

by
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Some Tips for Common-Sense Debating

The first year I judged debate, I thought American high school debating had lost sight of its all-important, down-to-earth, democratic roots and had evolved into a ritualized, inbred, elitist game.

Today, after my third year of judging tournaments for San Antonio's MacArthur High School (mostly Lincoln-Douglas, with some cross-examination and ex-temp), I have decided my initial reaction was overdrawn -- but not completely wrong.

Debate coaches DO need to throw a little more common-sense ballast into debaters' bouncing theoretical boats.

If this is not done, many debaters will never emerge from the caterpillar stage and become the handsome butterflies of public life that they could be. Instead, like computer nerds, they risk becoming a lonely community of geniuses isolated from the rest of humanity by their own self-imposed, needless obscurantism.

Computer nerds can survive in their cloisters because they turn their ingenuity into tangible machines and because their monkish labors earn money for the hiring of interpreters.

Break Habits

But debaters, if they are to fulfill their potential, must someday stop talking only to each other, and start persuading the rest of us -- boards of directors, city councils, customers, voters. To do that, they must break some habits they develop in debating and start speaking the same language that outsiders do.

Debaters are extraordinarily bright kids and they pick up quickly (too quickly) on the "high technology" of forensics, i.e... the intricate analysis, the jargon, the citation of rules.

Convince Ordinary People

In the process, they forget that the real-life value of debating skills is to convince ordinary people -- not debaters -- to support the causes, the values, the deci-

sions they believe in.

I hate watching smart kids waste their brains and energies "lawyering" the (supposed) rules of debate instead of actually debating. It's like watching football players arguing with the referees when they should be blocking and tackling each other.

Avoid Accusations

Instead of discussing the meat of issues, debaters too often just accuse each other of violating topicality, triumphantly trumpet an opponent's alleged overlooking of a third contention, demand that arguments be drawn over to their own sides, and instruct judges on what the judging issues are.

"I DON'T CARE!" one wants to scream. "Topicality sounds like a pomposity that deserves violating; I don't remember what your third contention was; I'm not keeping a chart to draw things over on' and I - not you -- will decide what the judging issues are."

Avoid Debate Jargon

Usually, I'm not that blunt. However, I do write critiques warning debaters that many judges don't know or care about debate jargon' that, in the real world, there are no rules of debate except to change minds and hearts; and that, in the real world, this demands cogent information, common sense arguments and clear, simple English - not a mastery of debate theory.

Use Debate Theory

It's not that debate theory is wrong. It's a good tool for learning how to influence ordinary people. It's just that, when it comes time to actually influence people, one has to USE the theory.....*not talk ABOUT it.*

Often this is just a matter of choosing the right words. A debater can win a layman over by objecting that an opponent

has gotten off the subject to avoid facing reality. He will lose the layman if he insists on using the term "violated topicality."

Fortunately, as debaters mature, most seem to reconnect with the real world. They slip into jargon and lawyering much less. Perhaps repeated battering by codgers like me has something to do with this. One hopes their coaches are influencing them, too.

Show The Finished Product

Coaches should do even more in this arena. Impress upon all debaters, including novices, that the jargon, analysis and chart-drawing done in the classroom should be left in the classroom.

Remind them that doctors study anatomy, pathology, etc., but they don't regurgitate it all to their patients. They just say, "You have an infection. Take these pills."

Another analogy: A skyscraper contains incredible complex support and utilities structures, but smart architects don't let occupants and visitors see that stuff. They conceal it behind walls, floors and ceilings that give the building users the only thing they care about: practical working or living spaces.

Debaters need to do the same. By all means, learn the debate jargon, the analytical techniques, the "rules" that work most of the time. Use that stuff to build strong cases, but don't show it to the judges. A debater should show judges only the finished product: a well-knit, smoothly spoken, plain-English argument that makes the debater look more right than the opponent.

Lay judges will actually punish debaters for showing the innards of their art - not deliberately but just because they really do not understand. Debaters who get used to succeeding with these approaches in debate classes or with expert judges may come to see them as magical incantations for any occasion. They are going to be sorely disappointed when they try them on lay judges and do not get the expected re-

sults. It is the job of coaches to make sure this doesn't happen by training debaters not to use such arguments in tournaments.

Face the Judge Using Common-Sense Approach

(It is dangerous to try to guess, or ask, what kind of judge one is facing. Both kinds may resent the gamesmanship this implies. "Just play ball!" is likely to be their attitude. Even if one guesses successfully, one assumes the burden of trying to "switch hit" between common-sense and legalistic approaches every time one faces a new judge. What's the point? Expert judges may tolerate a legalistic approach, but surely almost all of them will accept a common-sense, substantive approach equally well. Indeed the best ones will prefer it, for all the reasons I have cited. So if everybody likes the common-sense approach, and lay judges hate the legalistic one, doesn't it just make sense to always take the common-sense approach? The case for substantive content couched in good, plain English is overwhelming.)

The same usually cannot be said for cases made by student debaters, a problem caused mainly by an archaic approach to research and argumentation. Debaters slave endlessly over their research, but the ideas and evidence they end up with often falls short of the required level of persuasiveness.

