

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.

## **How Debate Is Sold**

### ***Debate as an Educational Activity***

It is repeatedly claimed that debate is, or at least should be, an educational activity. In fact, as a debater, I frequently cited the standard of education in topicality arguments. However, I find it difficult to imagine that most of us actually believe the typical debate round results in a qualitative increase in the education of those in attendance. This is particularly true in the case of the IPDA where rounds frequently revolve around such complex topics as, “RESOLVED: Snickers are better than Three Musketeers.” How much useful information can the audience possibly receive? Other rounds may center on potentially important but highly inflammatory topics like abortion, religion, and gun control. Compelling though they may be, it seems unlikely that such debaters will provide, in the space of a half-hour round, new evidence in rhetorical battles which have already been so thoroughly covered in US American popular culture. Even in rounds blessed with a relatively substantial topic, audiences are more likely to hear arguments over the strength of sources, definitional semantics, or plain old he-said/she-said disputes rather than well-reasoned thought-provoking analysis. In short, it seems hard to imagine that any given debate round is actually all that educational.

### ***Debate as a Democratic Activity***

Supporters of debate also claim that debate is an inherently democratic activity insofar as it engages multiple perspectives and provides an arena in which the public may consider important issues affecting their lives. However, these claims seem disingenuous at best.

First, if our aim is truly to represent a diversity of perspectives, the binary structure of academic debate leaves much to be desired. Debates are generally structured in terms of a yes/no or affirmative/negative binary; thus, any proposition is decided according to such terms. I dare suggest that we have gained little by allowing our understanding of every issue to be bifurcated along these lines. Derrida (1981; 1994) argues that such binary oppositions are fictions: the division they intend to convey can never be so neatly contained because of the endless play of signification. Eagleton (2008) notes, “Meaning is the spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers, rather than a concept tied firmly to the tail of a particular signifier” (p. 110). Though we wish to imagine the world in black and white, it endlessly spills over these boundaries: despite our best attempts to understand the human experience in terms of truth and lies or wrong and right, our language and even the stuff of our everyday existence frequently falls in the grey area between these poles. Unfortunately, our debate formats simply reduce such indeterminacy to a vote for the Negative. While this rule aids us in selecting a winner, it does us great harm if we are led to believe we have answered a question simply because we have awarded a trophy.

Additionally, to suggest that debate is democratic because it serves the public is to neglect the socioeconomic privilege that envelopes the activity. Though competitors in the IPDA may not enjoy the sort of economic freedom and privilege experienced by the very rich, they are among a select few US Americans with the time and money to spend their weekends debating instead of working. Though at least two sides may be aired in any given argument, countless others are never heard because those voices are left out of the college experience or left out of public discourse altogether. Postcolonial scholars have noted that there are groups of “sub-altern” people for whom no access to

representation is even made available (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1996). And because debate coaches write IPDA resolutions, and coaches are almost always well-educated white-collar professionals, even the topics to be debated necessarily reflect a narrow set of class, gender, and racial interests.

Third, it may be difficult to believe that academic debate represents a democratic approach to controversy because of the way it legitimates certain forms of discourse while simultaneously silencing others. In short, certain sorts of knowledge and experience are considered credible in debate while others are categorized as un-scientific or merely opinion. Ways of knowing which fall outside the traditional rubric of scientific knowledge are disciplined and dismissed.

### ***Debate as Constructive of Critical Thinking Skills***

Perhaps most commonly, debate is said to be an activity which fosters critical thinking skills. Such claims are presumably based upon the way in which debaters are trained to support their arguments with evidence, to weigh arguments objectively, and to render decisions on the basis of such weighing mechanisms.

First, debaters often act as though the preponderance of factual evidence indicates the propriety of a decision. Students are instructed to support each claim with as much credible evidence as time allows. However, facts do not speak for themselves. Facts are interpreted and made to speak in favor of claims advanced by interlocutors.

Furthermore, facts are not equally available. Many postmodernists and poststructuralists, perhaps most notably Foucault (1965; 1972; 1977; 1978; 1980), have noted the connection between power and knowledge. This connection is both productive and restrictive:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes' it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (Foucault, 1977, p. 194)

Facts, usually culled from scholarly research or witness testimony, are funded, created, and published by privileged actors possessed of sectional interests. Thus, the presence or dearth of evidence in favor of any particular claim ought to be taken not as a guarantee of truthfulness, but as an indication of the interests of those in power.

Furthermore, I have, in previous works (Duerringer, 2008), questioned the notion that arguments may be weighed with any semblance of objectivity. In order to quantify the value of arguments provided in a round, debaters typically appeal to some weighing mechanism. This weighing mechanism is said to aid the judge by providing a way of determining how salient each argument is. Unfortunately, weighing mechanisms themselves are freighted with semi-arbitrary value judgments which inevitably shape the debate round. Bochner (2000) writes:

Ultimately, all criteria serve a conservative and destructive function ... Criteria always have a restrictive, limiting, regressive, thwarting, halting quality to them, and they can never be completely separated from the structures of power in which they are situated. (p. 269)

Criteria establish this task of weighing arguments by filtering discourse: they exclude some speech while legitimating others. Since weighing mechanisms are never neutral, claims about our ability to make objective judgments about arguments seem questionable at best.

