

Editorial:**Debate should be two things**

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Steve Goode, former IPDA National Champion and good friend to many on the circuit from years past, used to open each and every debate by saying “Debate is both fun and educational. When it stops being either of those things, we should stop doing it.” It has been many years since Steve and I were teammates at Stephen F Austin State University. As I returned to IPDA as a coach, I found it a very different circuit than the IPDA I left, which gave me pause to wonder if we were still fulfilling Steve’s maxim.

While I make no claims of perfection concerning earlier years of IPDA, I do believe the circuit at that time yielded rhetorical contests that were both educational and fun. In the past five years, however, several trends which draw away from both those foundations have crept into the organization. Namely, calls of abuse, weighing mechanisms, and the use of the Internet.

Abuse:

This past season yielded several firsts for me. This was my first time as head coach of a debate team. I hosted my first IPDA tournament. And, for the first time in over a decade of forensic competition, I had abuse called on me during a round. This was truly a shocking 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. This harms debate for a few reasons.

Primarily, it harms the education of the debate round. At the point where abuse is called, the round no longer becomes about the resolution. No real arguments are hatched, nor clash presented against the affirmative case. Instead, the substance of the round centers around the character of the Affirmative. The Negative doesn’t win an abuse claim by debating the round, but by proving that the Affirmative is a sleazy lowlife who’s trying to take advantage of everyone in the room. The attacks are no longer academic but ad hominem. And the Affirmative is left, not to defend against attacks on his case, but on his person.

No one shakes hands after a round where abuse is called. How could they? As opposed to the gamesmanship and mutual respect that comes from a hotly debated contest, both competitors look on each other with disdain. As opposed to looking across the classroom at a worthy opponent that you would not mind losing to, you now look at

an enemy. No matter which name is circled on the ballot, someone will feel cheated. Truthfully, everyone in the room should feel that way. The true victim isn't the Affirmative or the Negative, but the resolution itself. All the potential for lively academic discourse imbued within its words have been stolen. In the types of rounds calls of abuse were designed for, there would be no education anyway. In most cases, though, abuse claims destroy the potential for education within a round.

In addition to the lack of education, repeated calls of abuse decrease the overall severity of the accusation. Like the proverbial boy who cried wolf, the claims often fall on deaf ears. If the judges are experienced (another issue entirely), they've doubtlessly heard it many times before. Most competitors are used to having abuse called on them, and coaches have accepted the claims to be both spurious and the norm. Since the charges of abuse are so rampant and typically without weight, no one looks down on those accused of it. Indeed, some may even feel sympathy for the Affirmative for many of the reasons previously mentioned. This situation seems all well and good until the day the wolf actually shows up.

Imagine, if you will, the day that you are the Negative in a preliminary round. You've spent your half hour well and are loaded to the gills with refutation for what seems to everyone to be a very straightforward resolution. Up steps the affirmative, and to your horror he interprets the resolution in a way no person could possibly fathom. His refined arguments and use of a plethora of citations tell you that this is a canned case, one written days or even weeks beforehand. And worse yet, since the Affirmative's take on the resolution is so far afield from the actual wording, you've been robbed of your prep time. Even if the case isn't canned, the Affirmative has had thirty minutes to prepare and you've had zero. What do you do in this situation? What can you do? The wolf has finally shown up, but since it's been called so many times, no one cares to listen to you as your chance to win is devoured.

Finally, there is a distinct harm beyond the one to education and to the debater who cried wolf. Let's say you accept what I've said here and decide to treat abuse as the serious charge it's supposed to be. The experience is something like being the only car to not change lanes in slow moving traffic. The reason most traffic jams move so slow is that cars keep changing lanes. As one car moves to the lane to its left or right, it causes all the cars behind it to put on their brakes. At the same time, it frees up a car length in its previous lane. As cars start moving to fill in the gap, other cars see that lane moving and try to change lanes into it. You can see the obvious problem here. Traffic would move a lot quicker if people would stop changing lanes, stop trying to better their own position at the expense of their fellow man. However, if everyone is changing lanes and you're not, they're all going to advance while you're stuck. In essence, you are punished for trying to do the right thing.

Unfortunately, the same is true of debaters. So long as calling abuse is the norm, rather than the exception, debaters who refuse to call abuse will be punished for doing the right thing. How is that, you may ask? The answer is simple: If you don't call abuse, you can lose the round. I once saw an outround that, in my opinion, was one of the most one sided debates I'd ever seen. In every instance, at every point, the Negative outdebated the Affirmative, destroying the oncase while protecting the offcase. The judges agreed. After the round, they all approached the Negative debater saying that he had dominated the round. The problem was the decision was 2-1 for the Affirmative. The 2 deciding votes, although they believed the Negative performed better, faulted him for not calling abuse when the Affirmative ran a mildly truistic case. When I talked to

one of the judges afterwards, inquiring as to where this idea that if the Negative was the better debater but didn't call abuse he should lose the round, he said that when he had been eliminated at the same tournament, the judges had given him the same reasoning.

Does it promote or harm debate to allow wins on technicalities? Are the general public, those who we train to persuade, persuaded by such things? It is the judge, not the jury, who finds a man not guilty based on a technicality in the law. And when killers are set free due to such things, is the public not outraged? If we truly want to learn to persuade the public, these wins by technicality must instead become technical fouls, and we should throw them out of the game.

Weighing Mechanisms:

Another trend I found surprising as I returned to IPDA was the issue of weighing mechanisms. Whereas before, we adapted our style to the judge(s) in the back of the room, we now tell the judge the way they are to evaluate us. This presents a couple problems.

