

LD: THE FORENSICS "MAGIC BULLET"

by Bill Gibron

When I began my career in forensics, back when dinosaurs battled leprechauns for control of Middle Earth, I was introduced to a great many concepts at a speed second only to that of light, sound and the feet of an IEer toward break postings. All intrigued me, but none more so than Lincoln Douglas Debate. My initial thoughts, upon hearing the name, was that it was some sort of warped duo where students recreated that famous 1858 tete-a-tete while judges graded on poise, posture and stove pipe hat wearing ability.

When I was enlightened as to my own short sightedness, I discovered that it was a value debate. I was still confused, since the only connotation I could place on the term 'value' was a 2-for-1 sale at Wal-Mart. Well, time indeed passed and I discovered something amazing: Lincoln Douglas Debate is the best event in forensics, period. Now, before you policy people demand my rather fat head on a platter, or you Interp mavens feel I am again blasting your prima donna-ish path, I am prepared to defend my position.

For you see, I find that LD incorporates everything that we strive to teach in forensics. From learning to doing, from preparation to presentation, participation in Lincoln Douglas is nothing short of a crash course in the rest of a student's life. Don't think so? Well, let's divide it into sections, and see if I am completely off base.

Section 1: Education Skills

Why did we become teachers? (aside from the non-stop accolades and free jackets to the Cayman Islands). It is to teach the mind and mold the intellect of our nation's future. Students need challenge, and yet most find a simple set of multiple choice questions the mental equivalent of the Quantum Theory of Relativity. What they really need is something that stimulates their will, and their perseverance, not their ability to memorize. And LD provides

this.

Unlike most forensics events, LD changes topics every two months, requiring a new focus, a new outlook, and most importantly, a new set of cases. In order to achieve those precious arguments, students must use old and new skills, fine tuning their minds into powerful analytical machines. They need a cure from the short attention span randomness of the remote or mouse button. And LD is the antidote, a "magic bullet" to future success. Just look at the areas involved:

Research - as much as they hate to admit it, most LD topics are pulled from the headlines and poised in (usually successful) ethical tones. Pragmatic examples are one way of shoring up a position, or crating an argument and the best way to discover them is to hunt for them, in a library, or bookstore, or on the internet. This ability to define and refine a topic will be invaluable in college, where no paper goes unresearched and no topic goes unexhausted.

Thinking - but what do you do with all that information once you've gathered it up? Well, that's the next great thing about LD. It requires you to use it, to find out how and why those 75 cases you found about abolishing the death penalty apply to the resolution. It requires you to question and to explore, both internally and externally, and risk ridicule for the sake of reasoning and rationalization.

But LD also does much more than that. It asks the student to contemplate issues that they may not have ever thought about before. Rights, laws, morality and philosophy all play a major part in the creation of a fine LD case, and for the mind that has only until recently concerned itself with the lyrics to *Cowboy* by Kid Rock, this is a daunting task. But it is also a satisfying one, as we will explore later.

Argumentation - once considered, it is now time to analyze. Just because you know something is right or wrong, just because it seems fair or equal does not mean

you can express those thoughts logically or eloquently. This is where the development of arguments come into play. Like the old Monty Python sketch says, an argument is not just the "automatic nay saying" of the other person's words. An argument is a well thought out and researched proposition, mixing fact with fundamental principles to achieve a clear and concise statement.

And it is never as easy as this sounds. The development of good argumentation takes time, and topic areas, which indulge and modify the position and propositions asked for. In Team, or even Extemp, you tend to see the same set areas over and over again. Only LD offers the juxtaposition of morality vs. legality, right vs. might. By constantly honing and re honing arguments, an LDer develops the nature, not just the skill, to argue.

Writing - but all those fancy words and thoughts mean nothing if they cannot be communicated in an effective and efficient manner. This is where the ability to write is paramount. Students learn that arguments are only as good as the way in which you phrase them, and develop long term, irreplaceable benefits in the written word. Most courses in high school gloss over writing as a necessary evil, or merely a fill-in-the-blank formulation for the appropriate essay.

Not LD. LD teaches the need to be clear, concise and cohesive. It teaches word economy and eloquence, and educates young minds in one of the most difficult of all the communicative skills; the explanation of complex philosophical ideals. Most times they are successful. Sometimes they are not. An LDer need to constantly revise.

Rewriting - very few people, no matter how talented or gifted they are, can sit down and type write a perfect article or letter. Knowing the who, what, when, where, why and how of editing and rewriting is an essential skill to the communicator. And no

other event requires the constant rephrasing and reevaluation of the words chosen than LD. Within the course of a 38-minute round, a student may have to reconsider the wording and structure of their arguments hundreds of times.

