed by tournament organizers in a necessary training process. Violating another element of the communication process is the judge – whether lay or professional coach – who takes pride in remaining completely stoic throughout a debate round. Debaters are told that audience analysis is an important part of the debate delivery but when a judge steadfastly limits their feedback to the written ballot it undermines the oratorical objectives of IPDA. It may not mean anything for a judge to have a “poker face” in NDT or CEDA debate since the debaters never look up from their briefs but in IPDA granting some degree of feedback during the speeches is critical to making this endeavor as “real world” as possible.

Lastly, lay judges should be instructed to only have limited exchanges prior to debate rounds with the competitors they are judging. Though audience analysis is a critical element of the public speaking process, debaters who glean information prior to a round and use it to curry favor with the judge to win the round is the crassest abuse of the lay judge’s lack of knowledge of the process and its ethical boundaries. Just as a litigator would be admonished to not address a juror by their name, debate judges should equally be cautioned that some “friendliness” with a competitor prior to a round may overstep ethical lines.

All of this is to say to tournament organizers that training of judges – all judges but certainly lay judges – should be a significant part of preparation for a debate tournament. As a coach and a competitor I believe all coaches should enter a few tournaments just to feel the sting of what their debaters are complaining about when they find out their loss that kept them from breaking had a “Reason for Decision” that was not argued in the round or because the judge just liked the AFF debater better. Then we might have less debate format purity in embracing minimal training for judges as if it is holy writ and more recognition that the element that curbs debate excesses can also be the element that undermines if we do not constantly monitor and improve this rhetorical and oratorical product we embrace.

Questioning the Ground Beneath Our Feet: The Merits of Academic Debate

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In order to promote academic debate, coaches and authors often claim that debate is educational, is democratic, and promotes critical thinking skills. Though I spent six years in the IPDA and love the activity dearly, I am deeply skeptical of such claims. In this essay, I explain the considerable problems these claims create and draw upon critiques from postmodernism, poststructuralism, and sophistic rhetorical theory in order to provide advocacy for a radically re-contextualized understanding of the merits of academic debate in general and IPDA in particular.