

EVIDENCE AND DEBATE

by Scott C. Eagan

Competitive speech and debate has the unique position of being something that many other high school activities can't be. On one level it is a competitive activity, pitting one school against another on a battle of thoughts and logic. On the second level, and as we are all reminded in nearly every round, competitive speech and debate is an educational activity. Unfortunately though, this aspect is all too often set on the back burner and forgotten by both the student and coach. There they remain until needed. It is often interesting to note that the moment the concept of debate for educational purposes surface is when a debate team feels they are losing the advantage in the round; or when the coach needs additional funding for the team.

It is important to understand that neither element is unimportant. Competition is good and, in the long run, many students do learn a great deal. Unfortunately, many educational offenses are taking place within debate rounds. This does not mean that participants in individual events aren't being abusive. They too are committing just as many as the debaters. This article, however, will concentrate only on debate flaws.

The majority of offenses occur with the evidence used by debaters. Evidence used in rounds should not be manipulated to fit the needs of the case. This seems to be, however, the method in which debaters are cutting cards. To understand more clearly the offenses, three areas of concern will be noted: definitions, taking quotes out of context, and manipulation of statistics.

Every debate round needs

to start with a common ground. This means the resolution. Sometimes though, the resolution uses terms that need to be defined. This does not mean that a researcher can use *any* definition. The context of the resolution needs to be taken into account. If the word is being used as a noun, then it must be defined as a noun. If it is an adjective, it must be defined as an adjective.

Often times a word has several possible meanings. Once again, the context in which the word is found must be considered. If it is a legal definition, then it is not appropriate to use a philosophical or medical definition. Along the same line, combining definitions, using synonyms interchangeably, or taking definitions out of context

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is also abusive. If there is a contradiction to your case in one part of a definition leaving it out does not eliminate the contradiction.

Definitions are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to evidence abuses. Probably the largest area of concern is the misinterpretation of the text. Although the entire article can not be quoted, it is still important to consider the original intent of the author. Just because a single sentence in the article supports a particular position does not mean that the author supported the theory. They may be describing the opposing view or clarifying a particular point. Once again the context needs to be taken into account.

Statistical information is the final area where abuse

occurs. Statistics may be skewed due to the author's personal biases. It is very important to understand that for any single item, there can be many different statistics.

One card from the 1991 - 1992 topic is a prime example of this problem. According to Maria Forcarinis:

"Right now, according to current data, 50% of the poor spent over 70% of their income on housing. What this means is there are some 16 million people who are in immediate risk of homelessness."

This brings up several questions to be considered. First of all, how *many* people are truly involved? What is the *criteria* for being classified as "poor"? What was the "housing" money *actually* paying for. The use of percentages effectively clouds any real significance to the statistics.

To add to this confusion is understanding Ms. Foscarinis and her credentials. This card is taken from the Director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty who happens to be presenting information to the House Committee on the Budget. HMMMMMMMM, could this mean there is a slight bias, or that just maybe these numbers are the "worst case scenario"?

When it comes down to it, just because a particular card has words in it that support a debate position, does not mean that it is accurate. It is not proper to manipulate evidence just to get the desired result. If both the coaches and debaters keep this in mind, there is a chance that debate can be both a competitive and an educational activity.

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