

IPDA: Where have we been, where do we want to go, and how do we get there?

Editorial by Anthony McMullen - University of Central Arkansas

“You must be the change you want to see in the world.” --- Mahatma Gandhi

I feel compelled to begin by recalling the event that prompted this editorial. At a tournament last November, one of my debaters was faced with what appeared to be a violation of the IPDA rules. I declined to watch the quarterfinal round, but I received a text message from Mark Lowery (who coaches the University of Central Arkansas team with me), stating that he wanted to protest the round. The opposing debater, taking the negative position, pulled notes from an old round out of his briefcase in the middle of the round and proceeded to use them. To me, this violated the spirit of IPDA, which prohibits the use of anything not prepared during the thirty minutes preceding the round. Those who watched the round agreed that the opposing debater never intended to violate any rules and that his actions were the result of inexperience, but his actions were unacceptable.

My debater won the round, which eliminated the need to file a formal protest, but I recognized that something needed to be done. I immediately began drafting a proposal to clarify the rule regarding pre-prepared evidence to reflect the spirit of the rule. I forwarded the proposal to Mark, who forwarded it to the members of the Governing Board and later to the Executive Council. I thought that I had provided a simple answer to the problem. Instead, I had opened a can of worms. The debate continues as I type these words. I hope there will be a resolution before they are published.

These events led me to think about a bigger issue: What is the International Public Debate Association, and what is it destined to become? This organization is different from what it was when I attended my first tournament in 2000, and I think everyone that debated back then would agree that what I have described would be a violation of the rules. I was surprised to discover that some within IPDA today see nothing wrong with what this debater did. While there are aspects of “old school IPDA” that I miss, I am not going to proclaim that IPDA was better back then. But this editorial gives me the chance to reminisce about the past and discuss what it will take for IPDA to become great in the future.

My first competitive debate was at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. I received an award for third speaker in the novice division and reached the quarterfinals in the tournament. I lost as the affirmative on the resolution

“Everyone cheats.” In addition to losing on a 3-0 decision, I let out a swear word in the middle of the round. The judges did not mind the “s-bomb,” but I clearly lost on the merits. I competed as a student from my senior year in college through my third year in law school. I thought that the 2004 National Championship would be my last tournament, but I kept in touch with the University of Arkansas debate team and found myself competing during the 2004-05 season. In the spring of 2007, I began teaching business law part time at the University of Central Arkansas. That semester, Dr. Stephen Smith encouraged many of the University of Arkansas alumni debaters to attend the 2007 National Championship. Several of us took him up on the offer and found ourselves competing against old friends and old foes. I mentioned to several people that I was teaching at UCA, and they encouraged me to start a team there. I did not know this at the time, but I was part of what would become a perfect storm. I was willing to coach the team on a volunteer basis, and there were people at UCA who wanted to restart debate. In fall 2007, the UCA debate team began again after a fifteen-year absence, and I have acted as co-coach on a volunteer basis since that time.

When I started debating, wireless internet was not available at most colleges and universities. A few teams brought evidence boxes, but most debaters relied on the collective genius of their teammates. At the University of Arkansas, we made sure that there was at least one expert on just about any conceivable subject (I was the legal expert). We relied more on logic and rhetorical analysis more than facts and figures. Today, few debaters attempt to go into the round without internet research on even the most rudimentary topics. Sadly, this is the result of “source presses,” or debaters insisting that any fact not backed up by a source cannot be relied upon (even when that fact is known by any liberally educated person). A comment from Adam Key bears repeating: “[I]f the internet will not be available, programs have been known to protest loudly. One exasperated coach was even heard exclaiming that his debaters didn’t know how to debate without the internet.”¹

Another major difference, also pointed out by Key, is an increase in the willingness to challenge definitions and weighing mechanisms. He and I share the same experience:

In the IPDA I remembered, abuse was the dirtiest of words. It was saved only for those people dastardly enough to redefine a resolution in such a way that if you interviewed a thousand people and asked them what a particular resolution meant, not a single one would come close to how the affirmative took it. It was a shameful thing to be called abusive. You feared your coach, your teammates, and the rest of the circuit would hear about it. Contrast that with the modern day, where the negative cries abuse on a regular basis. It’s no longer a big deal. Instead, it is simply taken as part of the game. Abuse is often cried, not for the intended purpose of calling foul on a debate travesty, but because the Negative simply would have

preferred if the Affirmative had taken a resolution differently. Abuse no longer means the take on the resolution is illegitimate, just that the Negative doesn't like it.²

