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Critiquing Debate

James P. Dimock

Debaters enjoy debating more than debate itself. The closer one gets to becoming “an old debater” (a category to which I will inevitably have to resign myself sooner or later), the more likely we are to find ourselves debating on the side of “the way debate used to be” or “the way debate is supposed to be.” I don’t malign this seemingly inevitable progression or even my place in it. I think the tendency to re-examine ourselves says something about our activity.

I enter this debate about debate, I think I should begin by defining my side of the flow, or to at least identify which side of the flow I am attacking. My purpose is not to condemn debating or to defend the good old days of debate. Rather I hope to engage in a critique of the activity. Debaters are familiar with critique, often spelled with a “k,” as an attack upon the philosophical or ideological assumptions of the opponent’s argument but critiques exist outside the world of debate as well and their purpose is not merely to win arguments. Critique, as Ingram and Simon-Ingram (1992) noted, aims “at emancipating ... addresses from ideology” (p. xxviii) and McKerrow (1989) argued the practice of critical rhetoric is “to unmask or demystify the discourse of power” and “to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society” (p. 91). My critique is concerned not with what is good or bad debating, but with how debate constructs “a particular vision of the world” and the “forms of power ... embraced or implicated” (McKerrow, 2001, p. 621) by the activity. Specifically, the focus of my effort is on the practice of competitive debating, in particular how debate practices control and organize knowledge in fundamentally undemocratic ways.

That debate should lend itself to undemocratic ideology is ironic. The activity of debate has long been justified and defended on the grounds of its democratic-ness. Advocates of debate, at both the high school and collegiate level, have grounded their support for the activity on its capacity to train students in the skills necessary for citizenship in a democratic society. Freely (1996) contended that, “Society benefits if debate is encouraged, both because free and open debate protects the rights of individuals and because debate offers society a way of reaching optimal decisions” (p. 6). The connection between participation in debate and democracy is a core assumption of debate coaches and forensic educators. In Mitchell’s (1998) words, the connection between democracy and debate is a “faith inscribed in the American Forensic Association’s Credo, reproduced in scores of argumentation textbooks, and rehearsed over and over again in introductory argumentation courses” (para. 2). The advocates of debate support the link between debate and participation in a democratic society. Muir (1993), for example, has claimed:

... debate involves certain skills, including research and policy evaluation, that evolve along with the debater’s consciousness of the complexities of moral and political dilemmas. This conceptual development is a basis for the formation of ideas and relational thinking necessary for effective public

decision making, making even the game of debate a significant benefit in solving real world problems. (p. 287)

The advocates of contest debating assume almost categorically that debating teaches students to question assumptions, think critically and research positions—all keys to arguing effectively. If we take as a given the premise that a democratic society depends upon argument and, second, that debate provides students with instruction in the art of argumentation, then it is reasonable to conclude debate should be valued by and fostered in a democratic society. Such reasoning holds, however, only insofar as we can reasonably assume all argument is equally democratic. If the assumption doesn't hold, however, then undemocratic argumentation must be distinguished from the democratic. Thus, the purpose of my critique.

I believe two aspects of contest debating run counter to the democratic goals of the activity: concision and the unqualified obedience to authority; each aspect addressed in turn.

Concision

One of the most anti-critical dimensions of debating is the structural imposition of concision upon argumentation. I borrow the concept from Noam Chomsky who identified concision as a property of the propaganda model of the media. The model posits that the mass-media filters news and information in order to marginalize dissent and protect moneyed and powerful interests. In the context of mass-media, “concision means you have to be able to say things between two commercials” (Chomsky, 2002, p. 387). Concision as a structural constraint “imposes conformism in a very deep way because if you have to meet the condition of concision, you can only either repeat conventional platitudes or else you sound like you are from Neptune” (p. 387). If a person says, for example, that Iran sponsors terrorism, the claim sounds perfectly reasonable and the speaker is simply repeating a position said over and over again. Thus, little if any evidence is required to back up the claim. The claim can be made concisely. Suppose, however, the speaker was to make an unconventional claim by stating the United States sponsors terrorism. Under such conditions, Chomsky contended, people have a right to demand evidence in support of that claim. Chomsky explained the dilemma:

This structural requirement of concision that's imposed by our media disallows the possibility of explanation; in fact, that's its propaganda function. It means that you can repeat conventional platitudes, but you can't say anything out of the ordinary without sounding as if you're from Neptune, a wacko, because to explain what you meant—and people have a right to ask if it's an unconventional thought—would take a bit of time. (p. 387)

One only need watch television news pundits like Bill O'Reilly to see the concision principle in action: the more the guests' opinions differ from the host,

the less they are allowed to speak. Even those who do get to talk at length are getting only a minute or two to explain themselves. Only those who are able to express simple ideas that require little or no supporting analysis or evidence are able to get their point across clearly. The further outside the mainstream an idea is, the more likely the guest will sound like someone “from Neptune.” Intentional or not, Chomsky concluded, concision is “highly functional to impose thought control” (p. 387). It makes it very difficult to challenge established political dogmas and makes it easy to ridicule those who do.

