

Policy Debate

A Distinguished Historical Tradition

by Cindy Burgett

Policy debate, sometimes called cross-examination (CX) debate or switch-side debate, has a distinguished historical tradition. Organized debate is first recorded in ancient Athens, and more than two thousand years later, the first national high school topic was published in America. Organized debating societies are known throughout history, especially in the university setting. What is this thing called policy debate and why has it endured the test of time?

Policy debate is a highly structured discussion of a predetermined topic concerning a policy. Essentially, debaters talk about changing the way things are done in some specific topic area. That topic area is chosen by debate schools nationwide and it changes each academic year. As an example, the 2007-2008 topic concerns what policy the United States federal government should choose to increase its public health assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa.

To understand policy debate, it's important to understand the basic structure of a debate. First, policy debate involves teams made up of two people who debate together against other teams of two people at tournaments. Tournaments are made up of rounds, and in each round one team of two people debates another team of two people from a different school. All of the teams at the tournament are debating at the same time in different classrooms, so if there are thirty teams attending a tournament, there will be fifteen debates going on during a round. Usually each team debates between three and six rounds at a tournament. There are two sides in a debate, the affirmative and the negative. The affirmative proposes a policy that concerns some aspect of the resolution, and the negative opposes that solution from a number of different argumentative positions. In most places, a team is expected to uphold a different side of the resolution in each round they debate, so a team must be prepared to both advocate a policy (be affirmative) and to oppose policies that other teams propose (be negative). Each side in the round speaks according to a schedule and questions each other in cross-examination periods following the speeches. Listening to the debate is a judge or critic, who has a ballot and decides which team did the better debating, based on the quality of each team's argumentation, speaking skills, and general persuasiveness. This ballot is handed into a tabulation room, where the host school keeps track of wins and losses, and at the end of the tournament, the teams with the best win-loss records either enter elimination rounds or get awards.

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The idea in a debate round is not to verbally browbeat your opponent into mush, but to have an educated discussion about the good and bad aspects of change. To avoid having a debate turn into a yelling match, each side speaks according to a schedule for a limited amount of time in speeches called constructives, and rebuttals, with cross-examinations happening after each constructive. Each individual has one eight minute constructive, after which s/he answers questions, then asks questions after a constructive speech by a member of the other team, and finally gives one five minute rebuttal. These are maximum time limits.

While all of that may seem complicated, it's really pretty easy once a person gets to see how it works. But just understanding the rules of the game and how the game came about isn't enough to make a person a good debater. To debate well, one needs the ability to research information on the topic, to organize that information, and to craft argumentation from that information. Learning to do effective research is one of the most important skills a debater develops. Just as important to being a good debater is being able to articulate clear and logical arguments that you have crafted in a way that is convincing to a judge. Thinking strategically about argumentation is also a skill that will help a person win debates. Making intelligent arguments, engaging the other team's arguments, and telling a judge in a clear way why your arguments are superior in a round are the keys to winning.

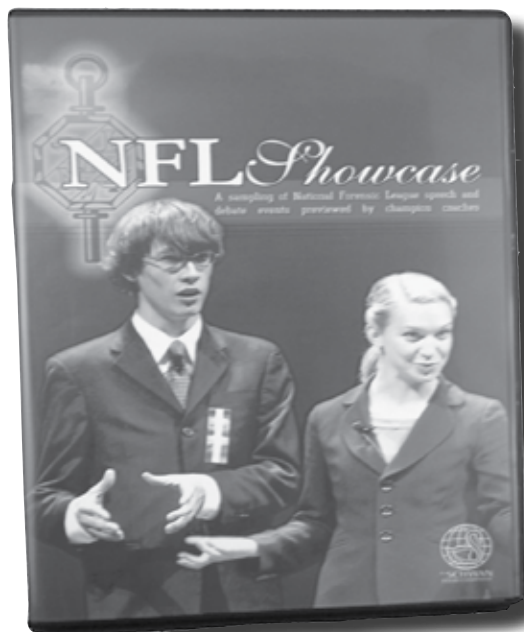
Still, students have a variety of different types of debate from which to choose – Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum and Congress are all very interesting as well – so what makes policy a good choice for certain people over the others? If you enjoy working on a team, as opposed to working independently, policy debate can be a great way to make a life-long friend (or sometimes, not!). While being a great public speaker is a plus in all three kinds of debate, policy debate, at its top levels, requires you to be able to talk at very quick rates rather than conversational speed. It seems like a crazy skill to develop, but it makes it more possible for you to run and to juggle a larger load of argumentation that other forms of debate just don't require. All types of debate require critical thinking, but the ability to think strategically in very complex ways is

especially valuable in policy debate. It would be fair to say that policy debate is more cut throat in terms of its competitiveness than Congress debate is, and while Lincoln-Douglas debaters may disagree, for most people, policy debate seems a bit more intense and specialized than other kinds of debate.

Being a successful debater in any of the debate events takes a bit of talent, which a person can hone over time, and it takes a lot of work. The Puritan Work Ethic holds true in policy debate over time: if you are talented but lazy, eventually other talented people will pass you by. If you are not a “natural” but you work hard, your work will, over time, see a return. Most things that are worthwhile take some effort, and debate is well worth that effort. Debaters learn more about domestic and international affairs, economics and politics and especially about the topic area than any of their non-debating peers. Their ability to express themselves verbally is far above average. It’s very empowering – especially for a young person who doesn’t have many opportunities like this -- to get the opportunity to speak to a critic uninterrupted for an extended period of time. Also, it’s a great adrenaline rush to engage in what some have called “full contact social studies” with some of the brightest minds around.

Debate is also a great place to meet interesting people and make life-long friends. What better way to bond with folks than a long van ride to a tournament? Sitting around in the squad room and talking with teammates about debate and non-debate things can be entertaining and enlightening. For lots of folks the squad room becomes their home away from home and the debate squad their extended family. There are worse ways you could spend your time, but not many better ones.

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