

CURMUDGEONLY THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF POLICY DEBATE

by Larry Smith

The overarching assumption regarding competitive debate ought to be that the activity is an educational one. The extension of that assumption is that any activity that is designated as educational should have as an end result some applicable knowledge or skills gained by the participants which could be applied in real life.

Any formulation of a policy or a change in policy requires a careful and thorough consideration and communication of the net effects of the application of the policy. This would be true from the very micro level of a family attempting to determine something as simple as the policy for bedtime for children to the complex macro policy decisions regarding the governance of a nation.

Educationally students participating in policy debate competition should be learning to examine policies inherent in the annual debate resolution and through exhaustive research and information gathering be able to formulate coherent arguments for or against a particular policy. That is supposed to be what policy debate is all about....and by extension, it is supposed to be teaching them the methods and skills required in real life decision making. It should be a training ground for future leaders.

That would be the ideal, educationally speaking. Unfortunately policy debate at the interscholastic level has degenerated in the past decade to something less than what its name would imply. Rather, policy debate has become an activity that is more a complex theory game, played by a very select few for a very select audience that subscribes to this "game" approach. The decline nationwide of the number of schools which participate in policy debate is evidence enough that something has gone wrong in the state of debate. In policy debate rounds very little in the way of "policy" in a real world sense is ever debated.

From an educational viewpoint this is profoundly disturbing. Future generations are being deprived of the skills required in making sound policy decisions. Ask any attorney, teacher, businessperson,

or common citizen to judge a debate. The result is often, "What in hell are these kids doing?" Certainly this public perception of the activity is not what the forensic educational community would like to broadcast regarding the value of competitive speech activity as an "educational" experience all students should receive.

There are several questions that need to be answered regarding the problems many see in the arena of high school policy debate. The first question is what seems to be root cause of this decline? Secondly, what specific practices springing from these root causes are destroying policy debate? Third, what could be done to return policy debate to a truly valid and valuable educational activity?

From a strictly biased and personal position, high school debate has been wrested from the school classroom and the high school debate teacher. University "debate camps" have promulgated the current abuses of the activity by turning it into a game of theory arguments. Those who sit in the ivory towers of academia examining rhetorical communication and persuasion theory are also, unfortunately, the same people who instruct high school debaters in weeks long institutes.

At the university level ongoing research and the publish or perish dictum are the driving factors to retain instructional positions. Job security dictates constant thinking and evolution into new interpretations and "knowledge" that can be published or presented to other colleagues at conventions and conferences. (One has only to sit through some of these presentations to realize just how far beyond the norm some are. The facetious observation regarding doctoral dissertations is true. To obtain a Ph.D. one researches and learns more and more about less and less, then publishes the findings. Usually to no useful purpose in the real world.)

Critiques

While these efforts are expected and encouraged at the university level, they should have little, if any, influence on high school students. Unfortunately that is not what happens. A good example of this abuse of knowledge by application appears

in the critique arguments that have been spawned and spread into high school debate in the past few years. Critiques take two (maybe more) avenues, neither of which contribute anything useful to what is supposed to occur in a high school debate. The avenues are born of the recent rage to be politically correct in all senses, but particularly in language choices. Politically correct loosely translates into "non offensive" language...non offensive to anyone, anywhere, anytime if that is possible in making language choices. (I suspect the same people who examine language choices for political correctness are also responsible for the gobbledygook language of governmental agencies, but that is another article.)

Negative teams have seized on the critique (or kritik or kritick or other strange variations on the word) as another means to play a game against affirmatives. Some teams argue that affirmative policy must be rejected because the terms of the debate resolution contain offensive language choices. This absurdity becomes an argument in the round, even though the affirmative has no choice regarding the wording of the resolution. In the jargon of debaters, it is nothing but a "time suck" that conceivably could have a place in a real world discussion regarding policy wording formulation, but should not appear in academic debate. For example, I could see in the real world how language choices could be important in encoding a policy, but to argue that affirmatives are responsible for the wording of a debate resolution's "offensive" terminology is an egregious abuse of academic research into language effect that is better left to doctoral dissertations.