But this should not be the first time this occurs. Editing should begin at the conception and creation phase. A student's first draft of a case should never be the one debated. It should be challenged and attacked, using the responses and rationales as a basis for the new and improved version. Many students who I have coached claim that this one requirement of LD helped them more in high school and college than any other.

But the written word is just one section of the big picture. Forensics is the ability to speak authoritatively, and persuasively, the key word in that sentence being "speak". Therefore, the next contribution to the education of the student is:

Section 2: Speaking Skills

Persuasion - few skills are more valued in the real world than the ability to eloquently and convincingly sell oneself and ideas. Everything from a job and ideas. Everything from a job interview to a case in court to a lesson plan in Trigonometry relies on persuasive speaking to get the point across. And Lincoln Douglas is the best event to fine tune persuasive speaking skills as it is mandated in the very fabric of the competition. A LDer can rely on the words of others to make his or her point, as do Interpers and Orators. In LD, it is the student, along in the rhetorical spotlight, living or losing by the agility of their words and the soundness of their reasoning.

And they receive a kind of instant feedback, more quickly than a ballot or oral critique; their opponents rebuttal. One spoken, an LDer knows how successful or absent they have been by the way in which their competitor addresses their points. And what is said about them.

Mental Agility - going concept to concept with persuasion is the notion of thinking on one's feet; of making micro-second decisions about what arguments to go for and which ones to drop; the sudden realization of being totally undermined and the need to rebuild from scratch, all in three minutes of prep time. Team offers some mental gymnastics, as do the IE events. But when it comes to a total cranial workout, LD is the triathlon of the forensics tournament. After reading the type written case, its all

up to the mind and talent of the student.

Self Reliance - LD is one of the few events that does not make students rely exclusively on the information of others to provide a basis for their performance. A LDer is lost without sources, as is an Extemp. Interpers would be doing stand up comedy or performance art if it wasn't for authors. LDers only need themselves. No partners, no manuscripts, no expert cuttings.

Wait, you say, what of the philosophers and thinkers that they rely on to provide grounding and support for their case? What of them, I say. Yes, they are important, but not VITAL to a round of LD. When was the last time you voted on a quote? Or a card? Evidentiary support is just that, support. The student learns to think first, and find consensus later. And in a very pre-programmed, forced fed society, only good can come from this.

So, where does this leave us? LD may be good for learning how to write an essay, or research paper, or even how to talk your way out of being grounded, but what real world application can this possible have? Well, unlike Algebra, LD is #1 in giving a young person the proper foundation for the future. This is clear in the final section of focus.

Section 3: Life Skills

Philosophy - at what age were you when you first contemplated freedom? Justice? Equality? Morals and ethics? For many of us, these issues seem best left for the pundits to propagandize about over our fourth cup of cold coffee and a tired 6:00 a.m. sweet roll. But these are the life blood of an LDer. These are the very notions that require and demand their attention. And when they do, they create the best possible result; the expansion of consciousness. No other event can do this. No other event offers the possibility of humanity, compassion and tolerance.

Constitutional Issues - do you know your rights? No? I had to attend three years of law school and pay several thousand dollars and I still am foggy on a few things; What does the 1st Amendment really mean? How does the 4th Amendment protect us? Most citizens in the United States are grossly misinformed or just plain ignorant as to what they actually have the right to do and what they assume is their rights. LDers learn first hand, and work with over and over again, these very basic principles that makes up our noble republic.

Is this exhaustive? Far from it. Is it persuasive? I hope so. I honestly feel that, as I move on down the path of life toward the final drumbeats of infinity, I will always cherish my time as an LD coach. I have learned more than I every did in high school, and supplemented what little I got from college and law school. But its not just from my perspective. I think of all the students I have coached, all the young minds I have had the pleasure of warping with this wonderful dialectic drug.

And it is in their eyes, in the light and empathy, truth and intelligence at which I see them approach their lives and their relationships that I see the true healing powers of LD. How it opens narrow minds and excites the intellect of the bored or lazy. Just as it did so many decades ago, the course of a nation, or the course of a child's education, can be turned on the clamber of reasoning and analysis. And I am sorry, I just don't see that happening with a kritik. No, only Lincoln Douglas Debate, with its combination of Education, Speaking and Life lessons does what many think impossible; truly providing a student with a comprehensive and relevant education. Other events have their merit, but they are not LD. Long live LD, the King of all Debate events.

(Bill Gibron coaches at the Academy of the Holy Names (FL)).