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IPDA: Academic debate's minority group.

ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of academic debate there has been a progression of formats that have each reached the same end: that of a highly technical and rapid-fire style. IPDA is a rich subculture within academic debate as it is a highly communication oriented activity. There is a need for this activity and room for growth. This activity is one of the most valuable to students as well as accessible, but only in terms of understanding. It is our responsibility to protect this activity and do what we can to help it grow.

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Introduction

Pocket protectors, glasses, and a complete lack of fashion sense are common stereotypes of debaters. However, as with all stereotypes these simply are not accurate. Debate is a rich subculture of which most people do not have much knowledge. Before explaining the specifics of such a subculture, there must be a clear definition of the term subculture, Aguirre & Turner (2007) offer: "Groups that can be distinguished by their history as well as their distinctive behavior, organization, culture and, perhaps, superficial biological features". When we look at debate as an activity and those that permeate the activity, there is a strong subculture that is put forth which will be seen through an analysis of their history, distinctive traits and general experiences. The main emphasis of this analysis will be placed on the International Public Debate Association (IPDA) as this is a relatively young form of debate and arguably the most pure form of academic debate.

History of Debate

Hensley & Carlin (1999) give a thorough analysis of debate's origins; citing its origins to ancient Greece, and crediting Protagoras as the "father of debate". Protagoras was a pre-Socratic scholar that required his students to argue the pros and cons on a variety of issues. Plato later accredited Protagoras to being a sophist, one who laid more importance on the effect of the communication on the listener rather than truth. Aristotle thus began stressing the importance of truth and examination of both sides of an issue (Hensley & Carlin, 1999). Freeley & Steinberg (2005) continue the history with a more in-depth look at contemporary debate; citing, from the ancient Greeks to recent history debate continued in academia as an exclusive activity that was lacking in uniformity. By the 1940's, tournament debate grew in popularity with the creation of the National Debate Tournament (NDT). The NDT was the primary style of debate for the next 30 years under direction of the American Forensic Association (AFA). Debates would take place across the country and schools would compete for bids to participate in the NDT. By 1971 there was a dramatic shift in the direction of debate with the inception of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). Their creation was largely due to a need for a stronger emphasis on communication skills as the NDT became a very technical and rapid-fire style of debate. In 1996 CEDA and NDT "merged" by utilizing the same debate topic for the year. By this point there were only two distinct differences: 1. NDT was a tournament whereas CEDA was an organization and 2. NDT was still exclusive where the CEDA National Tournament was inclusive of all CEDA debaters. As with the creation of CEDA, debaters began to get fed up with very technical and rapid-fire debate. They would then create an organization to compete in; all with the emphasis being on communication skills; but all (except

IPDA) would fall down the same rabbit hole and become increasingly technical and more rapid-fire. (Freeley & Steinberg 2005).

When we look to academia we see there are many organizations and clubs that are available to students. One of the least known is that of debate, and more specifically IPDA debate. IPDA is a subculture within a subculture and has just recently begun to flourish.

Distinctive Traits of IPDA Debaters

Strange (2006) outlines seven distinct characteristics of debaters: public speaking skills, critical thinking skills, listening skills, argumentation skills, analysis and investigation of public issues, influencing others, and independent thought. These skills shift debaters from the macro-population into a subpopulation all of their own. These skills are finely tuned over the career of a debater and become useful tools in their lives, which will be discussed further in the last section.

First, public speaking skills are an integral part of any debater. Fellows (2003) states that “Americans fear public speaking more than they fear death”. Debaters have taken this fear and charged toward it head on. The ability to conquer the fear of speaking in front of people, is one most have not taken steps to overcome this fear. Granted, debate is not the only medium by which one can overcome a fear of public speaking, however, it is one of the most pervasive. The ability to speak well in front of an audience has a multitude of benefits that can help one in any career or profession.

Second, critical thinking skills are crucial to debate. Bassham, Irwin, Nardone and Wallace (2002) define critical thinking as: “the general term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze and evaluate arguments and truth claims, to discover and overcome personal prejudices and biases, to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions, and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do”. Debate being an activity of advocacy and argumentation critical thought must be pursued to evaluate the claims of those refuting argumentation laid forth. Our society is increasing in its lack of ability to critically evaluate what we are told. When we see three times the news coverage of Anna Nicole Smith’s death than the war in Iraq, we are not examining what is truly important. This is not a new trend, our society tends to “go with the flow” than analyze the arguments put forth by those in charge, racism and McCarthyism demonstrate this. The trained debater, however, questions everything.

