



Strategies For Educational Debate

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Preface

After a considerable amount of thought on the subject of violence, I have come to the conclusion that the survival of our society depends upon rational, thorough, and intelligent debate of controversial issues. Violence and physical force cannot and must not be viewed as legitimate alternatives. In fact, it is my opinion that resolving complex issues by any method short of the rigorous requirements of debate will reduce the likelihood of appropriate policy or sound judgment; both basic factors in the continuance of an orderly and just social structure.

All reasonable citizens, then, should take it upon themselves to understand this essential process. This book is written with the hope that those who read it will learn to *appreciate* and *use* debate.

C. WILLIAM COLBURN
Ann Arbor, Michigan



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I

Educational Debate: Basic Considerations

Answers to the question "Why study debate?" vary from individual to individual. Some students are motivated to seek a greater understanding of debate in order to do well in interschool or intramural competition; others have an intellectual curiosity about argumentation; and another group can be categorized as those not wanting to fail an examination in their debate course. Whatever the reason, it is important for the student who is undertaking the study of debate to do so with a willingness to examine the activity step by step. Just as in mathematics, the language arts, and the applied sciences, debate has a number of principles upon which the activity is based. Understanding debate depends upon a systematic investigation of each of these principles.

In this first chapter, a very brief historical development and some assumptions underlying educational debate are presented. Principles inherent in this discussion are presented at the end of the chapter in the form of recommended approaches (strategies) for the practical and/or theoretical utilization of educational debate.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Those who have investigated the history of educational debate have had difficulty determining specific "starting points" in the evolution of the activity as we know it today. There is general agreement, however, that debate has progressed through four distinct periods: (1) literary societies from the founding of our colonial colleges to 1895; (2) trian-

gular leagues from 1895 through 1920; (3) forum debates, 1920 to 1930; (4) debate tournaments, 1930 to date.¹ A brief review of each of these periods may aid you in gaining some sense of historical perspective for educational debate.

Literary Societies

Literary societies, which were an integral part of our colonial colleges, fulfilled a social as well as intellectual need for the nineteenth-century college student. A typical society meeting would include devotionals, musical numbers, papers and speeches, group or choral readings, a skit, a debate, group singing, and a business meeting. It is important to note, however, that the debate which featured "attack and defense" of a particular issue by two to eight different speakers, followed by questions from the audience, was always the major attraction. The earliest intercollegiate debate is reported to have taken place in Evanston, Illinois, on November 29, 1872, when the Adelpic Society of Northwestern University debated the Athenaeum Society of Chicago University.² Typical of these first debates, no decision was rendered. The first intercollegiate debate in which a decision was given is thought to have taken place on May 5, 1881, when the Phi Alpha Society of Illinois College met the Adelphi Society of Knox College.³ The very next day, another decision debate was held between the Peiehessophian Society of Kirkpatrick Chapel, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Philomathean Society of New York University.⁴ Through participation in literary society debating, students gained an appreciation of various speaking techniques and strategies. To improve their abilities and to do well in their competition with other societies, students invited guest lecturers skilled in the art of elocution and debate to conduct "short courses" on their campuses. The evolutionary trend from this point can best be described by a passage from L. Lamont Okey's dissertation, "A Descriptive Biographical Study of Thomas Clarkson Trueblood":

¹ This organization follows a pattern established by W. R. Diem in his "History of Intercollegiate Debating in Ohio," *The Central States Speech Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November, 1949), 43-53.

² Otto F. Bauer, "The Harvard-Yale Myth," *The AFA Register*, Vol. 11 (Winter, 1963), 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴ Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, *Decision by Debate* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1963), p. 303.

Trueblood came to the campus [The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan] in 1884 and offered, with the blessing of the University, a course in elocution—something that they did not have and something that the students wanted. Out of that single non-credit course developed credit courses in speech and, finally, a well rounded department of speech, which was the first in any large university. As head of this new kind of department, Trueblood became nationally known as a teacher of debate and oratory.⁵

With courses in argumentation instituted in college and university curricula, systematic and directed training in debate was established.

Triangular Leagues

The competitive spirit which first brought students together in debates before their literary society and then prompted debates between the societies was now channeled into debates between the universities. Triangular leagues were formed and between the years of 1895 through 1920 were extremely popular. The “triangular” concept allowed a school to have one debate away and one debate at home each year. Campus-wide tryouts, several months of research, and a number of arduous practice debates preceded each league debate. In many cases the leagues were developed to coincide with the schools’ athletic rivals. In their book, *The Big Ten*, Kenneth L. (Tug) Wilson and Jerry Brondfield illustrate the closeness of this union when they describe the very first intercollegiate basketball game ever played under conditions similar to the sport as we know it today—five players to a side with rules and regulations enforced by a referee. This game was played the night of January 18, 1896, in Iowa City, Iowa. In their description they note:

That afternoon a train had brought into Iowa City nine youths from the University of Chicago. Four of them made up the Chicago debating team which was to engage in forensic combat that afternoon with a Hawkeye foursome. The other five made up the Maroon basketball team that would meet five Iowa students who were representing the local Y.M.C.A. as well as the University.⁶

⁵ L. Lamont Okey, “A Descriptive Biographical Study of Thomas Clarkson Trueblood” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1935), p. 185.