Experts on debating and argumentation have derided the impact of concision on other forms of debating. The first broadcast political debate in the United States, a presidential primary debate between Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen, lasted for an hour with each candidate being given twenty minutes for his opening statement and eight and a half minute for rebuttals. The debate was on a single topic: whether or not the communist Party should be outlawed. In his analysis of the debate, Kane (1987) suggested the debate had a meaningful impact on the Oregon State Primary after which Dewey’s failing campaign was “resurrected” and Stassen’s “was all but finished” (p. 252). Since then, however, the political campaign debates have gotten considerably shorter. Kennedy and Nixon had only eight-minute opening statements followed by two-and-a-half minute responses to questions. In the 2004 Presidential debates between George Bush and John Kerry, the time allotted per question was only two minutes. While the length of time for the debates permits the covering of many subjects, nothing can be covered in any depth. The format for debates in presidential campaigns has been tinkered with many times over the years but, as Kane observed, “No degree of tampering ... will compensate for the basic inadequacy that one cannot develop a meaningful position in a very few minutes” (p. 250). Debates may influence voters, yet scholars of argumentation and debating have been negative in their assessment of the quality of these “debates.” The debates are certainly not critical in the sense I am using the term here nor could they be so constrained by concision.

This principle of concision is also at work in contest debating. Time constraints ensure argumentation is limited and that conventional points of view will dominate the debate. Positions firmly within the mainstream require only the sparsest analysis and scantest evidence. The quality or depth of support is hardly at issue since the position is presumed already. Opposition, on the other hand, requires considerable support and is subjected to intense scrutiny. A debater need only suggest Iran has no right to arm itself with nuclear weapons, but considerable resources would be required to support the contention that the United States has no right to their weapons.

Concision is not simply a byproduct of the time constraints imposed on speakers; after all, we must be *some* reasonable time limits both to ensure that the debate is fair (both sides get equal amounts of time) and that the debate tournament is manageable (you can’t schedule multiple rounds of competition unless you have some sense of how long each round will be). Placing limits on time is perfectly reasonable. We should observe, however, how short time limits are given the complexity of the issues considered. Even a simple question of policy

must consider reasons for changing policy (harms and inherency), the nature of the change to be made (plan) and the grounds for expecting positive change in conditions (solvency). The complexity of topics debated has increase dramatically since formal intercollegiate debating began, yet time limits have changed little. The topic of the first National Debate Tournament in 1947 was “Resolved: That labor should be given a direct share in the management of industry” (National Debate Tournament, n.d. “Anticipating,” para. 10). In 2008 - 2009, debaters will consider:

Resolved: that the United States Federal Government should substantially reduce its agricultural support, at least eliminating nearly all of the domestic subsidies, for biofuels, Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, corn, cotton, dairy, fisheries, rice, soybeans, sugar and/or wheat. (NDT, n.d. “Topics,” para. 1)

As the complexity of the topic increases, the inherent complexity of policy questions increases exponentially. Yet the time permitted to address complexity has not.

As complexity of topics increases, so too does the need for concision. More issues means the time dedicated to each issue is less. Good debaters are at least tacitly aware of this condition and use it to their competitive advantage, wherever possible taking the stance most likely to have little need of rigorous advocacy. Such positions are likely to favor the existing structure and current political dogmas. Change can be advocated, but the basic structure and assumptions of the status quo are not challenged. To extend a metaphor used by radicals (see, for example Friedberg, 2007), it’s permissible to rearrange who gets how much of the pie, as long as the baker remains the same.