A second abuse of the critique argument is for *either* team to object to some language choice by the other. Again, this is an abuse of time that could be better spent debating specific issues in the round. David Hingstman offers in the *Rostrum* (March 1997) an example of a critique argument heard in a round. "...scapegoating and ageism kritiks ask the judge not to treat juvenile crime as a special social problem...because it stigmatizes juveniles

and masks adult crime and becomes a self fulfilling prophecy." And he shows an affirmative abuse of the game of critiquing, "The kritik often asks the judge to ignore disadvantages that are grounded in the secondary consequences of the plan because of the interests of marginalized groups or peoples (racially or genderized others)."

The search for political correctness in language choices should be left to the ivory towers of communication research and learned papers. It has no place in high school policy debate if educationally the goal is to teach students to discover the real world processes of policy decision making. Specifically no judge should ever decide a debate round on the basis of who did or did not use "offensive" language choices. The critique arguments are nothing more than an attempt to avoid the real issues in policy debate and to intervene in the decision the judge makes by forcing the judge to consider irrelevant issues.

Topicality

A second theory argument that has been distorted well beyond its original intent is topicality. The rules of debate (of which there are only four or five) state that the affirmative team must offer a new policy that implements the wording of the resolution. For years topicality arguments were reasonably rare in debate rounds, and then they only appeared when an affirmative team offered some policy plan that was clearly outside of and beyond the scope of what the resolution stated. Under the instigation of debate theorists, again at debate camps, the topicality voting issue has become expanded well beyond what it was originally intended to be.

Topicality has become not an option, but instead an obligatory issue in every debate round, even when an affirmative plan is clearly topical. And applying the "advanced theory thinking" of college research, the topicality issue has reached highly structured and extensively obtuse language to the point that only a handful of "game debate" practitioners can comprehend what is being argued. (I've judged many rounds where it was clear the topicality block being argued had sprung directly from some debate institute brief, probably written by some graduate student instructor. It was also clear too often that the debater offering this unintelligible argument did not have a clue regarding the meaning of what he/she was reading.)

Topicality arguments reach the point

of absurdity when debaters find obscure definitions for words such as "to", "for", "by" and "federal" and try to apply those definitions to challenge the validity of the affirmative plan's adherence to the wording of the resolution. Too often the whole topicality argument comes down to "our dictionary (source) is better than theirs." Even worse, topicality arguments, often multiple arguments on multiple words or phrases, seem to consume entire first negative time blocks. I once judged a round at nationals where the negative team asked my preferences. Among other preferences, I noted I was not a big fan of topicality arguments. What did first negative do? He stood up and read (at 400 wpm) eight minutes worth of topicality briefs! Nothing on inherency. (more about that later) Nothing on significance. Just topicality, not one of the arguments really applicable to the affirmative plan. (I had listened to the plan. It was topical, at least reasonably so, which is the standard I usually apply.) In sum, topicality, which should be an issue only rarely if affirmatives are following the rule of offering a plan to implement the resolution has become THE issue for first negatives and even is being introduced into a debate by some second negatives. I can envision the horror of listening to a whole round where negative offers nothing but topicality and critique arguments...theory only, no substantive arguments on policy.

And the tragic thing about most rounds is that topicality as an issue too often disappears off the flow sheet after 2nd affirmative constructive's responses. So? Why did first negative waste all that time when he could have been arguing something more substantive? The answer is simple: institutes teach topicality as a theory, and students come away with whole blocks and briefs that require them to think little in a debate round. And it was traditionally the first negative who had to be the best thinker in the round. Here again the esoteric thinking of theorists overrides the pragmatic arguments one would expect to find in any debate over policy in the real world. Can you imagine congress arguing topicality (definitional issues) over some policy proposal? Topicality arguments like critiques are designed to influence the judge's decision making process by directing it away from that of a policy maker to that of an arbitrator on language choices.

Inherency

Another negative influence of theory

dribbling down to policy debate is that involved in the logic of the decision making process. Specifically the whole issue of cause and effect has disappeared from debate. Debate jargon used to include inherency (current policy or lack of policy) and significance (harms). Debaters on the affirmative had to demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between inherent policy and some sort of societal harms.

