

Understanding the Hyphen Addressing the Debate-IE Divide

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Abstract

At the 2008 National Forensics Association National Championship Tournament, a special meeting was held for the coaches of Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debaters. At this meeting, those in attendance attempted to voice concerns about both the perceived “slights” and the actual structures in place (like sweepstakes formulas, awards, and qualifications) from the larger NFA community, made up of individual events (IE) coaches. Issues like limited judge strikes or mutually preferred judging, changing the schedule so that debaters did not go first and last on competition days, and allowing for oral comments by judges were all discussed. But at the heart of this “rift” is the notion that maybe the LD community and the IE community have different, possibly incommensurate, objectives. It is with that thought in mind that I propose some community, both LD and IE, objectives that could lead us to address this growing divide in one of three ways: Leaving things alone, separating the two groups, or merging the groups into one. This paper will explore the implications of these options for addressing the debate-IE divide.

Introduction

Some time ago, I had a conversation with a colleague of mine about debate at the National Forensics Association (NFA) National Tournament. At the time, the team I coached did not have any Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debaters. With no debaters entered in the tournament, I was not going to judge LD at the national tournament. When I said this, my colleague asked me why I wasn’t going to judge LD anyway. He argued that I would be helping the LD community by judging, since I was familiar with the event having competed in and coached the event. I told him that I had an obligation to my own team. He countered by saying that I had an obligation to the LD community, because if I didn’t judge, someone less “qualified” would take my place. In essence, I owed it to the debate community to judge. I ultimately declined, deciding to focus on my team of IE competitors, but that conversation stuck with me.

It was a bit shocking for many of my friends and colleagues involved in competitive forensics for me to not have any debaters at the national tournament. You see, I began my career as a debater. In fact, when I was competing, I regularly referred to myself as purely a debater and not someone who did Indi-

vidual Events (IEs). The team I competed for was predominantly an IE squad, regularly placing in the top twenty at the American Forensics Association National Individual Events Tournament. But I was a debater. I traveled exclusively to debate tournaments and only did IEs to meet minimum travel requirements. As I transitioned into coaching, I still thought of myself as a debater, or rather a debate coach. I began my coaching career on a team that had traditionally done well in LD and prided itself on its debate background.

Now that I have been coaching forensics for approximately five years, I have started thinking more about conversations like the one mentioned above. My debate friends have been somewhat hostile to the notion that I have transitioned to a more IE focused team. They have told me that I should go back to my debate roots. Yet, I constantly wonder why there is such hostility between debaters and their IE counterparts. At its national tournament, NFA now has four public address events (persuasion, informative, rhetorical criticism, after-dinner speaking), two limited preparation events (extemporaneous speaking and impromptu speaking), four interpretation events (dramatic duo, dramatic drama, prose, poetry) and LD. On the surface, it appears as if there is more than enough room for debate and IEs to peacefully coexist under the umbrella of NFA. But the differences in awards, qualifications, resources, popularity, and perception have created an environment where debate and IEs are divided.

This paper will examine the realities of the debate-IE divide. For this examination, I will explore the history of NFA LD from its inception at the 1988 National Developmental Conference to the present. I will also look to the structures of tournaments, including scheduling, sweepstakes tabulations, and awards, to understand the created difference between debate and IEs. Finally, I will propose some options for addressing the debate-IE divide.

The History of NFA LD

While there were many national tournaments held at the end of the academic year including the annual National Debate Tournament and the Interstate Oratorical Association tournament, it was not until 1971 that the first IE national tournament was held (Fryar, 1984). Under the direction of Dr. Seth Hawkins, the National Forensics Association held the first IE national tournament at Ohio Northern

University in the spring of 1971. For nearly 40 years, the NFA has held its national tournament every spring. But it was not until 1991 that LD was offered at the NFA National Tournament. In fact, LD was not even considered until the 1988 National Developmental Conference.

At the 1988 National Developmental Conference, Dr. Roger Aden proposed an event that combined the argumentation and research skills typically associated with academic debate and the delivery skills associated with individual events (1989). Arguing that the forensics as laboratory metaphor may be problematic, Aden (1991) countered with forensics as a liberal art that “is designed to produce individuals who are able to think independently rather than solely relying on existing knowledge” (p. 101). In essence, a format of debate that would allow competitors to actively engage each other in critical discussions and arguments about real world policy decisions would be a valuable skill that NFA should promote (Aden, 1989).

