

URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES AND THE ROLE OF CLASSROOM TEACHERS IN GUIDING HIGH SCHOOL DEBATING

by
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“In an effort to support the development of democratic societies in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, the Open Society Institute introduced high school debate as part of a larger movement to help transform the Soviet, monolithic education structure. Debate was introduced to provide a forum for secondary school students to develop sophisticated communication skills, understanding of current social and political events and a tolerance for different ideas, in order to enable them to participate as citizens in what were becoming newly democratic societies.” Beth Breger, OSI Program Officer, October, 2000

In 1997 the Open Society Institute, an international foundation established by George Soros, turned its philosophy to high school youth in America’s urban centers. Based on the urban debate league model developed by Melissa Wade at Emory University, since 1997 the OSI has supported the establishment of urban debate leagues (UDL) in 12 cities. Exclusively focused on policy debate the UDL movement counts 150 inner schools (125 new since 1997) with a current student participation of over 2000. The UDL’s function as incubator leagues, training new coaches and leveling the social, economic and experiential playing field. As programs and debaters rapidly mature within the UDL, they merge into the established debate circuit. But there is more afoot than the assimilation of “a great wave of immigration.”

The UDL movement represents the most explosive growth in high school debate in the 68 history of the National Forensic League. After decades of struggling at the margin of secondary education, this growth is exhilarating and startling to the coaches who kept high school academic debate alive during the a time of contraction and isolation. The celebration of growth although heartfelt must be brief. There lies immediately ahead critical decisions and

important work for us all from the stalwarts of the established national circuit to the neophytes of the UDL’s. The Urban Debate Program looks forward to future cooperation with the NFL.

In the 1960’s our community reassessed comfortable structures and norms and embarked on a journey away from the intellectual monopoly held by the stock issues paradigm. We need now to reassess the assumptions we have grown comfortable with in the past three decades. Some of these assumptions serve our craft well, some have vastly enriched the intellectual experience of debaters. Other assumptions have prolonged and contributed to our isolation; still others have miseducated debaters. American education has for the past 10 years submitted itself to a thorough critical review. Instructional content and methodology is being consciously and carefully resculpted as secondary education steers across the glacial divide between an industrial society and an information technology society. There is nothing which indicates that American high school debate should stand apart from or exempt itself from this fundamental reexamination. Indeed, the UDL movement has the potential of propelling us into the heart of the education reform movement.

The effect of the UDL movement presents the opportunity for more than quantitative growth. At an honors program orientation held by prestigious university a concerned parent asked , “What is the basic skill you find students most deficient in ?” The Dean of Academics replied, “The ability to communicate effectively to diverse audiences.” For most of the recent past, high school debate has been part of this problem. Coaches, debaters and judges...we looked alike, talked alike and thought alike. The urban debate movement will sweep that away, refreshing and enriching the learning curve for all of us.

American society grows richer through diversification but it remains troubled by racial and economic schisms. Too often issues of class and race are either trivialized as differences in style or demonized through racial profiling. Rarely are they examined for understanding. Well privileged, well schooled suburban teenagers research, talk about and propose solutions for life on the other side of the great American divide. On the other side are hundreds of thousands of urban teenagers with active minds and great ideas. The intellectual richness of American debate will be significantly enhanced now that their voice is heard directly in the round rather than refracted through clipped evidence on a debate brief.

There have been some whispered concerns among established programs that the UDL movement will dilute the scholarly discussion of “heady” issues like postmodernism, deontology, Foucault..... Intellectual history is replete with strident warnings that intellectual quality can only be guarded through elitism. When an intellectual discipline lifts its feet from the ground to avoid the mud of real people it moves from intellectualism to mysticism from disciplined study and discovery to cultist practice. Many might remember Judge Pelham’s stern warning to high school teachers that if we did not regain control of this activity we might find ourselves holding national tournaments on a tiny, deserted island.

We do not structure our sport to have players who specialize in offense (affirmative) and players who specialize in defense (negative) because logic, argumentation and persuasion are weakened when the direct experience is one-sided. The thought process of specialists is trapped by their own well practiced structures and habits. We abandoned four person teams knowing that diversifying the experience of novices elevated the learning curve; we shattered the

monopoly of the stock issues paradigm knowing that the resulting diversity in argument forms would elevate our thinking to a new plane. Viewed from the reality of American life, our high school students have been competing in a one-sided debate. The urban debate movement provides us with the most powerful diversity, human diversity.