Somewhere, probably at those same institutes, someone decreed that inherency was not an issue. The resolution exists, therefore there must be a problem with the policy related to the resolution. Negatives were absolved of having to defend any current policy because none is mentioned by affirmatives. To be sure, affirmatives can offer harms...dead bodies on the podium, or other societal harms or risks...but rarely will a clear indictment of status quo policies be made to show the direct cause of those alleged harms. Negatives rarely bother to question affirmative's assumption that current policy is the direct cause of these harms.

In a real world decision making process when some sort of harm is evident the first question to ask before implementing any sort of remedy is, what is causing these harms? Contemporary debate allows affirmatives to offer some policy and find some asserted harms that it will supposedly correct. eg: legalize drugs, reduce juvenile crime. Nowhere does the judge hear how status quo policy of making drugs illegal is the direct, primary cause of juvenile crime. The resolution exists...current policy must be at fault. No argument. No logic either. The affirmative teams just like the bold concept of legalized drugs and adapts that thought into policy to implement the resolution.

Since negatives rarely make issue of inherency and significance, it is no wonder poor first negative has been relegated to topicality briefs and a few disadvantage arguments his partner doesn't have time to run. Case side arguments are obsolete, according to the theorist gurus.

Plan Attacks

Policy debate, then, has come down to 52 minutes of argument and rebuttal on the merits of an affirmative plan: topicality, disadvantages. Period. Most negatives do not even bother to actually think about what a plan says and offer any plan meet advantage or workability arguments. That would require in round thinking and analy-

sis. No canned briefs eight pages long.

Since topicality, a plan attack, has been discussed, turn for a moment to disadvantage arguments. Here again we will find the fertile minds of university students at work. Students attending institutes come away with boxes full of eight page disadvantage briefs. No thought process here. Just stand up and read them in the round, even if you don't fully understand what the brief says or that it takes seven and a half minutes of precious constructive time to read at 400 wpm.

Some, like the beef disadvantage argument, probably started as a joke. Others which invariably have some sort of apocalyptic world ending impact are at face value counter intuitive. Any adult judge sitting in the round probably knows enough history to know that similar actions (to affirmative plan) have been implemented in the past without triggering nuclear war or environmental collapse. Yet high school debaters will take briefs prepared on the "learned" knowledge of college students in economics classes or political science classes and utilize them in a round...often not understanding a word of what they read. No thinking is involved. How many really understand the "net widening" disadvantage that appears round after round?

Rarely is any disadvantage clearly linked to affirmative plan. Generics abound. And the thinking is, if this one doesn't have enough impact to convince the judge, then the next three or four will. Each is built on linking various and divergent sources into a chain of reasoning that defies all logic. If one could assemble all the quoted authorities in the room and ask them to come to the same conclusion as the stated impact, in all probability the experts would laugh uproariously. Yet negatives claim these impacts to be true probabilities. And how are they being educated in the decision making process by this profligate leap frog logic?

Through all the college influenced changes in policy debate have we seen any truly educational benefits? The answer is only for a handful of students who seize on the theory game playing aspect and eschew the true purpose of what policy debate is supposed to be. And other students (and coaches) stay away from policy debate in droves because they perceive it as too arcane and meaningless. And that is not as it should be. The result, fewer and fewer students are learning the real world,

logical thinking processes that go into policy decision making processes. Just imagine a teenager arguing against a family policy of a midnight curfew by telling his parents the curfew has placed the world on the road to nuclear destruction. And just imagine any legislative body attempting to determine policy having to consider whether or not implementing that policy would lead to environmental collapse.

To be sure, the effects, as best they can be predicted, of any proposed policy should be explored before adoption of the policy. If there are disadvantages those ought to be within the realm of the distinctly possible, real world possibilities. No one can go beyond the concept of risk and say any impact would be probable because we cannot predict the future. Impact possibilities should be just that rather than the absolute probables negatives now proclaim. "Adopt affirmative and nuclear war will occur" is patently faulty logic and poor argument. Do you think institute college student instructors will ever teach that? Me neither.

