

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN THE DEBATE CLASS

by Tim Mangan II

When I first began teaching debate, I gave my students no formal grading criteria and instead emphasized that they would be graded on "work ethic." This quickly transformed into a policy where everyone got an "A". Then of course, the inevitable situation came about where a classroom made me decide that I needed some standard criteria for assigning grades.

My next approach involved a rigorous set of standards, which if not met, would result in a grade "lower than an A." I assigned a specific number of practice rounds, a specific number of cases to be written, and a specific number of speeches presented. The students were so concerned about their grades that the drive was to complete the specified number of rounds. Class turned into an endless stream of speeches.

Frustrated with the grading for my debate class I consulted a fellow coach. He told me that he graded his students in three basic areas: *Cooperation*, being one of the most important (I don't even remember what the other two were). I thought about what he had said and realized that taking his idea and organizing it in rubric format would solve several of my problems.

Cooperation would finally allow me to appropriately grade the varsity debater who came back from summer debate camp with the "coach is an idiot" syndrome. It also reminded the students of the importance of working as a team and sharing ideas to create better ideas. I had found that both of these attitudes was destroying team morale and undermining my ability to coach.

Skills demonstration would give me a way of requiring participation in debate tournaments. On several occasions I had students take the class who were only interested in arguing and had no intention of learning anything about competitive debate.

Productivity would solve the problem of the slacker who wrote one decent case and decided to sit for the rest of the quarter. It also solved the equally annoying problem of the student who wrote several poor cases and tried to tell me that quantity was better than quality.

Diversity was added as a way of building my school's speech program and increasing our NFL participation. It also effectively serves as a check on a student's speaking ability. Our school requires a public speaking course, but students may opt to take debate instead. Even though any debate coach would easily agree, I wanted to minimize the argument that others had made regarding debate not enhancing proper speaking skills.

Miscellaneous was originally added to give students an opportunity to include debate work that I had not thought of including in the rubric. However, it has turned into a wonderfully creative endeavor for most of my students. In the last set of portfolios I collected, one student created a series of cartoons illustrating "proper" debate attire and attitude. I can't say it is the perfect model for my novices, but the student had some interesting insights.

Today grading my class runs very smoothly. For progress reports, I assign grades of pass or fail, based upon what evidence of work I have seen up to the midpoint of the quarter. All students received passing marks at the midpoint of this quarter. I collect the portfolios one-week before the end of the quarter so that I have time to get my grades completed. Even though you would think that the students would put things off to the last minute, I have had a tremendous work ethic among my debaters. Some students are so concerned about completing their debate work that I have had to emphasize that there are no deadlines other than the final portfolio due date and that they don't have to stay up until midnight every night doing debate work. Of course I still have to remind other students that you can't do practice rounds without a case and having neither obviously lowers your grade significantly.

The most important aspect of the portfolio is the cover letter. This letter tells me how the portfolio is organized. I explain to the students that if I can't find it, I can't grade it. The letter holds the student accountable for providing documentation of

his/her portfolio work. For example, a student explains to me in her cover letter that she gave a speech to a luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club. A copy of this speech or notes from the presentation should appear under the diversity section of the portfolio. The cover letter also serves as a reminder to me that the student has gone to x number of debate tournaments or participated in x practice rounds.

In addition to the cover letter, I ask students to document debate activities. For example, if a student asks me to look over a case I will most likely write comments on the case. If a student has one of his classmates evaluate a case, I ask that the student have his classmate write comments, initial, and date the comments. Students also keep copies of their practice round and tournament flows. Documenting these activities provides written proof of coursework if case grades are ever challenged.

This year I plan on making a few changes to the grading rubric and portfolio process. I would like to create a separate rubric for the varsity debaters. This would focus less on diversity, as these students should have proven their basic speaking competencies in their earlier years as debaters, I would replace this with a section on leadership. The cooperation section requires students to submit their ideas to others, but it doesn't reflect my desire that varsity debaters should be guiding their classmates in perfecting cases, critiquing speeches, and setting a tone of professionalism.

I also need to revise the rubric to spell out exactly what I expect as far as documentation. I have explained my expectations fairly well in the preceding paragraphs and I do likewise in my class, but the rubric itself doesn't contain language specifically explaining my expectations for documentation.

Finally, some students would like to get feedback on their progress well before the finished product is due at the end of the grading period. Next quarter I plan on letting my students turn in their portfolios one

week before progress reports are due. These students would then receive a progress report grade other than pass/fail.

Overall I have to say that, portfolio assessment in my debate classes has been a great success. I haven't had any problems justifying grades since adopting this system. Student motivation is much better. Few students challenge my directions. I feel that portfolio assessment provides consistency for my students and myself. My only regret

is that I didn't start using it earlier.

If you have any questions or require further information on how the portfolio and rubric system is used in my classes, feel free to contact me at Freeport High School (815-232-0400) or e-mail me at tmangan@aeroinc.net. I can provide example cover letters, course syllabi, and a shortened description of this essay that I provide to students and parents.

GRADING RUBRIC

Debate Portfolios

Name:

Score:

Format (10%)

- Cover Letter included
- Portfolio is well organized and easy to follow
- Portfolio is legible
- Work completed in a timely fashion

Cooperation (20%)

- 5 Solicits feedback from teacher and classmates. Effectively uses feedback to improve debate skills.
- 4 Solicits feedback from teacher and classmates. Shows some evidence of using feedback to improve debate skills.
- 3 Listens to feedback from teacher or classmates. Shows some evidence of using feedback to improve debate skills.
- 2 Listens to feedback from teacher and/or classmates, but does not show evidence of using feedback to improve debate skills.
- 1 Does not listen to others or use suggestions from teacher and classmates.

Skills Demonstration (30%)

- 5 Has demonstrated improvement in speaking, researching, note taking, and arguing by participating in several practice rounds, drills, and debate tournaments.
- 4 Has shown improvement in the following areas: speaking, researching, note taking, and arguing. Improvement has been demonstrated by participating in practice rounds, drills, and debate tournaments.
- 3 Has shown some improvement in the following areas: speaking, researching, note taking, and arguing. Improvement has been demonstrated by participating in the following: practice rounds, drills, or debate tournaments.
- 2 Shows no improvement in debate skills from the beginning of the grading period.
- 1 Skill level can not be determined.

Productivity (20%)

- 5 Has written 3 or more complete cases for each topic/resolution studied this grading period. All cases demonstrate research and thought.
- 4 Has written 2 or more complete cases for each topic/resolution studied this grading period. Some cases follow basic structure, but lack research.
- 3 Has written at least one complete case for each topic/resolution studied this grading period. Cases fail to elaborate on main points.
- 2 Has not completed any cases, but several honest attempts to write a case appear as outlines of credible ideas.
- 1 Has written nothing, which bears a resemblance to a case.

Diversity (10%)

- 5 Has demonstrated knowledge of good speaking skills by applying debate knowledge to several diverse contexts.
- 4 Has applied debate knowledge to several contexts, but some applications lack preparation or commitment.
- 3 Has applied debate knowledge for application to one other context, but application shows minimal preparation and practice of good speaking skills.
- 2 Has plans to apply debate knowledge to another context, but has yet to accomplish the goal set.
- 1 Has not applied debate knowledge to other contexts or prepared information for such purpose.

Miscellaneous (10%)

- 5 This section is left intentionally blank so that students can devise their own grading criteria.
- 4
- 3
- 2 I grade this area according to how much thought and preparation went into creating the work for this category.
- 1