In my opinion, as an educated outsider, the crux of this problem is an obsession with long-dead philosophers that most Americans have never heard of. As a liberal-arts graduate, I am pleased that my debater son is learning about Hobbes, Locke, etc. However, I don't look to those guys as guides to 20th-century issues, and Joe Six-Pack doesn't have a clue who they were.

Consequently, a typical debate opening statement -- "Because I agree with Tycho Brahe's grandmother, I must affirm" -- is dead on arrival as far as most lay audiences are concerned.

If listeners don't say just say, "Who?," they are likely to say, "Well, you may agree with that witch-burning, serf-flogging, pre-steam-engine troglodyte, but I don't." And then what chance does the debater stand?

Proper Opening Statement Structure

A winning case is a logical structure, built with evidence and argumentation, on a foundation presented in the opening statement. For a case to succeed in the short time available, that foundation **MUST** be one the audience (judge) instinctively recognizes and agrees with.

It must be axiomatic, i.e., so commonly agreed-upon by Americans from all walks of life and all schools of thought that the opposing debater would not dare to question it and the judge would never think to. A debate case can survive having some of its evidence and arguments skewered; but if that philosophical foundation is attacked and defeated, then everything stacked on top of it collapses and the case is doomed.

What kinds of ideas qualify as unassailable axioms? Given time and intellectual skill and will, of course, almost any axiom is assailable. However, the time limits of debate and the limited philosophical inclinations of most Americans confer a virtual impregnability on certain sources of ideas and quotations.

For example: humane moral precepts from the sacred religious texts of any modern faith, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the writings of Benjamin Franklin or Einstein, the speeches of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. -- such sources are instantly recognized and command instinctive respect from American listeners.

A clever analyst might rip some ideas from these sources to pieces, but very few judges will think to do so and opposing debaters would attack such honored sources only at great risk. With a trusted and unassailable foundation, a debater can build the rest of his logical superstructure with much more confidence.

Hobbes and Locke simply do not provide that. They inspire distrust in some judges even if the opposing debater does not say a word against them -- and they can be attacked with impunity.

"My opponent cited Hobbes, who every right-thinking person knows is an idiot, pervert and enemy of modern humane values," a debater could say...and most judges would not have any reason to doubt it. If a judge found this riposte plausible, it would virtually blow the opponent out of the water. And even a judge who disagrees with this gambit is unlikely to be offended by it, whereas many judges would react negatively to a debater who challenged ideas from the Bible, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Washington, Lin-

coln or King.

In short, debate coaches should counsel their students to seek their ideas from sources that command sacred or quasi-sacred status in American society, not from forgotten philosophies.

Another point that must be impressed more vividly on debaters is this: one of the few absolute rules in debating is that no argument counts unless the judge can hear the words. Sadly, this is a rule many debaters violate profligately -- especially CXers, of course, but the problem is by no means limited to them.

The most brilliant argument in the world is worthless if the audience (judge) hears only a cacophony of words piled up on top of each other. Even when words are spoken one at a time, if the **pace** is too hectic and there is no time to absorb the meaning of it all, very cogent arguments may be missed or underestimated by the harried listener. Impress upon debaters that three or four decent ideas, clearly presented, are more persuasive than 20 brilliant ones that nobody can hear, understand or absorb.

Research -- Broaden General Knowledge

One final idea worth passing on to students: while targeted debate research is essential, there is no substitute for an underlying liberal education.

During one ex-temp speech on an economic issue, a brilliant young novice failed to cite the most important economic factor of all. He simply hadn't stumbled across it in his hasty pre-speech research. While it would be unrealistic to expect such a young man to be an economics expert and I did not penalize him for this omission, it was sad to see him come so close to sheer perfection and miss it for lack of a fairly common-place fact.

Of course, no one is every going to hit on all cylinders in ex-temp, but this incident does point up a valuable lesson. Over the long haul, the best debaters will be those who possess an inexhaustible yearning for knowledge of all kinds.

Great debaters do not just fill their debate research hours with a mechanical collection of facts on this year's topics -- they fill their whole lives with learning in the broadest sense.

Consequently, when they go into a debate, they need not gamble all on the hazards of a hasty, quick-and-dirty topical re-

search effort. They operate from a solid foundation of personal knowledge, supplemented by debate research -- much sounder research because it is guided by their broad general knowledge.

Use Metaphors From Unrelated Fields

As a writer, I find that the best arguments on any topic often are metaphors from totally unrelated fields. The best way to win a political point may be an analogy from sculpture, or natural history, or the physical sciences, or religion.

Research will not turn up such connections. An all-permeating liberal education will.

Broaden Reading Material

Encourage debaters to get that kind of education. Encourage them to read constantly, from non-fiction of all kinds and from great literature. As a minimum, urge them to begin a life-long habit of reading a good news magazine -- ALL of it -- every week.

In conclusion, I urge debate coaches everywhere to return to the days of yore when high-school debate was exemplified by Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, on stage in an auditorium packed with parents and siblings, pondering the merits of standing up to Hitler -- plain talk for plain folks on real public issues so difficult that smart people of good will may disagree.

"Forensics"

A

Valuable Experience

Clearly, I believe there is room for improvement. Having said that, however, let me emphasize that high-school forensics is an immensely valuable experience. I have gratefully watched my son grow tremendously in analytical skill, wit, articulateness, knowledge, confidence and leadership.

This is a great program. Debaters just need to remember that their ultimate audience is the rest of American society, not just each other.

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