

Realizing the Treasured Values of NPDA Parliamentary Debate

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A half-score years ago, the desire for certain educational benefits inspired both the inauguration and explosive popularity of parliamentary debate as designed by the founders of NPDA. Those were the values that drew me back into debate coaching after nearly 30 years. By articulating those values here, I hope to make it easier for the community to continue realizing them more fully.

Certainly, all forms of academic debate furnish important educational benefits to student participants as well as to school programs. It does not disparage any debate format to observe that each provides its own special profile of educational values. A program director's thoughtful choice of format is based on the specific educational outcomes sought for students, and does not imply the superiority or inferiority of any format.

Today, some fear that the tug of natural competitive instincts is steering parliamentary debate in a conservative and "counter-revolutionary" direction, back toward re-adopting those forms and practices which prompted the revolution that "parli" originally was. It's easy to find among coaches of parliamentary debate a resigned feeling that the event is changing irresistibly in ways that the special values accounting for its popularity will be lost. Recalling the evolution of other debate formats launched from the same educational impulses from which NPDA sprang, they predict that in another decade NPDA will have evolved to a state where it has little perceivable uniqueness, and so it will be merged into a conglomerate "NPDA-CEDA-NDT" organization. This paper attempts to reassure those who treasure NPDA's original purpose that such changes are not at all inevitable, and to encourage those who have stewardship of the event — coaches and participants — to value, maintain, teach, and expand its unique characteristics.

I hope also to make clear what kind of work will be needed to do so. Certainly there is room, perhaps even a need, for change and evolution in parliamentary debate. But I submit it should be in the direction of more fully realizing the unique potentials of the form, rather than back toward that from which the form emerged a decade ago. Such change requires stretching ourselves, coaches and debaters, into new areas of learning and practice well beyond "the way we used to do it."

Hence this attempt to articulate parli's special and unique values. In the tradition of parliamentary debate, what appear below are not meant to be rules. Often they describe abstractions that defy clear definitions. Sometimes the difference between an "ideal" and deviation from it appears not as a clear line but as a gray area where reasonable judgments differ. No enforcement mechanism is envisioned, or even possible, beyond the consensus of the community and its commitment to maintain the unique educational values of the activity.

Please do not misunderstand this document as discouraging experimentation, since it is the wish of NPDA to encourage all forms and formats of academic debating. But as we experiment, we should be careful not to lose that which we value. There is more than one kind of "good debate." What follows is meant to describe the conditions in which "good *parliamentary* debate" occurs.

Ethical Discourse

Parliamentary debate (and this should be said of other formats as well) guides students in developing ethical discourse, as opposed to sophistry. Ethical discourse explores significant public or intellectual issues honestly in pursuit of truth and/or other noble ends. Sophistry seeks merely to win using any means available.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

providing students an opportunity to explore a wide variety of public and intellectual issues, understanding them in all their complexity while searching, by means of free and open discourse, for useful solutions, worthy values, and noble ideals.

We risk losing this educational value when...

...debate is thought or spoken of as "all about winning" or "doing whatever it takes to win the round."

...debate training involves developing a cafeteria of tricks and twists designed simply to win the round.

... debaters frame their appeal to the judge in terms of "we win this round" rather than "our position on this public issue is sound." ...

debaters choose tactics designed solely to disadvantage opponents rather than to provide a cogent discussion of the real-world issues embodied in the topic (for example, the tactic known as "spread"). ... resolutions which clearly designate an important current public issue are interpreted in a way designed to take the opposition by surprise by avoiding the clearly designated issue.

... resolutions which clearly designate an important philosophical issue are transformed into policy cases which do little to illumine the philosophical issue.

Variety in Analysis

Parliamentary debate provides experience in exploring a variety of topic/issue types along with the argument forms best suited to deal with each.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

proposing a different topic for each round, usually providing a balance between resolutions of policy, of value, and sometimes of fact, and inviting exploration of current events, social and personal values, and questions of philosophy. Parliamentary debaters receive training regarding the appropriate analytical approaches to each of these kinds of questions.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... a team turns all resolutions, no matter how worded, into one kind of case, such as policy cases, or value cases.

... topics clearly intended to pose questions of philosophy are diverted into policy cases that do little to illumine the philosophical problem.

Rationality

Parliamentary debate values the process and products of rational deliberation.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

teaching debaters rational procedures of analysis along with theories and methods of argumentation, with the expectation that decisions in rounds will be based primarily on which team presents the better reasoning more effectively.

We risk losing this educational value when...

.. Judging decisions are based to any degree on irrational factors, such as *ad hominem*, red herring, or other such fallacies, on incorrect or erroneous evidence, or on prejudice involving irrelevant factors such as the race, gender, or the personal appearance of participants.