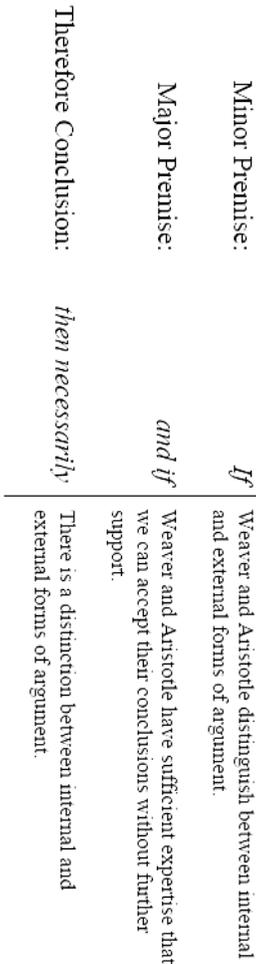
The pedagogical foundations of debating, assume that students engage in the activity in order to develop skills conducive to their participation in a democratic society as informed and engaged citizens. Debating should habituate students to questioning assumptions and demanding that claims be justified on the basis of accurate information and sound reasoning. Debaters conditioned upon concision as both a structural constraint and a strategic necessity, however, inculcate blind spots and constrain thought. Debaters trained to argue within the status quo but not to challenge its basic assumptions might well be more dangerous to the cause of genuine democracy than had they had no such training at all. Those who have had no training are, at least, not brainwashed into believing they have reached the limits of what can be argued.

Obedience to Authority

Since Aristotle, scholars of argumentation have identified different types of arguments debaters might use in defense or refutation of a given claim. How those types of argument are delineated depends upon the person making the classifications. We generally recognize arguments can be divided into two distinctly different classes. Aristotle (1946) distinguished between artistic proofs (ethos, pathos and logos) and inartistic proofs (“witnesses, evidence given under Speaker and Gavel, Vol 46 (2009) www.dsr-tka.org/

torture, written contracts, and so on”) (p. 1355b). Rhetorician Richard M. Weaver (1974) classified arguments as “‘internal’ in the sense that they involve our own interpretation of experience” and “‘external’ sources” of argument “which utilize the interpretation of others” (p. 144). External arguments, in the simplest form, involve citation of authorities or the quoting of witness testimony. I, for example, could have made the distinction between internal and external arguments based upon my own understanding of the structure of arguments. Instead, however, I invoked Weaver and Aristotle as authorities in order to make my argument. The basic structure of the argument from authority can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1



The syllogism makes apparent such arguments “have no intrinsic force; whatever persuasive power they carry is derived from the credit of the testifier

or the weight of the authority” (Weaver, 1974, p. 146). The lack of intrinsic force does not mean, however, that arguments from authority and testimony are not legitimate forms of argument. Rather, it means such arguments depend upon the credibility of the witness or expert which lie outside the argument, thus they are called external arguments.

Even the best arguers will often base claims upon authority and it is certainly true that critical thinkers, speakers, and writers cite sources of their information (Dimock, Treinen, Cronn-Mills & Jersak, 2008). It is important, however, to avoid obfuscating the distinction between citing sources and the argument from authority as a distinct mode of argument.

Figure 2

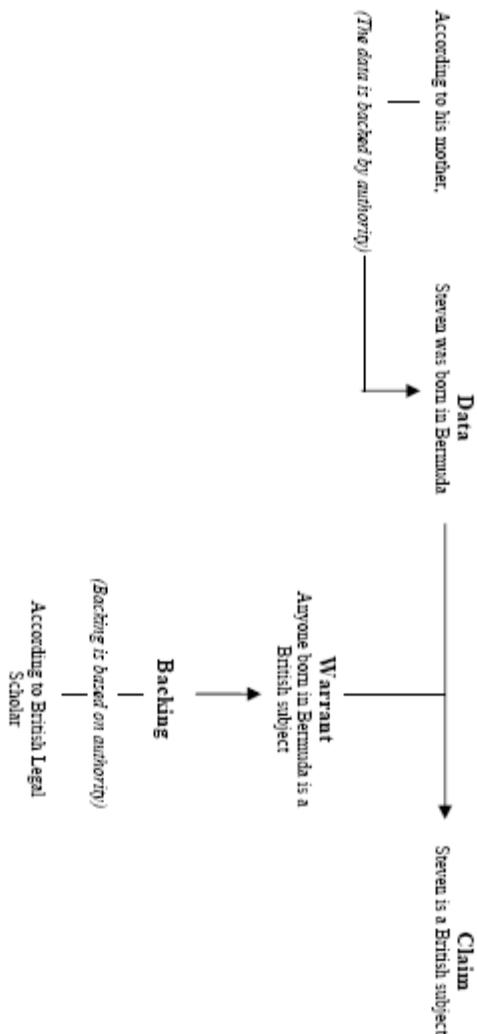
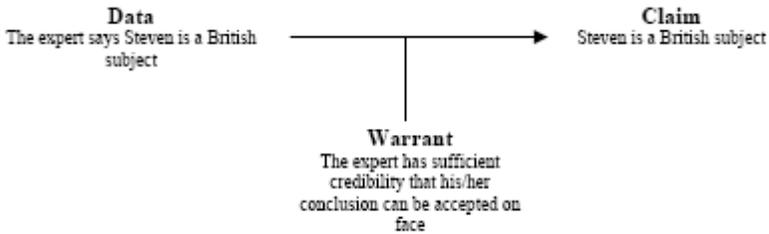