Additionally, it is rarely the case that victories are earned by debaters whose efforts were quantifiably better than those of their opponents. Instead, victories often seem to occur at the confluence of subjectivities: where particularly positioned interlocutors make use of specialized discursive practices to interact with particularly positioned judges, victories are awarded. In my time as a debater, practically every one I spoke with experienced moments of luck where their racial, economic, gender, or sexual identities had provided them with the social capital needed to secure the assent of a similarly identified judge. Other times, those markers of identity hamstrung the best of orators. And even in cases where judges seem capable of focusing only upon the case at hand, their own subjectivities invariably play a mediating role when assessing the relative merit of arguments offered in the round.

### **What's Left? Or the Merit of Academic Debate**

Presuming readers have granted all, or at least some of the arguments made to this point, one may be left to ask why I love debate so much. If the average IPDA debate round is not particularly educational, and if it is not terribly democratic, and if it does not foster the sort of critical thinking skills it promises, why is it a worthwhile activity? In the remainder of this essay, I will argue that academic debate, and IPDA especially, is a worthy activity because it provides debaters with a profound understanding of the way language operates and because it seems to create tolerance and moderation in interesting ways.

#### ***Experiencing the Play of Signification***

While I have already argued that IPDA rounds, in general, are not terribly educational, I do think that debaters learn a great deal about language over the course of their careers in the association. Unlike the average US American who believes that it is possible and preferable to speak clearly and to mean what one says, debaters are constantly shown the way that perfect clarity and meaning are always beyond the reach of language.

To begin, debaters learn that definitions mean everything in debate rounds and they find that words are incredibly tough to pin down. Though it sounds like an easy task, finding definitions for even the simplest of resolutions can pose a problem. According to the dictionary in my office, the word "is," for example, may be defined in eighteen different ways. Even when one settles on some accepted definition, the task of clarification has only been deferred: soon enough, the opposition may call on the debater to explain the meaning of the definition.

Additionally, debaters learn the degree to which subjectivity shapes individuals' interpretations of language. Though we strive to impress our judges with wit and insight, our comments are occasionally interpreted as callous, imprecise, or downright insulting. It is these moments, dispersed throughout one's debate career, which are most instructive in showing us that symbolic communication is always interpreted within a variety of overlapping, sometimes conflicting, cultural and individual frames. This understanding, it seems to me, is one of the best reasons to compete in academic debate. These practitioners who exert so much effort to stabilize meanings and to speak clearly are the ones who, in the end, understand Derrida when he notes:

A text [written or spoken] remains ... forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception

... There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy of the physiognomy of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it. (1981, p. 63)

Debaters have first-hand experience with the play of signification. They have seen the way that certainty always slips away from us when we seek to decide the meaning of our words. They are the ones, too, who learn that each of us brings our own subjectivity along as we fool ourselves into believing that we can interpret words, that we make sense of words, without inserting ourselves into that sense-making process.

### ***The Moderating Force of Academic Debate***

The third significant benefit of academic debate can be described as the sort of moderating effect a debate career can exercise over one's beliefs. By this I mean that debate, when practiced over a significant period of time, has the effect of militating against the sort of strongly partisan attitudes frequently espoused on television infotainment programming. While it may be sensational, and thereby profitable, to caricature opposing sides of an issue, debaters are routinely confronted with situations that are likely to add nuance to their understandings of both their own beliefs and those of others.

To begin, most debaters will, at some point, be required to advocate for policies and beliefs which run contrary to their own. In order to win debate rounds, they will be compelled to craft the most persuasive arguments available in support of these policies and beliefs. This demand increases the likelihood, though it does not guarantee it, that debaters will come to consider both sides of such controversies as meritorious. Even those who are charged with advocating for policies and beliefs that they already find agreeable may find their beliefs challenged in ways that lead to tolerance. As a teacher, I find that a great number of my students believe what they believe because they were told to do so by family, friends, or clergy. But debaters often find their closely held beliefs put under scrutiny: opponents provide refutations which are unpleasant to consider and sometimes previously unknown to us. Though we may continue to believe in a particular policy or belief, debate provides us an opportunity to understand that position with more complexity.

Finally, debate militates against extremism insofar as it teaches us the near impossibility of maintaining absolutes. As a judge and later as a debater, I learned that competitors charged with defending a resolution that included the words *all* or *never* found themselves at a severe disadvantage. I came to conclude that there was an exception for practically every rule and that absolutism tended, more often than not, to be little more than lazy thinking.

The result of these experiences, as I have suggested, is an increased likelihood that debaters will think of the word less in terms of absolutes and more in localities, contexts, and contingencies. Burke suggested that while most people interpret life through a tragic frame in which protagonists must fight antagonists, we are better served by understanding their world through the comic frame. He writes, "Comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis switches from crime to stupidity" (Burke, 1984, p. 41). In other words, a comic frame seeks to point out our shortcomings, but does so in ways that create opportunities for adjustment rather than blame:

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that

*all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle. (Burke, 1984, p. 41, emphasis original)

Persons employing the comic frame do not resist new thoughts and seek victory, but they deal with complications to their plans and seek to overcome obstacles in the spirit of transcendence and integration. This new understanding will not only tend to moderate against extremism, but it benefits debaters by allowing them to approach the world with an attitude that embraces complexity, seeks to transcend differences, and imagines their fellow debaters less as enemies than as counterparts in our performance.

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## Choosing Sides: Affirmative/Negative Positions and Competitive Equity in IPDA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Fairness in competition is one of the primary goals of any intercollegiate debate organization. This study examines the competitive equity of the Affirmative and Negative positions of advocacy over the course of the Fall 2009 season of the International Public Debate Association. While no significant relationship was*