Other Persuasive Factors

Parliamentary debate provides an experience in public dialogue broadly conceived, primarily rational but not exclusively so, since persuasion occurs from elements beyond the purely logical.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

teaching students the important relationships between success and such factors as civility, wit and humor, appropriate emotional appeals,

personal ethos, and the like, with the expectation that any of these, including "persuasiveness" in general, might be a factor in a judge's decision.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... judging decisions are based narrowly on the rational only, without consideration for other rhetorical elements involved in persuasion. ... it is assumed that any argument a debater makes requires refutation and if unanswered it is to be considered granted. ... there is an overemphasis on the importance of arguments appearing on the "flow," and no account is taken of

- proofs other than logical (such as appropriate and effective use of pathos, and appropriate consideration of ethos)
- effective, clear, and understandable delivery
- general persuasiveness, as understood in public discourse

Warrants are Primary

Parliamentary debate provides students with an intellectual exercise in which evidence, while important, is less important than reasoning about evidence — that is, data, while important, is less important than the warrants by which conclusions are drawn from the data.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

banning printed materials from the debating chamber, and restricting reference to them in preparation time, so that arguments, beginning from premises of common knowledge or of values, must depend for their effectiveness on cogent methods for drawing persuasive conclusions.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... the role of sound evidence is too much minimized, as when parliamentary debate is mischaracterized as debating without evidence.

...the role of evidence is overemphasized, as when research materials are referred to in preparation time, or permitted into the round.

Warrants are Varied

Parliamentary debate provides students experience with reasoning based on a variety of warrants.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

teaching and encouraging argument by sound generalization, classification, comparison, analogy, cause to effect, hypothesis testing, sign, and the like.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... authority becomes the dominant warrant in the activity due to an increasing use of researched evidence.

Minimal "Rules"

Parliamentary debate has always kept its "rules" to a minimum, in the hope that discussion will focus on the issues themselves, rather than on the rules and associated procedures for "winning."

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

encouraging judges' decisions based on what actually happens in the round, and on how well the debaters explain and justify their strategies — in short, on their persuasiveness.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... rules for this or any other format of academic debate are cited as warrants for winning an argument or a round.

... the NPDA Bylaws are brought into the round and cited in order to give a team an advantage.

... the focus of the debate shifts from the issues in the topic to "debating about debating."

Developing Self-reliance

Parliamentary debate develops self-reliance in students since participants realize that they will need to, and be able to depend on their own resources as they compete.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

creating the expectation that students must gain all the knowledge and skill they can, knowing that their discourse in the round must come only from their own well-stocked minds and independent analysis. They have to depend on themselves since, when the pressure of the round is on, there is nobody else there to depend on. While "coachable moments" can occur during preparation time, perhaps especially with beginning debaters first learning to frame cases, they still occur at a cost to student self-reliance. Certainly teams ready for national competition no longer need coaching help during preparation time.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... cases used in the round come from pre-briefed pages in a tub, especially when briefed by graduate assistants, coaches, or other team members rather than by the debaters themselves.

...coaching occurs during preparation time, and even more when
...coaching during prep time is intended and designed to give debaters
an edge in the coming round, rather than to provide basic guidance
and support, for example, when
... during that time coaches supply debaters with specific cases or
approaches that are not the product of the debaters' own analysis, or
with specific pieces of evidence that the debaters had not otherwise
encountered.

Competitiveness Reigned In

Parliamentary debate provides an atmosphere in which
competitiveness is kept in proper perspective, with the process more
important than the outcome (wins-losses).

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

following procedures designed to mitigate the excesses of
competitiveness. Such procedures include, among others, the
following:

- certain formalities inherited from its "parliamentary"
origins, such as forms of address and greetings, and even an
occasional "this house" resolution, continually remind
debaters of the importance of civility and of the public
sphere in which they are considered to be functioning.
- the revelation of the round's outcome is reserved to a later
time when competitive "juices" have ebbed, thereby enabling
debaters during the tournament to continue looking ahead to
the next round rather than looking back to the one just past.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... disclosure of results at end of rounds, or between rounds,
preoccupies debaters emotionally and intellectually with their win-
loss record, continually suggesting that their overriding concern
should be, "Am I winning?" and making their previous round win-
loss records a factor in their strategic or emotional approach to
subsequent rounds.

... the "parliamentary" elements of the activity are considered
obsolete or irrelevant, and are shaved off.

The General Audience

Parliamentary debate, a form of public discourse, teaches
debaters to present arguments effectively to a general audience of
educated people.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

insisting that, while debaters learn and practice even the most subtle, esoteric, and elegant reasoning, they explain it effectively in terms a general non-specialized audience can understand.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... debaters use technical terms (jargon) familiar only to "insiders" — participants and coaches — and expect judges to understand and respond favorably to it.