Figure 3



The arguments in Figures 1 and 2 are both based on Toulmin's (1964) model of argument but I have modified them slightly to highlight the distinction between citing sources and arguing from authority. In Figure 1, the argument is supported by authority in order to establish key facts or concepts but the argument itself stands on the strength of the arguer's inference, the conclusion drawn from those facts and concepts. The argument from authority, as seen in Figure 2, is distinctly different. Therein, the conclusion is sustained entirely by authority. The data (where Steven was born) and the warrant (who is a British subject under British law) are presumably there but they are in the mind of the expert. As auditors we are not privy to the data used, the concepts that provide the warrant; only the conclusion and the assurance (which is often enthymematic) that we should take his or her word for it.

I think it is important to stress nothing inherently wrong with the argument from authority. Authority is especially valuable to arguers who are unable to ground arguments in their own experience (just because I have never been to Iraq doesn't mean I should be disqualified from arguing about the Iraq War), provide arguers with perfectly reasonable shortcuts (it is easier and more reasonable to defer to experts on legal questions than research all of the statutes and relevant case law on my own). Indeed, in some cases the conclusions of respected authorities and experts should trump those of the inexpert. If I choke on biscotti at my favorite coffee shop, the only opinions I am interested in are those of persons who are trained in the Heimlich maneuver. No one else's opinion matters.

In such cases, the argument from authority can be qualified. If we draw upon the testimony of those who have been to Iraq when we have not been there for ourselves, we would look at the quality of that testimony: How many witnesses do we ground our argument upon? What is the range of the witnesses' experience? Are the witnesses reliable and credible? When we allow experts to synthesize information and ideas for us, as in the case of legal scholarship we ask different questions: Is the expert qualified? Is the opinion rendered within the expert's field of experience and training? Does he or she have the support of other experts within the field? Does he or she have any agenda which might call into question his or her conclusions? Finally, with respect to technical processes

or procedures, we can qualify the technician: Where and how was the technician trained? How much experience does he or she have?

Arguments from authority are an important component in the arguer's toolbox. It is important that we, as scholars of argumentation, understand the principles and limits of authority as a mode of argument. Unfortunately, however, scholars of argument have tended to pay little attention to the argument from authority. Neglect of the argument from authority begins with Aristotle (1946) who chose to ignore the 'inartistic proofs' and concentrate upon those proofs "such as we can ourselves construct by means of the principles of rhetoric" (p. 1355b). In the Enlightenment, the argument from authority was considered a fallacious "reluctance to challenge authorities that are learned, eminent or powerful" (Hamblin, 1970, p. 162). The philosopher John Locke called arguments from authority "*argumentum ad verecundiam*," and dismissed as fallacious the invocation not only of "*worthless* authorities" but also those "*worthy* authorities, whom it is normally reasonable to trust, maybe wrong" (Hamblin, 1970, p. 162). Contemporary scholars have continued to marginalize the argument from authority. For example, in what might be the most extensive treatment of argumentation and argumentation theory in recent years, van Eemeren and his colleagues (1996) invest almost nothing in the subject of the argumentation from authority continuing to favor other modes of inference and reasoning. But if scholars have been dismissive of the argument from authority, debaters have embraced it whole heartedly.