A special edition of the *National Forensics Journal* focusing on LD was published in 1996. From that edition, Minch and Borchers (1996) argued that LD was an event that “emphasizes traditional aspects of academic debate” including “evidence, reasoning, cross examination, and refutation” but that LD was also “dedicated to communicative performance in which high standards for presentation are encouraged” (p. 19). Howard and Brussee (1996) saw LD “not as a competitive end, but as an educational means to develop communication, argumentation, persuasion, and analytical skills” (p. 59). In the years between LD’s inception in 1988 and the special edition in 1996, LD “significantly expanded opportunities for students to experience the benefits of educational debate” (Bile, 1996, p. 37).

As LD has grown in popularity, some have wondered how LD should be viewed by the greater forensics community (Billings, 2002). Billings (2002) noted that LD was not combined with the IEs in sweepstakes tabulations, instead having the top five LD schools receiving separate national awards. Billings (2002) credited Williams with being the only scholar to argue for competitors doing both LD and IEs, but also posited a coming “sink-or-swim” decision about the future of LD. The time for that decision is rapidly approaching.

Structuring Division

When Aden suggested a debate event at the NFA, the suggestion was couched in educationally sound, pedagogically valid terms (1989). The intent was an event that combined the best of the debate skills with the best of the presentation skills NFA had to offer. However, between the inception and the application a few years later, a division between debate and IEs was formed. While most would consider this division to be more perceptual than anything,

the division is actually fostered by the structures on tabulation formulas, awards, and tournament practices. The structure of this division has facilitated an environment of difference that has pushed LD and IEs away from each other.

At the NFA National Tournament, the top five LD schools are awarded team sweepstakes trophies. The awards, large silver cups, closely resemble the overall team sweepstakes awards given to the top ten IE schools. And the recognition is nice, showing the NFA community that those top five LD schools have excelled in that event. Yet, those same points the LD schools earn are not counted toward the overall sweepstakes tabulation (Billings, 2002). Interestingly, students entered in Pentathlon (five or more events) may count LD as a limited preparation event. It seems clear that LD could count toward the overall sweepstakes trophies, but it is kept separate by the formula itself. By excluding LD from the overall sweepstakes formula, the structures of the national tournament encourage a division between LD and IEs.

While LD is only one event, it has received far more awards and qualifications than the other IEs. For example, at the NFA National Tournament, LD awards five sweepstakes awards, ten speaker awards, and thirty-two elimination round awards. Compare that to any IE that is awarded twenty-four elimination round awards. The next closest IE to LD in terms of number of awards given is dramatic duo which has twenty-four duos or forty-eight trophies. Duo might give out one more award than LD, but there is no team sweepstakes trophy for the best dramatic duo school. Additionally, the qualification system for the national tournament creates difference. For an IE, six competitors qualify for nationals if there are at least 11 entries in that event from seven different schools. To qualify seven, there must be at least 70 competitors in the field. For LD, up to 16 debaters can qualify for nationals as long as there are 31 debaters from at least three schools. To qualify 16 IE slots in one event, there would need to be 160 competitors in that event, which is larger than some events at the national tournament.

Even the national offices foster a sense of division. The IEs are governed by the Executive Council, made up of coaches elected to seats. LD has its own committee with an Executive Council representative and three at large members elected by the membership. No other IE has its own committee to propose legislation, address membership concerns, or hold special meetings. The LD committee, on the other hand, has that power. At the 2008 NFA National Tournament, the LD committee called for a meeting of the LD coaches to address some concerns of the coaches. The meeting was designed to stimulate discussion about any changes that the LD coaches would like to see NFA make to the practice of LD. In that meeting, coaches discussed ideas like changing

the restriction of oral critiques after rounds, considering the possibility of limited judge strikes, and reworking the schedule so that LD was not both first and last each day. The committee promised to take those suggestions to the Executive Council for consideration. This type of meeting is unique to LD, since the IEs do not have the same level of committee representation.

The structures of the tournament also contribute to a sense of difference. At the NFA National Tournament, LD is often the first and last event of the day, with IEs spread throughout. The rationale is that LD requires more space and judging, so it should be separated from the IEs. And yet, there are also more elimination rounds in LD than there are in IEs. At the national tournament, IE break to quarterfinals, while LD breaks to double octafinals. During the regular season, LD may be relegated to Friday afternoon before the IE tournament begins so as to free up rooms and judges for the IEs.