⁶ Kenneth L. (Tug) Wilson and Jerry Brondfield, *The Big Ten* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), pp. 54–55.

The account of the contest detailed Iowa losing the game by a 13 to 12 score; but more important for those interested in debate, Wilson and Brondfield added:

Iowa, incidentally, was able to salvage an even split for the day. In the afternoon its debaters won the match with Chicago, upholding the affirmative on the question that "Further Territorial Expansion of the United States is Undesirable."

The forensic victory perhaps could have been a source of some concern to people in Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona which, although territories, had not yet been admitted to the Union as states.⁷

During this period of triangular league debating, the popularity of literary societies began to decline. In their place, however, honorary forensic societies were established—Delta Sigma Rho in 1906, Tau Kappa Alpha in 1908, and Pi Kappa Delta in 1915.⁸ Local chapters of these honoraries were established on campuses throughout the country and have become a valuable part of educational debate as we know it today.

Forum Debates

A third distinct period of educational debate developed shortly after World War I. Forum debates, which called for no decision, became popular. These debates were held before audiences and were always held away from campus. Forum debating did not replace interschool competition; rather it served to supplement interschool competition. The popularity of forum debate can probably be attributed to a desire on the part of directors of debate to minimize the competitive nature of the activity.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸ L. Leroy Cowperthwaite and A. Craig Baird, "Intercollegiate Debating," in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.), pp. 267–68. In order to complete the historical foundation, it should be known that Phi Rho Pi, the National Honorary Forensic Society for Junior Colleges, was founded in 1928 by Roland Shackson, coach of forensics at Grand Rapids Junior College, Michigan. In addition, it should be noted that Delta Sigma Rho and Tau Kappa Alpha merged in 1963. National Archives are maintained at Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana, and the organization is known as Delta Sigma Rho–Tau Kappa Alpha (DSR–TKA).

High school debate was well established by the 1920s; and, in fact, the founding of the National Forensic League dates back to 1925.⁹ From the first high school debate, which took place shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, to the mid-1920s, the growth of inter-scholastic debate closely paralleled the development of college debate. In the era of forum debate, records indicate that high school students did participate in audience debates before various community organizations.

Debate Tournaments

Debate tournaments, which characterized the fourth period (1930 to the present), were actually popularized as a result of economic conditions brought about by the depression. Although the first tournament was held at Southwestern College, Wenfield, Kansas, in 1923, the tournament format was not widely utilized until the early 1930s.¹⁰ In 1931 the National Forensic League sponsored its first National Speech Tournament, an event which has been held annually since that year for outstanding high school students.¹¹ The rise of tournaments, as mentioned earlier, was clearly related to the economics of the times; directors of debate sought a situation in which maximum debate training could be realized at the lowest possible cost. From 1930 to today, tournaments have continued to grow in popularity. In fact, today it is hard to imagine the period before tournaments. To think of a debate season of three or four debates as the total for the entire year is difficult to comprehend.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DEBATE

When placed in historical perspective, it is clear that the immediate purpose of educational debate is to provide students with an arena where particular skills may be practiced and evaluated. No activity,

⁹ Frank M. Rarig and Halbert S. Greaves, "National Speech Organizations and Speech Education," in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1954), p. 511.

¹⁰ Ehninger and Brockriede, *Decision by Debate*, p. 303.

¹¹ Don F. Faules, "The Development of Forensic Activities," in *Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking*, ed. Don F. Faules and Richard D. Rieke (Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbooks Company, 1968), p. 26.

however, could have survived over a century of societal and educational evolution with its sole virtue being the provision of an arena for talk. Debate has flourished because it is recognized as an activity which teaches students the value of sound research techniques; provides an experience which demands solid analysis, clear organization, and logical thinking; rewards creativity and imagination; and requires a thorough understanding of the communication process. No single extra-curricular activity, with the exception of debate, provides the structure for combining the "basics" of education. Obviously, any activity which affords a student the opportunity to put into practice so many of the precepts of his total educational experience will continue to play an important role in our educational system. Debate will continue to stand the test of time.

ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING EDUCATIONAL DEBATE

Basic to educational debate are three assumptions which must be granted in order for it to be considered a meaningful and purposeful activity. The assumptions are:

- (1) Educational debate is free of a particular subject (informational) matter.
- (2) Educational debate is a cooperative activity.
- (3) Educational debate depends upon the notion that man should be a rational being.

Further consideration of each of these points will clarify their relationship to debate.