That answers, somewhat, the questions "what is the root cause of the decline of policy debate?" and "what are the specific practices from these causes that are destroying debate?" In sum, institutes have allowed advanced theory in argument to creep into the high school curriculum. These "cutting edge" topicality, critique, disadvantage theories are well beyond the scope of the educational intent implicit in teaching students good, logical decision making processes. It would be best if these theories were left at the university level to be shared by academics in the field to rhetoric and argumentation at their various conferences.

Solutions

The last question is, "What can be done to return policy debate to a truly valid educational activity?"

There are no clear answers. Should institutes be prohibited...or students be prohibited from debating at the interscholastic level if they attend institutes? No. In spite of the damage I see inflected on high school policy debate, I still found that the students I sent to institutes had a very good, in depth educational experience. I just had to de-program them when they came home so they could debate for our local judges. Institutes should be held accountable, however, for what they teach. What they teach should be basic debate devoid of advanced

rhetorical and argument theory such as those that have spawned the critique arguments. Institute directors should focus on the real world for a change rather than the academic.

There are other suggestions I could make to remake policy debate into an educational experience that teaches real world skills in decision making. Some are doable. Others are probably off the wall.

First, let me propose some new rules:

Rule one: No debate may be decided on theory or decision rule arguments. This would eliminate critique arguments in particular which either side will try to "sell" the judge as decision rules. In other words, just because a team asserts, "This critique is a decision rule." does not mean the judge must act on that assertion at all.

Rule two: Topicality arguments raised by negative must be based on grammatical phrases rather than single words within the resolution. That would eliminate at least some of the nit-picking obscure definitional challenges to single words.

Rule three: Debaters may not utilize preprepared briefs. All argumentation must be spoken to the judge, but debaters may read quotations from 4" x 6" cards in support of their arguments. There go the canned eight page disadvantage briefs

or

Rather than limit debaters to just cards, allow each debate team two evidence tubs for files. Just think of the back strain and excess airline baggage charges that would be eliminated.

Rule four: Change speaking times. In rebuttals give 1AR 6 minutes and 1 NR 6 minutes. Final rebuttals, summation speeches required, 4 minutes each. Final rebuttals would be restricted to summarizing the debate from a side's viewpoint. After the 2NC/CX the judges would name the issues considered crucial for their decision, and the first rebuttalists would confine their arguments to those issues. Some thought might be given to reversing the order so 1AR immediately follows the 2NC/CX. That way the judges can hear immediate responses to 2NC plan attacks.

Rule five: Require that negative argue issues of inherency and significance or grant those issues in the round by announcing they will do so.

Rule six: Do not allow debaters to ask judges for judging philosophy.

Rule seven: Instruct judges to put down their pen and stop taking notes whenever the speaking rate is too fast for comprehension.

Rule eight: Instruct judges they do not have to take the debaters' word. If they have personal knowledge (not beliefs) that indicates an argument is blatantly untrue or counter intuitive to logic and historical precedent, the judge may reject the argument and so note on the ballot.

Rule nine: Prohibit debaters from telling the judges "this is the winning argument in the round" or asserting similar are the crucial issues in the round and note them for the debaters prior to rebuttals.

Rule ten: On debate ballots elevate speaking skills to the top of the chart and award more points for effective communication than for other categories.

Example:

Ability of speaker to clearly speak and communicate arguments and evidence reading during round: 5-20 points

Ability of speaker to reason and use logical thought processes in analyzing and presenting arguments: 5-20 points.

Ability of speaker to effectively utilize evidence in formulating arguments during the round: 5-15 points.

Ability of speaker to present arguments in an organized fashion so the judge can follow where those are to be applied: 5-10 points.

Admittedly, all of this is personal opinion and curmudgeonly. There is one aspect of it all that is undeniably true, however. Policy debate at the high school level is a declining activity which engages only a handful of students nationwide. It should not be so. Rather, the thinking, decision making and other educational skills that debate can offer ought to be experienced by thousands of students nationwide.

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