One of the largest problems I've noticed with the use of weighing mechanisms is the ambiguity of their use within a round. Everyone seems to have an opinion as to who gets to set them, what they may be used for, and which ones are fair and unfair. While each person is confident their use of weighing mechanisms are the correct one, no one is actually sure. While judging, I actually heard one young woman claim that the Affirmative was the only one allowed to set a weighing mechanism, akin to the ability to define terms. The reason for this is simple: weighing mechanisms are never mentioned within the IPDA Constitution. Not once. As you can see, this lack of codification leads to many problems. Does the Affirmative set the mechanism? Does the Negative? Do both sides have to accept the other's mechanism? Should a debater who dominates a round lose because he ignored the artificial restraint placed on him by his opponent? Do we even need weighing mechanisms to begin with?

Frankly, I doubt it.

The entire purpose of a weighing mechanism is to narrow the focus of a round. While there is some virtue in focus, we must realize that in doing so we both limit debate and place restraints on the Negative. The Affirmative has essentially bound the hands of the Negative to creatively construct arguments, instead forcing clash to come in a neat package that the Affirmative is clearly ready for. If the Affirmative is indeed the one allowed to set the weighing mechanism for the round, then it is logical that their scale would be set to tip towards their particular case. Meanwhile, the Negative must spend their 30 minutes preparing cases for Preponderance of Evidence, Resolution of Future Fact, Cost/Benefit Analysis, Comparative Advantage, Independent Voters, and a plethora of other terms invented to advantage one side over the other.

The most notable issue this presents is a lack of education within the round. At the point where the terms of the debate are set exclusively by the Affirmative, many of the Negative's intellectual arguments become moot. When valid arguments are excluded from the marketplace of ideas by the gate of weighing mechanisms, the whole marketplace suffers. The entire point of debate is the testing of ideas, in hopes that through the give and take of argumentation we might be a few steps closer to knowing truth. This process can only work when ideas and arguments are allowed to enter the marketplace without restriction. Imagine the arguments that won't have a chance to be made, the discourse that won't get to happen, the truth that will remain shrouded simply because we wanted to restrict the round.

At the point where the Affirmative sets a weighing mechanism, the Negative really only has two options. Accept the mechanism and lay aside arguments that would greatly contribute to the quality of the round, or argue the mechanism itself. The problem with the latter is the same problem caused by calling abuse. Questioning a person's weighing mechanism means the debate ceases to be about the resolution, and instead becomes about the character of the Affirmative. The Negative either must accept the limited education offered by the artificial restraint of the weighing mechanism, or argue the mechanism itself and lose all chance of an educational round. Neither option seems particularly palatable for a debate community.

Of course, the Negative is free to ignore the mechanism entirely. In the same way, he is free to lose the round. IPDA has accepted the dogma of weighing mechanisms as canon, and thus anyone who opposes them does so to their own peril. I've seen many a round where the negative out-argued their opponent, only to lose the round because he didn't address the weighing mechanism. Again, wins by technicality should be anathema within an academic community.

Looking to the core principles behind IPDA, I have to wonder why we believe weighing mechanisms are even necessary. Our format of debate is distinct from the other collegiate formats because of our focus on the lay audience. Our job is to adapt to them, it is not their job to understand us. We should not be the ones telling them how to judge the round. Instead, we should be trying to adapt to their standards, because that's exactly how it works in the real world.

No jury ever found for a plaintiff because the defendant didn't argue the weighing mechanism. No salesman ever closed a deal based on a technicality. No statesman ever moved an audience through his use of artificial restraint. If we are truly to train for the real world, we must remember first and foremost that speaking is an audience centered sport. We may win the round on a technicality, but at what cost?

The Internet:

I might be showing my age here, but when I left active undergraduate competition, there had only been one tournament where WiFi was freely available. Internet access has become the norm, rather than exception. In fact, if 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. While the world-wide web has become a great tool to aid preparation, it brings with it a couple problems.

First and foremost, the internet has become a crutch. Rather than making sure we're up to date on the latest current events or relying on our team members, we turn to the glowing screens to provide us our arguments. With most controversial topics, and even many that are not, there are pages and pages of prescribed arguments available. Rather than arguments born in the fires of wit and pressure, we are continually flooded with arguments as fresh as canned soup. The creativity in arguments once present has been replaced by prepackaged logic.

IPDA is supposed to be about rhetoric. Other forms of debate focus on policy, evidence, and value, but what makes ours unique is the focus on persuasive verbal skill. Unfortunately, rhetoric has fallen by the wayside in the digital age, and we've let it happen. Rounds are no longer won by the person with a silver tongue, but with the most googled evidence. Facts and figures have replaced ethos, pathos, and logos. Our sources are questioned, anecdotal arguments and pure logic are no longer considered valid, especially compared to what was just pulled off Ask.com. This has dropped the focus on

rhetorical ability and reduced our form of debate into a competition of who can ask Jeeves more questions during prep time.

While evidence is important, it is not the meat of persuasion. The availability of the information superhighway was supposed to help us, but instead has become our handicap. Turn off the internet, unplug the laptops, and force your students to come up with their arguments. They might not have as many statistics, but they'll be far more persuasive.

Conclusion:

If we're able to take an honest look at ourselves and our organization, we can see that we have problems. It's said that every child will grow up to be just like their parents, and we're no different. The same problems in other debate styles that caused the need for IPDA in the first place have slowly but surely crept into our organization. We have followed the same paths as those other organizations and developed the same problems. We see wins by technicality, rampant claims of abuse, and a lack of emphasis on rhetoric. Is it still fun? Is it still educational? Should we still be doing it?

There's no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but the baby still needs cleaning. We have to resolve to change, not to some new way, but to go back to the style of debate that made us all love IPDA in the first place. We did things our own way, we had fun, and there was plenty of education to go around. I guess that's why they call them the good 'ole days, isn't it?