Third, listening is a lesser known milestone of debate. Brownell (2006) presents a model for listening comprising of: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating and responding. Moreover, Brownell asserts that most people don’t listen; rather they impatiently wait for their turn to speak (Brownell, 2006). Utilizing the components within this model of listening allow the debater to effectively interpret and appropriately respond to the claims of the opposition. These skills are quite effective in everyday situations where miscommunication typically happens due to poor listening, as 80% of the responsibility for effective communication lies with the listener (Brownell, 2006).

Fourth, argumentation skills have permeated debate from the time of the ancient Greeks. Freeley & Steinberg (2005) define argumentation as “reason giving in communicative situations by people whose purpose is the justification of acts, beliefs, attitudes and values” (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). The most common model of argumentation was developed by Stephen Toulmin and is referred to as the “Toulmin model”. The basic structure of an argument within this model is claim (a conclusion that is trying to be reached), grounds (evidence in support of the statement) and warrant (evidence and reasoning that moves from the grounds to the claim to justify the conclusion). When one listens to people put forth an argument, most of the time, one will notice their argument is lacking in one of these areas. However, people untrained in even rudimentary argumentation skills don’t analyze the arguments placed before them. This is especially important in the Democratic republic in which we live. When those in charge tell us we must go to war, we must evaluate the claims laid forth and evaluate if the conclusion follows from those claims.

Fifth, analysis and investigation of public issues is a skill developed through debate. The propositions within debate are grounded within the realm of reality and typically follow some sort of trend within current affairs. The debater must analyze the situation and any historical context that is relevant to effectively argue within their side of the proposition. Furthermore, the topics can be vague and abstract on only superficially meaningful. However, a well trained debater can take the deeper rooted meaning from any topic that only tangentially seems worth examination. When a debater begins to finely tune their skills they become better

informed citizens looking at public policy through a critical eye, something of which our founding fathers would have been proud.

Sixth, influencing others is a primary concern of any debater. A debate round is typically done in front of an audience or a judge, with the end goal of persuading them to their side of the debate. The ability to use this influence can be a benefit to society or harm. However, even mere knowledge of the tactics employed by those that would wish to persuade is a benefit to society, as we can then determine whether or not we truly wish to be persuaded in such a direction and aren't falling blindly for some trick.

Finally, debaters develop independent thought. In public education there is a stronger emphasis placed upon memorizing instead of actual learning (The Morning Star Academy, 2007). The environment fostered through debate discourages the mere memorizing of facts and incorporates actual learning. We all have heard the famous phrase "four score and seven years ago..." and know it as the Gettysburg address. However, ask an average student what the implications of that speech were and they will most likely stumble. However, a debater uses independent critical thinking skills and is ready to give analysis on the speech and the impacts we can see from that speech even to this day.

The Debate Experience

As a debater there are many sacrifices that must be made in order to gain a competitive edge within this activity. The experience is unlike any other and can not fully be conveyed to another, it is unique and something that can only be fully appreciated when experienced. When looking at minority groups we tend to think of "the little person" stereotype and tend to get a negative perception of their experience, especially in terms of racial minorities; with debate, that is not always the case.

The typical IPDA season lasts from September through April, culminating with the national tournament. Over the course of two semesters there are 10-16 tournaments. There is much traveling done with teams that are very competitive going to most, if not all, tournaments. Students give up their free weekends to travel to another university to engage in intellectual competition against other schools. Beyond just merely traveling teams will meet anywhere from 1 to 5 times a week for practice. The time spent preparing and subsequently competing in tournaments is consuming and rather tolling on the individual. However, the skills acquired in debate carry over into their school work and give them a competitive edge within their studies.

There, typically, is much support for such academic programs, especially from faculty and staff. The upper echelons of administration however, seem to only want to appear to support academic competition. Typically these activities are under funded, one of the major roadblocks to bringing in new schools into the IPDA community, and don't receive much tangible support from the administration. Some schools only means of competition come from students personally funding their own excursions on debate trips, which are yet another price the debater must pay to compete.

In the end though, debate experience has empirically proven to pay off. Richey (2007) conducted a study of former IPDA national champions on their career success post-involvement with IPDA. His findings showed that there was an overwhelming interest within two particular career fields, teaching and law (Richey, 2007). These findings aren't surprising when looking at the skills debaters acquire through their involvement within the activity.

In final summation, IPDA is a rich subculture within the subculture of "academic debate". This is an activity that has many long lasting worth while qualities that must be preserved at such a delicate time of expansion. Anything we can do as an organization to preserve the spirit of this activity while promoting it to our colleagues and friends is going to benefit not only this activity and those involved, but will have lasting impact on the society as a whole.

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