It would be easy to dismiss many of these differences as attributable to the inherent difference between debate and IEs; I don't want to be that hasty. The truth is that there *are* differences between debate and IEs. The time the events take is different, with IEs taking 10 minutes and debate lasting 42 minutes. IEs have six competitors per section while LD is one-on-one. But the real difference comes from the structures we have created to keep LD and IEs separate. Billings (2002) noted that LD exists by being fragmented from other NFA events, mostly for "fear of backlash from a larger segment of the forensics community which hopes to keep debate separate from individual events" (p. 32).

Options for Addressing the Debate-IE Divide

Given the differences between LD and IEs, it is apparent that something must be done to address these differences. I say this not to argue for one side of the divide to change in order to placate the other side. Rather, I argue that the NFA forensics community as a whole must decide what we want for both LD and IEs. That being said, I foresee three distinct options for the community to pursue: sticking to the status quo, separating the two, or bringing both sides together. Allow me to further explain each option so the differences between each option are made clear.

Sticking to the Status Quo

Any conversation you would have with coaches, regardless of the events that coach oversees, about the LD-IE divide would result in that coach saying that the debate and IEs are "just different." That answer may be given with a shrug or a shake of the head, but the consensus is that the two sides are different enough that you cannot lump the two together. That being said, since its inception in the fall of 1990, LD has been offered throughout the regular

forensics season at a myriad of tournaments as well as at the national tournament. As previously stated, LD was created as an event where forensics students could engage in debate as well as hone public speaking skills (Aden, 1989).

And since those early days, LD has grown. At the 2008 National Tournament at Tennessee State University, the number of competitors entered in LD was over 100 debaters, the largest the field had ever been. As new programs are coming to LD and other programs are coming back to debate, it stands to reason that LD will continue its growth. Part of that growth is due to LD competitors and coaches that come to the event after having competed in other formats of debate. Many collegiate LDers began their debate career as high school policy debaters. Several coaches have links to collegiate policy debate but have switched to LD for reasons like the relative ease of entry into the activity, the low cost of travel and competition, and the decreased research burden compared to other iterations of policy debate.

The growth has been good. Increasing numbers of competitors, critics, and coaches has made the event more robust and more competitive. But this same increase has also helped to foster the perceived debate-IE divide. As the number of debaters increase, the louder the voices calling for change become. The LD coaches meeting at the 2008 NFA National Tournament demonstrates this best. In the meeting, LD coaches publically voiced their fears that the IE community does not care about the concerns of the debate community, even though the head of the LD committee assured those gathered that the meeting itself demonstrated the Executive Council's commitment to LD. The perception is that the IE schools do not care what the LD teams do so long as it does not interfere with the schedule, tabulation, or sweepstakes formula. In response, the LD teams feel that the IE schools will veto any proposed changes because they do not understand the differences between debate and IEs.

The reality of the situation is nowhere near as bleak as some would contend. At the national tournament alone, LD is the smallest event by the number of entrants, yet receives a separate flighting, a team sweepstakes award, individual speaker awards, and trophies for the top 32 competitors, those advancing to double octafinals and beyond. Additionally, LD has a separate national level committee with one member of the Executive Council and three members selected at large by a vote from the NFA membership. Needless to say, LD has been given many resources to succeed. But more telling is the fact that many competitors do more than just debate. At the 2008 National Tournament, between one-quarter and one-third of the LD entrants also entered at least one IE and 11 LDers were eligible for Pentathlon. In fact, of the 32 debaters qualifying for elimination rounds, 14 were entered in at least one

IE. And for the past two years, the LD National Runner-Up was also the National Champion in Impromptu. The truth is that many students are doing both LD and IEs, and doing them well.

Given this state of affairs, one option for addressing the debate-IE divide is to do nothing. The system, while certainly not perfect, has worked for nearly 20 years now. Students have been given the opportunity to compete in both IEs and debate and coaches can make strategic choices about the direction of their own programs. So the solution is to stick with the status quo and make no major changes. By making the decision to maintain the status quo, the only real change would be the mindset of those involved. LD coaches and competitors would have a say in the shaping of their activity and the IE coaches and competitors would recognize that debate is different. This perceptual change would have the benefit of maintaining a familiar and tested qualification system and tabulation method. The only real change would be that the community as a whole would decide that we like things the way they are and do not want to change. This decision to maintain the status quo could alleviate negative perceptions and foster a community of cooperation.