When I started debating, the negative was expected to run with whatever the affirmative threw at him or her. I recall one debate where I forgot this maxim. I took the negative position on the resolution "There should not be a mandatory school attendance law." My opponent focused on the word "a" and took the position that there should not be a *single* school attendance law. He advocated that every state should have its own law. True, this interpretation was completely outside what most reasonable people would believe it to be. But rather than run with what was still a reasonable, albeit twisted, interpretation of the resolution, I cried foul and refused to shake my opponent's hand at the end of the round. While several of my opponent's teammates concurred with my level of disdain toward the interpretation of the resolution, the judges called me out on my lack of decorum during the round. It is one of my few regrets as an IPDA debater.

Today, definition challenges have become an abused part of IPDA. I have judged too many rounds where a negative debater's challenge was based on no other claim than that the affirmative's definitions did not come from a dictionary, and I have to resist rolling my eyes every time I hear that baseless argument. To make matters worse, some debaters expect their opponent to disclose their definitions, even on unambiguous resolutions. If these changes become the rule of the day, then it will unduly tilt the balance in equities between affirmative and negative debaters in IPDA. Again, however, I recognize that others may disagree.

I could continue writing about the difference between IPDA in 2000 versus IPDA in 2011, but that is not the point of this editorial. Like other debate organizations, IPDA has governing bodies that are tasked with steering it into the right direction, whatever direction that might be at any given time. Our self-perpetuating Executive Committee is designed to protect IPDA from devolving into forms of debate that we attempt to distinguish ourselves from. The use of lay judges requires IPDA debaters to prefer real-world rhetoric and language over debate jargon and technicalities. But neither IPDA's governing bodies nor the use of lay judges can check every excess that we attempt to avoid.

I've referenced Key's 2009 editorial because he identified some of the differences between IPDA ten years ago and today's IPDA. He also quotes Steve Goode, a former champion and friend to IPDA, "Debate is both fun and educational. When it stops being either of those things, we should stop doing it." But Key did not provide any solutions. Perhaps he did not do so because he recognized that any solution would be complicated and would warrant its own journal piece. Sadly, I am not going to offer any solutions, either.

I have in my mind what IPDA should be, and I am confident that anyone reading this piece has his or her own thoughts on what it should be as well. We, as an organization, should continue to discuss and debate the direction IPDA should take. We should lobby the Governing Board and the Executive Committee to effectuate changes that we wish to be made to the organization. And all participants (including and especially students) should be encouraged to go to these governing bodies with any idea that they believe would improve our activity.

I will, however, offer what I believe will be the deciding factor in determining what IPDA will become. In 2009, Nicholas Ducote and Shane Puckett encouraged the use of meta-debate in IPDA.⁴ They made an excellent point regarding the role of the debate round as an agent of change: "One of the only ways, and arguably the most dominant way, that students have access to a forum for change in the system is in-rounds."⁵ In other words, IPDA debaters themselves will dictate the direction of IPDA, and they should do so while in competition.

Debaters must be self-policing. By this, I do not mean filing protests every time a debater believes that he or she has been wronged (though that may have to be part of the process for the most egregious violations). Rather, coaches and debaters must conduct themselves in a matter consistent with the goals and ideals (actual and desired) of the International Public Debate Association. Debaters must be brave enough not only to stick to these ideals when faced with those attempting to change IDPA for the worse, but also to articulate their reasons to the judge when so faced. If this means introducing an IPDA kritik into the round, as Ducote and Puckett suggest, then so be it. But at the end of the day, debaters must be willing to practice what they preach, even in the face of others who would have them go in another direction.

