

Assisted Rhetorical Suicide:

A Response to O'Rourke and the Future of Policy Debate in Ohio

by Jason Habig

No matter what forensics event you judge, you are bound to get “that round” from time to time, which pits two (or four or six) relatively inexperienced competitors against each other. While most coaches recognize the importance of these rounds for the education of the youngest in our community as a way to grow the next batch of state and national champions, few would want to showcase such rounds to the outside community as a model of our best efforts. Yet based on watching just one tournament of Policy Debate containing these sorts of developmental rounds, Professor O'Rourke formed a lasting opinion of the entire activity throughout the state of Ohio. While the National Forensic League's decision in the December *Rostrum* to publish his article, which contained such narrow attacks on one activity in one state, is disappointing, the real danger of O'Rourke's argument is that it obscures the quality that still exists in Policy Debate in Ohio and nationwide as well as recent efforts to improve the activity.

Ironically, attacks like those of O'Rourke have done more (and unfortunately might do more) to make Policy Debate into an exclusive activity than legions of college debaters could ever do. There are three serious problems with O'Rourke's arguments about the demise of Policy Debate in Ohio and the corresponding lessons that he draws about the health of Lincoln Douglas. First, to argue that speed reading is even remotely responsible for the decline of Policy Debate in Ohio lacks even a cursory understanding of the activity. Moreover, while some of O'Rourke's advice about how to make Lincoln Douglas thrive has merit, ironically it was that same advice that he disregarded when he approached Policy Debate for the first time. Finally, and most perniciously, articles like O'Rourke's are not only misinformed but dangerous because of the mythological power that they have within the debate communities like that in Ohio.

On the issue of speed-reading in Policy Debate, numerous and credible studies have argued for the critical thinking and persuasive value of such a practice.¹ Yet my purpose here is not to defend speed reading but to argue that it is only tangential to Policy Debate as an activity. While Professor O'Rourke rightly points to a final Policy round from The Glenbrooks as an example of speed reading in all its glory (and flaws), he fails to recognize that those same debaters were likely placing in the final rounds at NFL nationals arguing stock issues at the pace of a small town lawyer. In Ohio, the teams that win our state tournament, including the Policy team from Professor O'Rourke's school last year, have not only to adjust to the speed preferred by college debaters but also to the style of several community judges. The reality of Policy Debate, and really any style of debate, is that students want to win, and to do so they must adapt to the peculiarities of their judges. As someone who has spent the last fourteen years of my life involved in Policy Debate, I speak for every Policy coach in Ohio when I say that I want every type of judge, including those who abhor speed reading, judging my students regularly, as persuading an audience and adjusting communication to the demands of different rhetorical styles is one of the most important values that Policy Debate can teach.

Because I believe that debaters in all categories should have to adapt to a wide variety of judging styles, I agree with O'Rourke's recommendations to encourage a diverse judging pool for Lincoln Douglas. Yet when his inclusion in a Policy judging pool would have had the effect he desires for LD, like many others, O'Rourke leapt back for the comfortable and familiar. The students in the Policy Debate round O'Rourke describes in his article were doing exactly what all effective communicators do; by asking judges for paradigms, Policy debaters are seeing what arguments in their rhetorical sheaths will be most effective in persuading their audience. If Professor O'Rourke had

stated that he preferred a slower rate of delivery and a focus of the debate around the affirmative case, he likely would have seen a very different debate; if the teams chose to disregard his preferences once he stated them, then they deserved to lose the debate, period. Rather than seeing the lack of adaptation as an insult or an affront made out of stubbornness, debaters who speed read in front of an audience not receptive to it are really just showing the poor judgment that teenagers can exhibit from time to time. I severely doubt that any Policy coach worth his/her salt, no matter how speed focused, would endorse such behavior. Yet because so many have viewed Policy the same way as O'Rourke for so long, Policy Debate is increasingly becoming a niche event; if teams and coaches with diverse styles chose to participate in sufficient numbers, they could make Policy into whatever style they would like. When the Policy Debate community in Ohio, or any state, shrinks to the size where one style of judge predominates, all of the students lose out on these essential adaptation skills that are the reason most Policy Debate coaches in Ohio went into the activity in the first place. Ohio is quickly approaching this threshold, as the only ones still willing to commit the time and scarce resources necessary to do Policy Debate well, are those veterans of the activity. Because many of these people are tolerant of speed reading, the false perception has been created that speed is essential for success in Policy.