Separating Debate from IEs

Perhaps the community does not want to stick to the status quo. Instead, the community might decide that debate and IEs are different enough that there is no reason to keep them combine in one tournament. Over the years, I have heard a number of debaters and debate coaches complain that the NFA National Tournament is too long for those only doing LD. In the years where the national tournament is on a five day schedule, the debaters have six round spread over three days, with elimination rounds starting on the fourth day. In fact, there is only one round of debate on the third day of competition in the five day schedule. The complaint levied by the debate only programs is that they spend large amounts of money on hotels, food, and travel for a national tournament that features a lot of waiting around for the next debate round to occur. And perhaps these coaches and competitors have a point. For the past several years, LD has been the first and last round of the day on day two with another round occurring over the lunch break period. For those debate only programs, they get up early, compete, wait until lunch, compete again, wait until the end of the day, and compete a third time.

When asked about the scheduling of debater rounds first and last, members of the tabulation staff explained that LD, while being smallest in number, also required the most judges and rooms. To ensure that there was enough space and judges, the LD rounds had to be scheduled with the fewest other things going on at the same time in the schedule. The pragmatics of the schedule aside, some critics

have wondered, aloud, if it might be more beneficial to have a separate national tournament for LD only. This tournament could increase the number of preliminary rounds while still ensuring a shorter tournament. One proposal called for eight preliminary rounds with all winning records advancing to elimination rounds. The arguments for a separate LD national tournament include the shorter schedule, the ability to modify the tournament to be more in-line with other debate national tournaments, and have a more exclusive judging pool. The shorter schedule is obvious, with no IEs to wait for, the debaters could increase the number of preliminary rounds while also keeping the tournament to three days. This change would save those debate only schools money on hotels and meals. Being that there are a plethora of other formats of debate, there are a number of ways to run national tournaments. That being said, some debaters feel that things like judge strikes or mutually preferred judging, disclosure (revealing decisions at the end of the round), and warm rooms (postings of results on a round-by-round basis) are vital to a "real" national tournament. And if the tournament is LD only, those that come to the tournament to judge will likely be more familiar with debate than those hired to judge an IE-debate tournament.

From the IE side of things, a separate LD national tournament would mean that the NFA National Tournament would end each day around dinner time. Because LD is run in a separate flight with the experimental event, no other real changes would likely occur. The only other area where time could be saved would be the awards ceremony where there would no longer be the LD elimination round contestant awards, speaker awards, and LD team sweepstakes awards.

But before we start packing bags and saying goodbye, I would like to offer a word of caution. In 2008, an LD only "national" tournament was held in Topeka, Kansas. This tournament used the 2007-2008 NFA LD resolution and time limits to guide competition. The tournament was originally scheduled to last two and a half days, ending at noon on the third day. Since 2008 was the first year for this tournament, less than 30 debaters entered the tournament, compared to the over 100 LDers at the NFA National Tournament. Clearly, this LD only national tournament is possible. But we should be cautious, especially considering that most teams had to make a choice between this LD only tournament and the NFA National Tournament. The result was a smaller number of schools chose to attend this LD only national tournament.

Additional concerns are that if NFA held a separate LD only national tournament, some schools would not have the financial resources to attend both the NFA National Tournament and the LD national tournament. This could result in a smaller

number of entrants in both LD and IEs. Beyond the financial concerns, some coaches may decide not to travel their team to both NFA national tournaments, especially if those teams attend other state, regional, and national tournaments in the spring. The students are expected to be students and attend class. More tournaments would only serve to increase the number of classes missed by competitors, which is not a big selling point to departments and institutions. Maybe this isn't the best option.

Bringing Everyone Together

I have already talked about maintaining the status quo and having a separate LD only national tournament, but I'm not convinced either of those options would be the best for the community. That is why I have saved my boldest, most extreme option for last: merge LD and IEs together in the overall sweepstakes formula. Now before I field your questions and concerns, let me further explain my proposal. In its inception, LD was intended to be debate for the IE competitor (Aden, 1989), which blended the research and argumentation skills of traditional debate with the delivery skills of IEs (Minch & Borchers, 1996) and that "emphasized both substance and style" (Diers, 2005, p. 45). Derryberry (1991) noted that many administrators have pushed for a "total forensics program" that offers students an opportunity to compete in a wide range of forensics activities, since this broad focus would be both educationally valid and administratively pleasing (p. 20). Since that initial idea, LD has become increasingly technical, relying more on debate theory, strategy, and research (Bile, 1996). The push to be more technical has fostered the perception that debate is drastically different, if not incommensurable, from IEs. But that does not have to be the case.