... free of a particular subject matter

Educational debate is a generic species of deliberation. This statement simply means that debate is not limited to a particular subject matter. A wide range of topics can appropriately be considered and resolved by debate. While this particular notion does not seem to be all that important, one should not dismiss this aspect of educational debate. As a matter of fact, the value of debate is undeniably linked to the topic-free nature of the activity. When one considers that the world's store of knowledge doubled between 1750 and 1900, again between 1900 and 1950, again between 1950 and 1960, and again every five years since 1960, it is obvious that in the future new issues and evidence will con-

front us. Information which we now have at our disposal, in all likelihood, will not aid us in resolving problems of the future. What will aid in resolving future problems, however, are the skills learned in debate as applied to the "new" information. A knowledge of research techniques, analysis, organization, logical thinking, and communication skills will not be outmoded by the expansion of information. The basic skills learned through participation in debate will continue to serve the debater throughout his life.

... is a cooperative activity

To the casual observer debate may seem to be an uncooperative activity, in fact, at times a truly hostile activity. Close inspection of educational debate, however, indicates that it is a cooperative endeavor. For in its broader framework debate takes place in a setting which, by design, allows for positions to be advanced fully and fairly. In addition, decisions in educational debate are rendered by a source (the judge) outside the parties contesting the proposition. Finally, debaters have, by tradition, agreed to abide by the decision of the outside source as binding. These procedural matters clearly demonstrate the cooperative nature of debate.

A second way in which we can talk of debate as being cooperative is by examining the product of debate: a rational decision. Basic to educational debate is the precept that ideas or propositions are not advanced as an end in themselves. Debaters advocate positions as a means to an end. Hopefully, that end is a rational decision which will serve to bring about a "better world."

In their book *Decision by Debate*, Ehninger and Brockriede pose a situation which illustrates the above comment:

Imagine a party of mountain climbers, concerned for their mutual safety. They test two ropes in every conceivable way, and then select for their common use the rope that proves stronger. In debate, two parties, concerned for their mutual well-being or the well-being of society as a whole, assume that the view which better withstands exhaustive criticism will more often than not prove to be the "truth" or to "work out" in practice. And just as the principal test used on the ropes is to see how much strain each will bear, so in debate the principal test of an idea is to see how well it will stand up under attack.¹²

¹² Ehninger and Brockriede, *Decision by Debate*, p. 20.

Educational debate is a cooperative activity; to approach it in any other way is to demean its purpose.

... depends upon the notion that man should be a rational being

Whether or not man is a rational being remains a moot question. But it seems clear that man's predictability, if we can equate that with rationality, is the only guarantee we have for an ordered world. Furthermore, if we are to proceed toward rational decisions in our world, participants in the decision-making process have got to assume that man should be a rational being. Given someone who is a "stable individual," emotionally and mentally, we must assume that if he has the information that driving an automobile at a high rate of speed into a bridge abutment will result in almost certain death, then he will not drive his automobile at a high rate of speed into a bridge abutment. This is not to say that the individual will not crash into the abutment, but clearly he should not, especially if he wishes to avoid grave personal injury. While this rather exaggerated point serves as an atypical debate example, it is not difficult to project the principle of the point into the educational debate setting. When supporting a particular position on a controversial issue, a debater uses all of the persuasive and logical tools at his disposal to urge the outside agent to accept his point of view. If the debater's logic and reasoning are sound, his point supported by the best of all possible evidence, and he has presented his case clearly, he can assume that his position should be accepted. For debate to operate under any other assumption would reduce the activity to mere folly. For man to assume that all other men are totally unpredictable would reduce society to a chaotic state.

STRATEGIES

From these brief opening remarks concerning the historical development of debate and the assumptions underlying the activity, two principles seem to be particularly relevant. They are offered as suggested strategies for the student beginning his or her study of debate.

(1) *Accept debate as it has evolved.* The fact that debate has developed in the academic community has important ramifications. Educational debate has been fostered and nourished by those interested in bettering their students' education. With few exceptions, those who now direct the activity are also dedicated to the educational value

of debate. Students should view debate as a means of demonstrating their abilities. As an opening strategy, regardless of your reason for studying debate, accept it as an activity which has evolved in an academic community and is designed to serve that community.

(2) *Base your study of debate on the assumptions underlying the activity.* Learning the elements of a topic-free discipline, gaining an appreciation for the “larger framework” of cooperation, and understanding the rationality of man are all goals to be realized by participation in debate. All of these factors are *ultimate* values of debate. Nonetheless, the beginning debater should be mindful of the goals which are related to the assumptions underlying debate. Preconceived notions which are contradictory to these assumptions can only serve as a source of interference for the person who seeks to understand and eventually profit from educational debate.

STUDY QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 1

Study Questions

1. Of what importance are the skills of debate to the maintenance of a democratic society?
2. What activities in our society are related to the skills of debating? What jobs or occupations?
3. Why has debate prospered in an educational setting?
4. What do you see as the function of debate in each of the four periods of its history discussed in this chapter?

Exercises

1. Read the transcript of the educational debate which is printed in Appendix D of this book. Write a brief statement presenting your impressions of the debate.
2. State as precisely as possible five practical benefits which can result from studying and participating in educational debate.
3. Make a list of traits which you feel are valuable to a leader. Star the traits that you believe can be more fully developed by participation in educational debate.
4. Write a one-page essay describing what you feel would be the state of affairs in the world if man suddenly abandoned the use and application of logic.