

To Exist or Not – that is the Question?

by

Paul Harens

Policy Debate is dying. Contrary to what Ms. Peters thinks there is a problem and something needs to be done. Yes there are lots of different events, but the primary event that made the NFL what it is today is Policy Debate. However, before I get yelled at, jumped, or mugged realize several things:

1. I do believe in this activity or I would have left it a long time ago (29 ½ years). I have coached or I am coaching: Debate, Interp, Oratory, Extemp, and Student Congress.

... "Policy Debate is worth saving. It is the basis of thinking and argumentation that students have and/or could use for the rest of their lives" ...

2. My novice debaters do the research - they do the work..

3. I teach basics and never even talk theory, speed or spread (they learn that from other places).

This new event is scaring many people and justifiably so. We have Ted Turner Controversy Debate because Policy Debate has evolved into something that is not real world or real communication. Some of us are dinosaurs and have watched the evolution (or de-evolution) of Policy Debate. Be honest, Policy Debate is close to its last breath. Schools are dropping programs, numbers are down, budgets are getting cut, and schools are not starting policy programs. There are NFL districts that don't even offer Policy Debate at their qualifying tournament.

The reason for this sad state is that we, the coaches (and/or judges), have allowed it to happen. We allow the speed, spread, weird arguments, theory arguments, no case arguments, effects topicality, squirrely cases, critiques, and the lack of communication/explanation of the real issues within the topic (to name a few).

A clear decision needs to be made on whether Policy Debate is worth saving. **I think it is.** It is the basis of thinking and argumentation that students have and/or could use for the rest of their lives (but not the way it is

now). If an educated person cannot walk into a policy round and understand what is going on, it must change or die.

There are a number of different styles (cliques – as one author has put it) of Policy Debate. To me they are: small school, large school, state, regional-states, and national circuit. The big question is: How long can any one of the cliques survive if others die? With the number of schools/states/NFL districts that are dropping Policy Debate we need to do something to change that trend.

So, what do we do? Several questions (and editorial remarks) need to be answered if we want policy debate to continue.

1. Will we continue to accept cases that skirt the resolution or not debate the resolution?

When someone takes a small minute portion of the topic (i.e. – fetal alcohol – hermaphrodites – transgender prisoners – tele-pharmaceuticals) that no can really debate and they win we have a problem. What's wrong with just debating the topic?

2. Will we continue to select resolutions that require novice topic

limits?

Look at the resolutions that are offered for debate. They are so broad and unfocused we have the weird stuff coming out of the woodwork. We are required to do a foreign topic every third year. It has been said that we need these resolutions for the education of debaters. What happens when we have no debaters to educate because of the resolutions?

3. Will we continue to ignore the basics of debate?

Paper is being wasted by not flowing a debate. The first CX question is usually, "Can I have a copy of the first AC?" Then everything is off case arguments. You can watch negative teams and about half the time they don't even flow. What ever happened to listening and flowing?

4. How fast will we let them go?

Right now we have asthmatic delivery, no eye contact, no real analysis or explanation of the evidence. Speed kills the activity and that is the reality of things. Any speech that is given should be a speech to convince. If we can't understand you and you don't explain how can you convince anyone of anything or why should you win?

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5. How many handbook companies are we going to support?

We have allowed the companies to run what we do and how we do it. How many handbooks does your team have? If we really debated the topic, how many would you really need?

6. Will we let college judges/debate camps select what will happen in our activity?

These college students come in and tell the debaters this is how it is done. The HS students come back and tell the others and we get what we have now. I used to take half of the season to unteach what some of my best debaters had been taught in camp. Not all are that way, but most are.

7. Will we, as coaches/judges, take the stand and stop what is destroying policy debate?

So, now the question is what do we do? It's simple; **we do a switch in paradigms**. We become interventionist if we have to. As one popular commercial has put it, "Just say NO!" Say no to the speed, spread, weird arguments, everything off case, the exchange of the first AC, we stop the things that are destroying policy debate. It is also called judge adaptation.

Let's return debate back to what it should be, the clash of opinion that calls for the attempt to convince. No matter what anyone says, it is a communication activity. It always has been and always will be a communication activity. It is not just issues and evidence. It is what you say, how you say it, and how you explain it.

Policy debate is worthwhile or some of us have wasted most of our adult lives teaching, coaching, and judging this activity. I don't want to see it die because it has a place in education as long as it can educate. Right now, there's not much education.

I have left out one other important factor. It is not definable, you can't quantify it, but with the kids and some coaches it is there. I call it the **fun factor**. Two basic rules in all of my years of coaching:

1. Did you learn anything?
2. Did you have fun?

For many of the students it isn't fun anymore. For coaches, like myself, it isn't fun anymore. If something isn't fun or you're not learning, why do it? This is one big reason why many coaches and students are no longer doing Policy Debate.

So, it is now into the laps of all coaches and judges. Do we save the activity or do we let it die? Your choice, your decision, but it needs to be made now or it will be too late. Don't try and justify the education of all the speed, spread, critiques, off case, theory, and the list could go on and on. The bottom line, do you want the activity to survive? If so, do something about it, if not, just keep going the way you are going and shortly it will be gone. My vote is to change and save the activity. What's yours?

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subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations. Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of the terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce. Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah to "undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free." And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

Unfortunately, not all communication is like the above. For instance, a university student declared, "Henry rushed out of this mechanical and monotonous society to get rid of restraints, and he dared challenging sea life." The statement is confusing because of the mixed verb forms. The student would have been clearer by saying, "To rush out of this mechanical and monotonous society to rid himself of restraints, Henry dared to challenge sea life."

A university freshman reported to the fraternity he was hoping to pledge: "I enjoy hunting moose, hiking in forests and rock concerts. I also like to play the piano and be at tournament chess." For better parallelism and clarity, he could have said, "I like hunting moose, hiking in forests, attending rock concerts, playing the piano, and playing or observing tournament chess."

An audience distracted by uncoordinated relations can fail to comprehend what immediately follows the structural errors, because it is too engaged in trying to extract the sense of the errors. The portion not understood could be the thesis, or key idea, of the address. When an audience fails to comprehend message, oratory fails.

CONCLUSION

Only by striving for clear imagery and proper reference, subordination, and parallelism can orators hope to be persuasive. If forensic coaches seem a bit relentless in their criticism, orators should meditate on Shakespeare's line in The Merry Wives of Windsor (V .iii), namely, "Better a little chiding [during practice] than a great deal of heartbreak [from poor performance at a forensic tournament]."

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