During the 2008 NFA National Tournament, at the LD coaches meeting, several LD coaches asked if a limited number of strikes would be possible at future tournaments considering the tournament started with more LD judges than were needed. The tabulation staff quickly noted that most years, LD started with a judging deficit and that even though the 2008 tournament started differently, many hired judges did not pick up ballots for LD after the first round. The reason is likely because LD is scary to the uninitiated. If you were to ask IE coaches about LD, many would say they don't like judging the event because the debaters talk "too fast," the arguments are "too technical," or the judges don't feel confident rendering a decision. The speed and technical nature of the round depends on the debaters, but is fostered by a community of debaters that like that style of debate. As for the decision, debate is far different from IEs. In a typical IE round, the judge is asked to rank the six competitors. But in an LD round, there is a winner and a loser. With so much at stake, it can be intimidating for the novice critic to render a deci-

sion, especially if they do not fully understand the more technical aspects of the debate.

On the debate side, most debaters would likely rather have a "flow" judge, one who is familiar with debate terminology, jargon, rules, and practices. These debaters dread having the "lay" judge, who is not familiar with debate practices. The lay judge is often associated with the IE coach because the IE coach does not teach LD to his/her students. The debaters feel that they have to "dumb down" their cases and arguments so that the lay judge will understand what is going on in the round. This reaction to the lay judge is both demeaning to the critic and based on the perception that debate is more complicated than other events. But at its heart, debate is about making good arguments that compel a critic to take one side over another.

So with so much difference, hostility, and confusing, why would I suggest merging the events together? To make the LD better and more representative of the NFA community as a whole. The current structure of the sweepstakes formula separates LD and IEs more than any perceptual barrier could. LD has its own sweepstakes formula and IEs have their own separate formula. Yet if LD was included in the overall sweepstakes formula, things would change drastically. For starters, it would be a bit redundant to have a separate LD sweepstakes award. When we consider LD as the now eleventh IE, it would make no more sense to have a separate sweepstakes cup for debate than it would to have a team sweepstakes trophy for Dramatic Duo Interpretation or Extemporaneous Speaking. And yet, by adding LD to the overall team sweepstakes formula, schools that have been IE only might make a foray into debate to earn sweepstakes points. This would have a ripple effect.

When IE only school enter LD, the former IE only judges now become regular debate judges. This means that these "lay" judges would soon outnumber the "flow" judges and require more adaptation on the part of the debaters. Additionally, the "lay" judges would be able to use their ballots as tools to endorse or discourage particular arguments and debate practices. And the rounds would move away from the extremely technical and more back toward an event that merges substance and style. For the debaters, there would be many new debaters that were pulled from the ranks of IE squads. The debate practices would likely favor the well informed speaker who had some familiarity with argumentation theory.

By merging debate and IEs into the overall sweepstakes formula, there would instantly be more competitors and judges in LD. This would change the way debate is done at NFA tournaments, by bringing in new debaters and critics that are not as familiar with the more technical aspects of debate. As noted above, many debaters also do IEs well. It only makes sense that the skill of the IE competitors

would translate to success in LD as well. By merging the two, LD would grow. Additionally, the entire NFA community would have a greater say in the development of LD. While initially shocking, I contend that a merger is the best possible option for the NFA community. In fact, over ten years ago, David Williams (1996) suggested that the most educational benefit for the students came from doing both debate and IEs, not from choosing one over the other. By changing the structure of the sweepstakes formula, perhaps the NFA community can promote such dual competitive endeavors.

Conclusion

The debate-IE divide exists both in perception and in reality. The structures of tournaments, awards, qualifications, representation, and practices have created an environment where LD and IEs may be deemed incommensurable. It is my contention that the only way to foster a cooperative environment is to merge LD with the IEs in the overall sweepstakes tabulation at the NFA National Tournament. The resulting ripples of change would affect the judging pool, the number of competitors, and the way debate is practiced. But the change would be in the organization, where the membership as a whole, LD and IE, could come together to decide the future of NFA LD. In 2002, Billings foresaw a “sink-or-swim” mindset where NFA members would have to take a hard look at the way LD is done (p. 32). The time for decision is now, and the best option is to merge together, not fracture apart.

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