Needless to say, I am not the first to advocate change by way of in-round conduct. For example, in arguing for the need for passion in IPDA speeches, Web Drake wrote:

[W]e have to institutionalize it. It won't happen by hoping it will. We have to make it clear to our judges—if this rhetor doesn't command your attention, don't give it to her. If his speech doesn't move you, don't vote for him. If they don't move you to fear, to empathy, to laughter, to tears—they aren't worthy of your ballot! It has to be a criteria on the ballot and a point of emphasis in the judges' meetings. If we are to train the next crop of great speakers, then we must train them to grab the audience by the throat and not let go. And then, we must reward them for doing so!⁶

In this effort to be self-policing, IPDA debaters must endeavor to be ethical debaters. Sadly, some do not care about being ethical if it means another win. Jeffery Hobbs and Piengpen Na Pattalung stated

the obvious: “Unfortunately, unethical behavior can lead to unfair advantages. As Ulrich points out, ‘If unethical choices did not often result in a competitive edge for the individuals that violated the code, there would be no need for articulating these violations[.]’”⁷ Hobbs and Pattalung offered their own suggestions for improving IPDA, but for the purposes of this editorial, I will only adopt one: “debaters should choose to be ethical on their own.”⁸

They quote from others who push for ethical advocacy in competitive debate:

We hope that you will aspire to achieve higher ethical standards. Such aspirations are particularly timely in light of the unethical behaviors exhibited by some public officials, athletes, and business people. The forensic activity exists, in part, to foster the best and most ethical rhetorical behavior. We hope you will do your best to enhance the integrity of the forensic activity by actively promoting and exhibiting ethical debate practices.⁹

Set high standards for yourself as an arguer and treat others with respect and dignity, and we believe that the people who interact with you will be more likely to treat you in the same way. In the process, the argumentative marketplace will become a more civilized and valuable place for the free exchange of ideas, and for the pursuit of policies and programs that will improve all our lives.¹⁰

(D)ecide to be honest and ethical in your attempts to secure the ballot. Be fair and be honest. If you are not sure about a fact, don’t use it. If you are in rebuttals, don’t bring up new arguments. Never lie. To paraphrase the golden rule, make the kind of arguments you want others to present to you when you are faced with an important decision. If you were buying a car, would you want the salesperson to make up “facts” about the car’s safety, reliability, and gas mileage?¹¹

If ethics leave debate, support for the activity will decline. Unethical advocacy may result in the short-term gain, but it has the long-term effect of setting IPDA back as a whole. Thus, any effort to shape this organization must include a focus on ethical debating. It is up to coaches to teach ethical debating and up to judges to punish unethical debaters. But debaters themselves are primarily responsible for promoting ethical behavior, and they must identify and address unethical advocacy whenever possible.

Debaters must be examples to their fellow debaters. They must be willing to do so even in the face of those who would steer IPDA in directions it was not meant to go. They must continue to practice and improve upon their craft and show, both inside and outside of rounds, that their ways are superior. And they must be ethical in the matter in which they choose to make this change. The governing bodies of this great organization will continue to shape this organization, but the primary role of determining what IPDA will be in the

future lies with its practitioners. There will always be emails exchanged and discussions between rounds, but debaters will always be the agents for defining this organization.

I often long for the IPDA that was when I first began competitive debate. I daresay that Keith and Leah Peterson, two of my former coaches and friends to IPDA, would be surprised to see what it has become. But as I have repeated ad nauseum in this editorial, I will not say that today's IPDA is better or worse than yesterday's. I certainly have my opinion, of which others may reasonably disagree. I do know that it is up to each and every debater within this great organization to determine what IPDA debate is and should be. I ask all debaters not to take this responsibility lightly.

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1. Adam Key, *Editorial: Debate should be two things*, 3 J. of the International Public Debate Association 3, 6 (April 2009).
 2. *Id.* at 3.
 3. *Id.*
 4. Nicholas Ducote & Shane Puckett, *Meta-Debate: A Necessity for any Debate Style*, 3 J. of the International Public Debate Association 65 (April 2009).
 5. *Id.* at 66.
 6. Web Drake, *Editorial: A Call to Statesmanship*, 2 J. of the International Public Debate Association 3, 5 (March 2008).
 7. Jeffery Hobbs & Piengpen Na Pattalung, *Ethics in Public Debate*, 2 J. of the International Public Debate Association 20, 22 (March 2008).
 8. *Id.*
 9. *Id.* at 22—23 (quoting Michael D. Bartanen & David A. Frank, *Debating Values* 198 (1991)).
 10. *Id.* at 23 (quoting Thomas A. Hollihan & Kevin T. Baaske, *Arguments and Arguing* 11—12 (1994)).
 11. *Id.* (quoting Jeffrey Dale Hobbs, *Developing the Negative Case*, *Public Debate: A Guidebook to IPDA* 29, 30 (2006)).