This leads to the biggest problem with O'Rourke's objections to Policy Debate. For while he correctly points to declining support for Policy Debate in Ohio, he completely misunderstands its cause; because so many others uncritically accept his analysis, O'Rourke's arguments will only serve to feed people's misunderstandings about Policy and further weaken its support. When you talk to Policy Debate coaches in Ohio about what is responsible for declining numbers, answers include a lack of financial resources in a state that continues to have an

unconstitutional form of school funding, an increase in the number of other, less time-consuming forensic options for students, a lack of coaches willing to make the time commitment, and the strict limits on school transportation more than 120 miles outside of our state lines. Yet when you ask some non-Policy forensic coaches, they likely will respond with some of the same straw man arguments that O'Rourke employs. This disconnect is troubling because it illustrates a sharp division within our community and perpetuates the myths and rumors about what "good" Policy Debate looks like, which are killing support for the activity in Ohio. Moreover, O'Rourke's claim that Policy Debate is becoming the stomping ground of elite private schools is sheer fiction, as almost 75 percent of the Policy Debate teams qualified to Ohio's state tournament in 2008 were public.² Successful Urban Debate Leagues, many with a Policy Debate focus, have been successful throughout the nation, and efforts are underway to bring such a program to Cleveland. Organizations like the National Debate Coaches Association have made lesson plans and prepared evidence for Policy Debate free with universal access,

beginning to eliminate some of the financial barriers that have hampered Policy Debate in Ohio and nationwide. Clearly many within the Policy Debate community are taking the steps necessary to increase participation in the activity by addressing these real causes of the activity's contraction; the misunderstandings created by articles like O'Rourke's hinder this progress significantly.

Yet despite the negativity of O'Rourke's article, and much of my response, there is the possibility for a happy ending to this story. Given the wide ranging academic benefits of Policy Debate, hopefully new and existing programs will take the opportunity to try Policy Debate. Despite my vigorous disagreement with his assessment of Policy, I would still love to have Professor O'Rourke in the back of the room judging my Policy teams, as they would learn as much from adjusting to his style and preferences as they would from any college debater who accepts speed debate. Celebrating adaptation and the diversity inherent to Policy Debate is essential to growing the activity and increasing its support. Hopefully O'Rourke has created a space for dialogue that will help to reinvigorate policy in Ohio and nationwide. ■

References

- ¹ For one example of an insightful defense of speed reading in Policy Debate, please see Ohio's own Darren Smith, Debate Coach at Centerville High School, "The Real Policy Debate Dilemma," *Rostrum*, June 2003.
- ² Results packet from the 2008 OHSSL State Tournament.

About the Author

Jason Habig is the Speech and Debate Coach for Hathaway Brown School in Ohio and also serves as North Coast District Chairman.

Editor's Note: The NFL chooses to serve the forensic community by publishing articles from its members, as Habig correctly indicates. The views of contributors to Rostrum are not necessarily the views of the NFL, its staff, or its members.



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Do you know a Policy debater who displays excellence in and passion for debate, a commitment to helping others, love and respect for the Policy Debate community, and dedication to maintaining friendship despite the pressures of competition?

If so, we invite you to nominate one individual no later than MARCH 15 for the 2010 TOC Julia Burke Award. Any Policy debater who is eligible or expected to be eligible to compete in the Tournament of Champions may be nominated (preferably including examples, anecdotes, and the identity of the person submitting the nomination). Nominations may be submitted at www.JuliaBurkeFoundation.org.