Freeley's *Argumentation and Debate* has been a standard in the discipline for more than 40 years and the textbook is noted for being principally a work on debate rather than argumentation theory (Hostettler, 1961; Bjork, 1994). Thus *Argumentation and Debate* is a good indicator of what is valued by instructors of debate as opposed to those who emphasize argumentation. Now in its 11th edition, Freeley and Steinberg (2005) have dedicated chapters to the structure of arguments (Chapter 8), the types of arguments (Chapter 9), and fallacies (Chapter 10). Balancing this treatment of argumentation, three chapters are dedicated to evidence wherein Freeley and Steinberg's treat such topics as the location of sources, reading critically, types of evidence, tests of evidence, and other dimensions of the argument from authority. As much weight is placed upon the argument from authority as is given to all other modes and types of arguments combined. Clearly, Freeley and Steinberg give considerably more attention to the argument from authority than van Eemeren et al. give the topic.

I do not wish to suggest that I have conducted a systematic investigation of argumentation or debate textbooks. I believe, however, the difference between Freeley and Steinberg's attention to testimonial and authoritative evidence and that given by van Eemeren et al. is indicative of the different treatment given the subject of authority is given in the two arenas. In argumentation studies, the subject is given little attention and clearly marginalized as a form of argument while in debate it is prioritized. Argumentation scholars may unfairly exclude the argument from authority but within the sphere of interscholastic and intercolle-

giate debate, the argument from authority is not merely a mode of argument; it is *the* primary mode of argument.

All arguers probably make use of the argument from authority to some extent or another and using such arguments is perfectly reasonable. My concern here and what I believe should concern all of us who think debate should be grounded in a democratic pedagogy is the overreliance on the argument from authority to the exclusion of other modes of argument.

Arguments from authority have a presumptive status in competitive debate. If a debater must choose between the use of authority and any other mode of argument, debaters will pick the argument from authority opting other forms of argument only when the option to cite evidence is not available. The opponent's rebuttal will predictably be that, although the argument might be cogent, there was "no evidence." When evidence clashes with any other form of argument, evidence wins and debaters know it. As coaches and judges we reinforce it.

I think the reliance upon a single mode of argument is unquestionably uncritical, like a carpenter who might have had some theoretical training in the use of tools but who really only uses a hammer. Certainly, the hammer is a useful tool and necessary for some tasks but I would have a hard time calling anyone a master carpenter who did not also have a working knowledge of the saw, the screwdriver, and a host of other essential tools. In the same way, we cannot justly claim to be teaching argumentation when in truth we are only teaching one type of argument, even if we are teaching it very well.

This prioritization of one mode of argument at the expense of all others is more than just educationally unsound, it is also uncritical. Rhetorician Richard Weaver (1953) said that how a person argues "tells us how he is thinking about the world" (p. 55) and is thus "a truer index of his beliefs than his explicit profession of principles" (p. 58). Weaver concluded that those who prefer the argument from definition, as he did, tended toward conservatism while those who argued from circumstance were liberal. Extending that position, I contend that those who favor the argument from authority are not necessarily conservative or liberal but technocratic.

Democracy assumes people are able to understand social, political, and economic questions, to weigh evidence, and make reasoned decisions. Conversely, technocracy (as I am using the term herein) assumes that people are generally incapable of understanding, analysis, and reasoned decision-making on such issues.

Noam Chomsky (2006) offered an example of the distinction between democratic and technocratic thinking. Chomsky noted that although he is perhaps most well-known for his political and social commentary, he is education and expertise is in the field of linguistics. His critics have often used this fact against him, suggesting that he is unqualified to render commentary on matters of public policy and international relations. Chomsky's response is that such criticism is not only irrelevant but indicative of an undemocratic mindset. "The alleged complexity, depth and obscurity" of political and social questions are:

...part of the illusion propagated by the system of ideological control which aims to make these issues seem remote from the general population and to persuade them of their incapacity to organized their own affairs or to understand the social world in which they live without the tutelage of intermediaries. (p. 70)

The insistence upon authority to validate claims raised in the political sphere precludes ordinary citizens from voicing their beliefs on political questions removing them from the political process. It effectively domesticates the demos and excludes them from the political sphere. The citizen is positioned outside the political discourse, assigned the role of passive observer while participation is left to experts.

Debaters are not to analyze issues for themselves or exercise what Chomsky called their own “Cartesian common sense” which he believed required little more than “willingness to look at the facts with an open mind, to put simple assumptions to the test, and to pursue an argument to its conclusion” (Chomsky, 2006, p. 70). Instead, debaters are required to cite experts, to make not their own judgments but to discover those of qualified others and recite them at the prescribed moment.