Varied Audiences

Parliamentary debate provides experience in discussing public and intellectual issues before a wide variety of audiences, engaging a wide variety of listeners.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

frequently using, and teaching debaters to value highly, non-professional ("lay") judges. Ideally, a critical mass of the judging pool at any tournament, particularly in advanced elimination rounds, is made up of non-professional judges.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... judge strikes are multiplied, or other systems implemented for narrowing the range of judges a team will meet to only those who are debate professionals, or still further, to only those professionals with particular specialized perspectives or experiences.

Judge's Special Role

Parliamentary debate provides students experience in a "public sphere" activity that depends to a large degree on a special relationship between debater and judge.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

giving the judge an unique and fragile involvement in the round, friendly and supportive, but authoritative and above question as adjudicator. Like a public audience, the judge's primary task (besides conducting the round) is to listen, consider, and decide.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... the judge relinquishes the role of introducing each of the debaters, and says, in effect, let's dispense with the needless formalities, just go ahead and debate.

... the judge believes that her primary role is to teach.

... the judge expects to be put on the spot by being required to explain

(many even say, to "justify") his decision at the end of the round.
... debaters and judges expect to engage one another, after the round, in specialized discussions of debate theory, and therefore,
... judging pools shrivel to include primarily graduate students, often recent competitors eager to exercise their own grasp of esoteric techniques, and so
... the debate tournament is divorced from the public sphere, and instead becomes a specialized meeting among technical debate experts.

NPDA's Scope

NPDA is broadly thought of as the primary organization for promoting the practice of parliamentary debate in the U.S. on all levels.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

developing NPDA programs for encouraging the novice speaker as well as the experienced, supporting new or struggling programs as well as the established ones, encouraging focus at all levels on the educational values of parliamentary debate, and guiding practice in tournaments around the nation as well as in the NPDA National Championship Tournament.

We risk losing this educational value when...

...we consider NPDA primarily or solely its National Championship Tournament, or view the organization's function primarily or solely as a means of determining who are the top or "elite" debaters in the nation.

Professional Educators as Coaches

Parliamentary debate programs are ordinarily coached programs, under the guidance of professional educators.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

encouraging school and departmental administrations to support the activity, providing sufficient staff and financial resources, and in other ways recognizing its value on the basis of the significant educational opportunities the activity provides students.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... program leaders come to feel they must "win" and bring home trophies in order to impress their administrations and demonstrate the worth of the activity by trophy count, else risking loss of support. ... programs are not provided with a coaching staff of professional educators, and must be "student run." In identifying student run teams

as less than ideal, we are not considering them second class. On the contrary, such teams deserve special respect and encouragement for their efforts. But administrators should know that it is better to provide coached teams for many good reasons, among them that a professional academic coach, especially one at some distance from her own competitive career, can help students keep the activity in its proper educational perspective (winning isn't everything, the activity is not your life, and the like), and can guide students to engage in the activity in a manner such that its educational values will be fully realized.

Faculty Run

The NPDA is run by coaches.

Parliamentary debate honors this educational value by...

recognizing that college and university administrations who often provide considerable resources to support the activity expect that it will be under the guidance of professional educators, in order that educational, not competitive, purposes remain foremost in importance. At the same time, student input regarding policies and procedures is systematically sought out and valued as an important resource in tailoring practices toward the particular educational outcomes valued in parliamentary debate.

We risk losing this educational value when...

... any system is adopted which permits student votes on policy matters to outnumber those of a majority of coaches.

Conclusion

If the above vision of parliamentary debate and its unique benefits is to be fully realized, much work will be required. Accordingly, please consider the following requests.

Request to Coaches.

While the following is important in coaching all students, it may be particularly so for those students who have experienced prior success in other forms of debate.

(1) Teach students to honor the traditions of parliamentary debate by explaining the purposes they serve — such as, that the forms of address and greetings are a continuous reminder of the importance of civility in public discourse, that the occasional "this house" resolution

enables the clear identification of an agent of decision, and the like.

(2) Expand your students' exploration of case construction beyond the policy and value paradigms.

(3) Explore with them ways of framing and pursuing philosophical disputes — without just turning them into policy cases.

(4) Expand students' capability with a wider variety of argument forms, particularly those that start not from evidentiary premises but from value premises. Increase the variety of warrants at their command, and teach them how to be persuasive by clarifying argument warrants.

(5) Help students keep competitive urges in perspective. Identity or human worth will not be measured by a trophy count or W/L records. And they do not need to know immediately if they won or lost a round.