American high school debate has been troubled by a lack of coaches. The National Forensic League and the National Debate Coaches Association have placed coach recruitment and retention at the top of their agendas. In many instances the lives of long standing programs have been maintained by volunteers from outside the ranks of secondary school educators - parents, lawyers, accountants, graduate students and a doctor or two. We are indebted them for keeping the flame lit. Furthermore, they have enriched the pool of ideas precisely because they come from without the walls of the school. But they also represent the inability of high school teachers to exercise leadership in this the preeminent academic activity. High school debate is more than a series of competitions to crown the best of the brightest. High school debate is an educational activity whose existence ought to be justifiable within the educational mission of American secondary schools and its direction ought to be in the hands of the professionals who understand the classroom process, whose job it is to teach.

It has been a requirement by OSI that every school joining a UDL be coached by at least one classroom teacher. The result is close to 200 new debate coaches, every one of them a classroom teacher. For the first time in decades high school teachers are numerically strong enough to be the dominant adult voice in high school debate. The implications are far reaching. UDL coach discussions eagerly probe winning strategies and the latest evolutions in critiques. But there is a new dimension. One too long missing. High school teachers also worry about what lessons are being learned and what patterns of thought are being molded. In short they are teachers first and coaches second. A short vignette is instructive. Its 1:00 a.m. in a hotel room in Albany after the first day of state finals. A handful of UDL coaches are gathered, talking over a year of experience on the "outside circuit." One says, "Tabula rasa lacks intellectual honesty. What does it teach to say 'I have no opinion about the logic of the link between education standards at avoiding a

nuclear conflict with North Korea. I am a blank slate' But then at the same time have a whole list of preconceptions, very rigid, about the structure and theory of a counterplan or topicality argument.

The debate coach in us scoffs at Governor Bush's remark - "That was a good high school debate trick" - as sophomoric. The high school teacher in us winces at its truthful implication. It will be refreshing to have coach gatherings and judge pools filled with two hundred intelligent, dedicated and highly professional classroom teachers. There will be new perspectives and perhaps some old sacred cows will be deconstructed with a bit of healthy irreverence for the past. Such is the cost and benefit of a free market of ideas.

The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development argues that the last decade of the 20 century and first decade of the 21st century will be identified as a period of educational revolution. Debate will not be exempted. Strengthened with the influx of 200 new coaches who are teachers, we are better positioned to place our mark on this revolution.

The guiding ideology of this revolution is constructivism. Based on the teaching of Jean Piaget and confirmed in the research of cognitive science, constructivism argues that humans learn through a constant cycle of constructing their own internal understandings, facing contradictory external stimuli and then refining and restructuring the internal constructs. Cognitive science research has found the human brain uniquely wired to detect, detest and resolve contradictions. Understanding is not acquired from the outside but rather constructed from the inside.

At first blush debate seems a most natural ally for the constructivist approach. But we need to ask whether a great deal of the "heady" argumentation flowing from debate theorists and accomplished lab leaders has produced deep learning or shallow knowledge. Speed does not disturb our new coaches. That is something which can be learned. What is most disturbing is the cascade of factual errors and conceptual inconsistencies which pass unchallenged as good coin when repeated in the script of sophisticated structure and erudite terminology. That should not be learned.

It is no exaggeration or a high school debate trick to say that the high school debater of today will be the decision maker of tomorrow, affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. We need to teach

them well. We are poised now to do it better. Soon thousands of urban youth from some of the most maligned schools of our nation will board buses and travel to the Glenbrooks, the Emorys, and the Lexingtons, compete and forge a truly national debate circuit. I think this is far better than sliced bread.

(Brent Farrand founded the nationally successful debate program at Newark Science (NY) HS. He has been awarded the coveted Paul Slappey Diversity Award by the Barkley Forum at Emory University.)

(This article is the first in a series of articles that will appear each month about the Urban Debate Leagues)