Ultimately, privileging authority is incompatible with the critical perspective. The obedience to authority, the assumptions that for every question there is an expert who can provide the answer, and ordinary people are not competent to discuss policy options without appeal to those who have the ‘right’ kind of knowledge: these are the core premises of technocratic thinking. I would contend, no great step is required to move from the position that experts alone have the right to draw conclusions about policy questions to the position that experts should be the ones making policy decisions. There is simply nothing democratic about that.

Conclusion

The problems posed by concision and the overemphasis of the argumentation from authority are interrelated concerns. The problem of concision is exacerbated by overly-broad topics. So is the problem of overreliance on authority. As Ziegemuller (1996) noted “although there was, over the years, some gradual increase in the amount of evidence used by debaters at the NDT, the rapid expansion in the quantity of evidence used largely coincided with the adoption of ... broad topics” (para. 8). As topics become unmanageably broad, it makes it difficult for debaters to develop their own sense of the ideas or to explore them in depth. Unable to make personal judgments upon the issues, debaters are forced to rely upon the judgments of others.

Debaters who use the argument from authority are also able to argue more concisely than those who develop other modes of analysis. One need only return to Figure 2 and Figure 3 to see which is more concise. Furthermore, the argument from authority aggravates the uncritical nature of concision. Concision favors dominant opinions and current political dogma which are repeated over

and over again in the media. It is thus far easier to find evidence to support mainstream viewpoints and perspectives. Constrained by concision, authorities whose conclusions are too far outside the mainstream must be quoted at greater length in order to make their claims appear rational. Debaters who keep their positions within the very narrow range of the dominant paradigm have a considerable tactical advantage over those who attempt to argue from outside that paradigm.

Concision and the overreliance on authority are practices which make it very difficult to challenge the dominant paradigm. Because they reinforce the dominant ideology, which has tended to favor some groups (white, male, straight, Christian, Western, elites, etc.) while marginalizing others (people of color, women, GLBT, non-Christian, non-Western, poor, etc.). For a long time, we have justified our activity on the grounds that it prepares young people for leadership. But what kinds of leaders will they be? Whether they move on to take roles in government, industry and finance or even the academy, will they be the kind of leaders who are instilled with a respect for democracy? Debate, as it is currently practiced, is designed to produce technocratic elites not democratic citizens.

In our civic culture, individuals are feeling more and more distant from the processes of democracy. Zinn (1997) has noted, for example, that “surveys since the early seventies show that 70 to 80 percent of Americans are distrustful of government, business and the military” (p. 474). An even stronger indicator of people’s alienation from the political process is the low voter turnout, especially among the most disenfranchised segments of the population. The Census Bureau reported that in 2004 voter turnout was up but still only 64 percent and rates were lower among those who are the most marginalized in the status quo: racial minorities, the poor and the youth (Faler, 2005). Voter turnout rates are dismal but the rates of actual participation in politics have been pathetic. While there was an upsurge of participation in 2008, whether this is the beginning of trend or an anomaly remains to be seen. We can conclude, however, that a democratic society is not possible without citizens who see themselves as empowered agents of action capable of understanding issues and making reasoned decisions. We cannot train leaders to do not believe that ordinary people are capable of understanding issues and making reasoned decisions and expect democracy to flourish or even survive.

I debated throughout high school and college. I don’t write this critique because I hate debate or resent debaters. I genuinely believe that no activity has done more for me intellectually than debate. I am convinced that it is an empowering activity and I believe thousands of others like me are proof of that. But as a critical scholar, I cannot come to the conclusion that debate is *personally* empowering and stop there. I cannot accept the conclusion that debating develops critical thinkers but not critically-minded citizens and believe we are doing good enough. I don’t believe debate has failed. I believe debate has failed to take the next step.

We can improve the critical capacity of debating and transform the activity into a truly critical education:

1. We need to fight concision and allow for arguments and positions to be fully considered. This means we need to extend time limits and to ask narrower questions. We simply cannot expect anyone to explain what is wrong with the Horn of Africa and how to fix it in less than ten minutes.
2. We need to value alternative modes of argument and not just as off-beat kritiks offered as merely another way to try and win the ballot. Thus, we need to stop being just judges of debate and start becoming scholars and students of argumentation. Arbitrary changes to the rules have been tried and have failed because we have continued to think of ourselves as debaters rather than as arguers and judges of debates rather than as teachers of argument.
3. We need to start taking our mission seriously. Debate is a game but like any good game its purpose is to instruct and to instill values. If we truly believe we are preparing students for leadership in a democracy and that our activity exists in order to strengthen the foundation of a free society, we should start acting like those values matter.

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