

Meta-Debate: A necessity for any debate style.

Nicholas Ducote, Louisiana Tech University

Shane Puckett, Louisiana Tech University

Abstract

The IPDA style and community, through discourse in journal articles and adjudication structures, have not completely embraced various types of meta-debate. This article attempts to explain the need of meta-debate argumentation, and its necessity for any debate format. This article further explains that not being open to these types of arguments hurt debate styles in the long run.

Introduction

As a community, the International Public Debate Association is limiting and hurting themselves by not allowing complete access to all argumentation – not in a direct, regulated fashion, but through tacit understandings and pressure. Case construction and negative strategies most often center on a fact and counter-fact format. Fact debate is a perfectly viable format to conduct forensic discourse, but case construction is not the issue. Within the debate round, certain arguments are discouraged. Although procedural arguments and other meta-debate arguments are necessary for IPDA, their utilization is often discouraged. This prevents a check on dominant structures, halts evolution of style and limits access to education in rounds.

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 (Eldridge, 2008).

If we want to build a community of critical thinkers and ethical communicators; we must make sure that our students have complete access to tools to examine truth. If we deny them these tools, we are hindering the production of truth and education

This article will specifically examine three types of argument: topicality, vagueness, and kritiks. As a whole, these arguments operate in a pre-fiat framework, meaning that a judge should examine them before they look to the specific case advocacy. Of course, what the judge actually does depends on the arguments made in the round, but these arguments are theoretically pre-fiat. The procedural's function in the round is to check back abuse of the round. They prevent arguments which hinder education in the round, or stop the creation of rhetorical violence/oppression. In the debate world, arguments do not become more "real-world" than procedurals. Actually, one could argue that the only "real world" arguments that exist in any round are the ones pointing out the abuse and oppression created in the round in real time. Meta-debate arguments, such as procedural arguments, work to regulate debate within the activity itself and enable its evolution. Discussion of access to truth and education with meta-debate arguments is as valid and necessary as the role-playing arguments of "fiating" a

better. 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. Denying or limiting their access to tools which shed light on problems in the activity or better ways to communicate, leaves the activity stagnate and it limits the educational value.

Meta-Debate is Crucial

Meta-debate is simply understood as debate about debate and discussion about an activity should necessarily preempt participation in it. Without a clear understanding of how an activity should be approached and conducted, its function is less than desirable. If a system of legalism were adopted, wherein certain arguments gained legitimacy simply through their intrinsic nature as a particular argument, debate would cease to be an educational activity. Education is foundationally the communal sharing of ideas, often referred to as the marketplace of ideas.

Every idea and rhetorical device should come to the marketplace on equal terms. Education and communication are inherently dynamic concepts. Only by engaging the topics and issues does the legitimacy of the different ideas become clear. However, if procedural arguments are thrown out simply because they *are* procedural arguments, the marketplace of ideas is compromised. Certainly, procedural arguments should not automatically win rounds, just as they should not lose them, or be thrown out. Stagnation is the ultimate result of rhetorical legalism. Any stagnation of argumentation denies the dynamism of communication itself, thus killing communication efforts. Evolution can never take place within the educational structures without accepting the legitimacy of all ideas. They should be weighed on the same equal plane as all other arguments. When that equal voice is given to procedural and other meta-debate arguments, education can once again flourish.

Yet, beyond simply ceasing to be educational, a legalism of rejecting procedurals because of their nature would actively discriminate against all debaters who wished to communicate these ideas. Fundamentally, such a structure would resemble nothing short of bigotry – where individuals are given a certain worth based on their intrinsic nature, not their actual utility as a member of society. Without the utilization of meta-debate, not only does the activity stagnate, but it also concentrates all the power in an elitist structure. This power is concentrated in a few community members with similar ideologies and utilized to oppress minority voices. These minority voices are those debaters that choose to utilize procedurals and other meta-debate argumentation. Oppression is intrinsically an undesirable system. Not only does it practically disadvantage a community, but it also results in minority violence. The same thinking that justifies this intellectual elitism can be turned toward society and such is the foundation of critical thinking – our rhetoric has a very direct effect on the world.

The only way to change and evolve a style and the members within it is through meta-debate. Articles and papers can be published until every author is deceased and the IPDA Journal no longer exists, but only losing rounds will change the activity. This proposal is not a call to immediate alteration within a particular style, but simply a call to openness. That openness will create an environment that is *open* to change. All that is necessary for education and equality to occur is an openness, not a forcible reformation.

Oppression within IPDA

Until this point, discrimination and rhetorical legalism have only been mentioned in general terms. At this point, the article will point to these oppressive structures within IPDA. Within IPDA, rationales for rejecting meta-debate stem from false perceptions. Procedural critics understand them as a waste of time, not necessary for education, and superfluous to the function of the round. Often, these arguments are perceived as confusing and tedious. As previously demonstrated, this could not be further from the truth. Eldridge (2008) demonstrates this type of oppressive reasoning when he writes about the horrors of “technical debate.”

Members of the debate community have also voiced concerns that the kritik unnecessarily adds density and esoteric vernacular to a pursuit already brimming with technical jargon. In addition to understanding the code debaters use to refer to their arguments, novices dealing with kritiks must begin to wrestle with the fabulously abstruse wordplay of Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida if they hope to defend against them. (Eldridge, 2008)

The primary cause for the oppression of the minority voices of meta-debate results from a fundamental misunderstanding of the argumentation. Procedural arguments are not intrinsically confusing. Indeed, most procedural arguments are very commonsensical and necessary for educational debate.