(6) Examine carefully your practice regarding coaching during prep time. Is it truly only to take advantage of teachable moments? How honorable is it if done to give your team an edge over the competition, or even to extend your own debating career by proxy? Respect the students' right to learn how to succeed or fail on their own.

(7) Encourage students to appreciate the benefits they gain from becoming proficient before non-professional "lay" judges. Insist that adaptation to such audiences is not to be disparaged as "dumbing down" arguments, but that they are engaging in an essential aspect of the rhetorical art - namely, good speakers ought to be able to employ the most sophisticated reasoning in a way that can be understood by a general audience. Stress too the value of learning from the varying perspectives such judges can provide. Finally, remind students that non-professional judges represent the closest representation we can provide of a "public audience," an element fundamental to what parliamentary debate is all about — engagement in public (as opposed to technical) discourse.

Request to Debaters

(1) Particularly if you have already experienced success in other forms of debate, identify the unique aspects of parliamentary debate, and take advantage of the opportunities they provide for expanding yourself beyond your previous experience. For example, learn to develop cases outside the standard policy paradigm, and practice how to argue philosophical questions, how to build arguments on value premises, how to be persuasive by clarifying warrants rather than presenting evidence, how to make sophisticated reasoning effective for a public audience, and the like. While your extra-parli background will be of great value to you (and it enriches parli as well), realize that parliamentary debate provides you with

different educational opportunities that will stretch and enrich you precisely because of their differences from what you have experienced before.

(2) Keep competitive urges under control. Orient yourself and your in-round language to the thoughtful exploration of important public issues, rather than simply to winning the round. Resist the temptation to approach debating as a package of tricks or tactics designed only to win.

(3) Reserve arguments about procedure (or about NPDA "rules") for only those rare rounds where they are especially needed, and avoid using them routinely as "tactics." Keep the focus on the substantive issues involved in the question before you.

(4) At an appropriate time and with grateful respect, tell your coach you would rather develop the self-reliance and satisfaction that come from working on your own in prep time.

Request to Judges (especially to coaches in the role of judges)

(1) While bringing to bear all your specialized training and experience to render a good judgment, keep in mind that this is public (not technical) discourse. A part of you should be listening as the "public audience," discerning whether the speakers are making their arguments understandable to a general, well-educated listener.

(2) While decisions are to be based primarily on relevant rational factors, take into account also other factors that matter in public discourse, such as civility, wit and humor, appropriate emotional appeals, personal credibility, and the like, along with general "persuasiveness" as that is understood in a public audience.

(3) While "flowing" the round is undoubtedly a useful tool, remember that sometimes factors in your decision will not appear on a flow.

(4) Open up to new approaches that explore issues in useful and persuasive ways. Keep your old decision rules tentative, and be ready to appreciate and reward a daring and innovative approach that is thoughtful and cogent, even if not conforming to all the standard requirements of the old paradigms.

(5) Engage in teaching to whatever extent you wish on the ballot and in appropriate (post-round) places, but remember that while in the round your primary persona is decision-maker, not teacher. The debaters are to feel they are speaking before someone who, like a public audience, is listening, and then deciding.

Request to Tournament Directors

(1) Design tournaments in ways that uphold the educational goals special to parliamentary debate. When experimenting with procedures, do it purposely and thoughtfully, and notify participating schools in advance so they know what to expect at each tournament.

(2) Be careful with disclosure, or any other practice that increases the spirit of competitiveness. By the nature of the activity, competitiveness will always be there - it needs no encouragement — and within proper limits of course it is beneficial. But competitiveness can easily escape proper limits, and when it begins to drive policies and practices, it can distort the activity.

(3) Enlist as many non-professional "lay" judges as you can get, from other parts of your campus as well as from the off-campus community, and make sure they are well represented in late elimination rounds. These are our best representatives of the public audience we hope our speakers are learning to address. Of course, they should be suitably trained. A systematic means of recruiting and training these judges should be an important part of your tournament preparation schedule.

(4) Avoid implementing systems that make it easy for debaters to appear before only certain preferred judges.

Request to the NPDA

(1) Respect and support all forms of academic debate, even while advocating the unique values of parliamentary debate by articulating them thoughtfully and effectively.

(2) Create and provide training materials for coaches, speakers, and judges that will prompt them to appreciate the special values of the activity, and that will enable them to perform in ways that realize these values more fully.

(3) Welcome, encourage, and respect "student run" programs, but urge their schools to understand the additional program benefits that come from faculty leadership and appropriate funding.

Parliamentary debate is a marvelous academic activity. Many have heard me say that coaching parliamentary is the single most educational thing that I do. We have, I believe, yet to realize fully the benefits that can emerge from its uniqueness. To do so, we all have much work to do. I hope this attempt to articulate that uniqueness will point that work in the best direction.