Topicality

Topicality’s utility is universally recognized. If a team is truly outside of the resolution, they should lose the round. In very common sense terms, a topicality argument functions as a check on “red herring fallacies” being applied to the round. Brownlee (1981) writes on the subject, explaining that topicality is vital to the preservation of debate as an educational activity. While some judges dislike topicality and others adore it, not many people will completely reject its use. IPDA rules make it clear that the affirmative team has the “right to define.” The language of the rule makes it clear that there is ground for topicality, but that ground is very inflexible. Interpretation of this rule has led to many debaters nearly eliminating the ground that the negative has for arguments. The rules make a very destructive assumption, which is dangerous to education. Contained within the rules is the tacit understanding that there are limited “reasonable” interpretations of the resolution. When debaters posit that a particular phrase can only have a limited amount of reasonable interpretations, they automatically eliminate other interpretations. The interpretation of language is, by its very nature, completely subjective and open to debate. This does not mean that topicality cannot be debated because every interpretation is equally valid. On the contrary, some interpretations can be more effective or reasonable to utilize in forensics – setting the foundation for the topicality debate. However, to assume that some interpretations are, by default, more reasonable is to preclude the use of others, thereby destroyed the very nature of language.

This fundamental misunderstanding of topicality is often poorly applied in debate rounds. The IPDA rules make it clear that topicality is reasonable and simply requests that debaters approach it in a reasonable way. However, debaters become unreasonable when they throw out any topicality argument simply because the affirmative has the right to define.

Framework

Another issue fundamentally misunderstood concept is framework. As previously discussed, fact debate framework is used more often than not in IPDA rounds. While this framework is acceptable, absolutely rejecting other framework used to test the resolution true is unacceptable. Many debaters find that appeals to authority somehow justify their use of a certain framework, and many adjudicators allow such arguments. The use of policy and value frameworks as counter-examples is not meant to preclude other frameworks, but utilizes commonly-known frameworks to prove a point. Even when the 1977-78 CEDA chose a “non-policy proposition” Henderson (1977) wrote that the framework as policy or non-policy was completely subjective and open to debate. Often, the response to an attack on the fact framework is that the debater’s coach told them to run that framework, it is always run as such, or other frameworks are simply too “technical.” This fear of the “other” (in this case, procedural argumentation), which can sometimes be complex, creates an oppressive environment. Again, it is this static, legalistic perception of dynamic rhetoric that creates oppression and undermines education.

Kritiks

Within the structure of debate, kritiks function as a check for in-round rhetorical violence and oppression. Kritiks can also be viewed as a “complex” or “technical” argument, thus most IPDA adjudicators will respond superfluously or with the generic “this argument is too complicated for IPDA.” Unfortunately, this argument is nonresponsive. Even to assume that one argument is somehow more “simple” than another is ignorant. Indeed, those who view kritiks as external to the policy framework clearly misunderstand the argumentation. Gehrke (2000) explicitly states that kritiks function should always be included within policy discussion. He argues that they underlie the very basic assumptions of policy, which must be addressed before we can ever hope to solve issues. At some point, debaters had to learn to utilize a fact framework, just as they learn to utilize kritiks. The reaction to kritiks by most debaters and judges, however, physically creates a system of rhetorical oppression and violence. Those debaters who chose to utilize kritiks to check back rhetorical oppression are, ironically, the victim of it. The previously quoted Eldridge (2008) demonstrates this frame of mind specifically toward kritiks. Even if it were the case that Foucault and Heidegger make up the majority of critical argumentation, that would not make it taboo. If the kritik uses Foucault or Heidegger and there is a clear link to the oppression, this proves that the oppression is still alive and well in these structures. The point of a kritik is to point out these abuses and the oppression in hopes to stop them in the future. The previous discussion of education and oppression is especially important here. When the elites specifically reject certain authors from the public debate because they are “too complex,” they create an environment completely antithetical to education.

Conclusion

Echoing Cirlin’s (2007) comments:

Debate is clearly competitive and ought to be fun. But let’s not get so carried away with the competition or the fun that we forget we are engaged in what should fundamentally be an educational activity.

All of the arguments conclude with these words. Fundamentally, debate, in any style, is about education. An organization sacrifices education for “fun” and refuses to accept

arguments that it deems “too complex.” At the point that this occurs, it is time for a very basic change in the organization; not a reformation of structure or authority, but a definite overhaul of the philosophies and mindsets governing the activity. This paper is a call to an ideological revolution, to change the way an organization views dynamic communication.

Works Cited

- Cirlin, Alan (2008). Defending a Core Position in IPDA Debate. *Journal of the International Public Debate Association.*, 2008. 3-18.
- Brownlee, Don (1981). In Search of Topicality: Definitions and Contexts. *Contemporary Argumentation & Debate.* 32-35.
- Eldridge, Daniel (2008). Academic Debate’s Minority Group. *Journal of the International Public Debate Association.* 7-10.
- Gehrke, Pat J. (1998). Critique Arguments as Policy Analysis: Policy Debate Beyond the Rationalist Perspective. *Contemporary Argumentation & Debate.* 18-39.
- Henderson, Bill (1980). Theoretical Implications of Debate Non-Policy Propositions. *Contemporary Argumentation & Debate.* 1-8.
- Hensley, D., & Carlin, D. (1999). *Mastering Competitive Debate* (5th ed.). Topeka KS: Clark.
- Richey, P(2007). Academic Debate v. Advocacy in the Real World: A Comparative Analysis. *Journal of the International Public Debate Association.* 26-33.