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**SOLVING THE FORENSIC DILEMMA:  
EVENTS TEACHING DEBATE AND INDIVIDUAL EVENTS SKILLS**

**ROGER C. ADEN  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA**

**"Uneasy alliance" is a phrase often used by news writers to capture the essence of a relationship between two dissimilar groups with a similar vested interest. The forensic community, although not a frequent subject of news writers, nevertheless also suffers from a sort of uneasy alliance. This relationship is that between individual events and debate.**

**Even though both activities arise from Greek roots few would argue that,**

in general, the participants and coaches in the two activities as well as the activities themselves are quite different. Exceptions certainly do exist, but few programs provide a strong commitment to both activities and even fewer students participate in both. Rather than bemoan the differences between debate and individual events and risk increasing the already worrisome alienation between the two camps, we should strive for strategies that bring the two closer together. The results would benefit students, coaches and the forensic community. Thus, the aim of this paper is to first identify the differences between the two activities and then to propose some creative events for individual events tournaments that are rooted in debate.

#### DEBATE

The benefits of intercollegiate debate are certainly no secret to members of the forensic community. Ideally, Laurence Norton (1982) notes, debate: "develops respect for academic research" (30), "stimulates an awareness of and a knowledge about public issues" (31), "develops critical thinking ability" (33), "develops an appreciation of systematic change as a basis for democratic action" (35), and "improves the ability to communicate" (37). Of specific value to debaters is the ability to see and effectively argue both sides of an issue (Freeley 2; Cronen 263). Thus, "the special function of debate is to provide a critical method for settling those differences that arise when people must decide between two mutually exclusive course of belief or action" (Ehninger & Brockriede 12; emphasis original).

Since most intercollegiate debate centers on the evaluation of a policy much of the focus of coaches and debaters is on evidence and arguments that support various policies. Debaters, then, learn "to determine what is necessary to defend a contention or construct a case, the ability to perceive relationships among arguments and between evidence and arguments, and the ability to arrange arguments and evidence in effective constructive or refutational patterns" (Marks & Pearce 284). As the preceding excerpt suggests, students with experience in intercollegiate debate are generally solid in research, reasoning and analysis skills (Semlak).

Unfortunately, the emphasis on evidence in debate has produced what many -- even within the debate community -- consider detrimental side effects. The three effects most prominently reflected in the literature are interrelated and can be summarized in one sentence: Debate has become an activity for specialists. Specifically, reformers point out that debate relies too much on research, producing delivery that is too rapid, which is not checked by any type of "lay" audience.

Too Much Research. The evolution of debate from an activity "focused primarily on persuasion and public speaking" to one of evaluating arguments (Rowland & Deatherage 247) has produced an emphasis on evidence. Debaters frequently try to win debates by introducing more evidence into the round and

some judges routinely read evidence cards after the round to determine a winner. In fact, it is not uncommon for judges of the final round of the National Debate Tournament to spend at least an hour to read evidence and render a decision. Consequently, "it is the feeling of many that current debate practice, especially in the United States, puts the premium upon the amount and uniqueness of the research and resulting evidence" (Zeuschner 56).

Rapid Delivery. Through the years debaters have learned that if more and unique evidence wins debate rounds, more evidence should be introduced into debate rounds. The result of this all too unfortunately solid logic is what is fondly referred to as "spreading," or speaking and reading at a very rapid rate. Colbert (1981) notes that the speaking rates of national Debate Tournament finalists has climbed from 200 words per minute in 1969 to 270 words per minute in 1980; the climb has likely continued somewhat since then. Although the argument can, and often is (i.e. Colbert), made that humans possess the capacity to listen and comprehend speech that rapid, one can easily argue that humans should not be forced to listen at that rate. Even judges intimately familiar with the activity and accustomed to the more rapid than normal rate of debaters often do not pick up everything that is said (witness evidence reading at the end of a round). No wonder then that even 20 years ago concern was expressed about debate tournaments "encouraging a peculiarly incomprehensible language form. . ." (Swinney 16).

No Audience. The question often asked by an "outsider" who happens to stumble on to a round of intercollegiate debate is: "Why do they speak that fast?" The sad answer is: "Because they can." The audience of a debate is often only the judge or, at best, other members of the debate community. Consequently, there is little motivation for a debater to present his or her arguments in anything but the standard form. The emphasis is on logical appeals (Boaz & Ziegelmueller), producing a communication activity in which individuals unfamiliar with the topic and not accustomed to the delivery speed become hopelessly confused (Friedman).

Overall, while debate produces students who are excellent researchers and critics of argument these students are often accused of being unable to articulately present their research and analysis to individuals other than members of the debate community. On the other hand, individual events are recognized as teaching students solid presentational skills and insufficient critical thinking skills.

#### INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

Few would doubt that a general audience would be more entertained by a typical individual events round than by a typical debate round. Conversely, there is little argument that reading the text of a debate round is infinitely more intellectually thorough and stimulating. Even students within individual events programs view some events as mere delivery events that require little

thinking i.e., extempers talking about interpers). As with debate, the problems of individual events number three and are interrelated: students focus too much on delivery; students do not make good arguments and students lack solid research skills.

**Delivery Emphasis.** When individual performances are heard they are usually evaluated in terms of all of Aristotle's appeals. And, since ethos and pathos are primarily affected by presentational skill, it is not surprising that delivery is emphasized in individual events. This emphasis, however, can result in students overlooking the analytical components of their events. All individual events require analysis and argument, not only the more logos-oriented public speaking events but interpretation events as well (Manchester & Friedley; Olsen). As VerLinden notes: "the forensic interpretation may be conceived as an argument. During the introduction, the interpreter makes a critical claim about the literature and supports that claim through the performance of the literature" (59). The goal of an interpretation, VerLinden argues, is not just a "polished performance" but a presentation that is slick and well-developed (65). The same goal can also be applied to public speaking events.

**Weak Arguments.** Even in those events where students are encouraged to make claims and support them, their efforts sometimes fall short of the mark. Frequently, judges will comment on ballots that students do not provide sufficient support for their claims. For example, students in rhetorical criticism often endeavor to endow their artifact with significance by stretching claims of artifact effectiveness or importance without sufficient evidence. In extemporaneous speaking, inherently an argumentative event, questions provided to students routinely require only description instead of interpretation and/or evaluation (Aden & Kay). Given these occurrences, it is not surprising that delivery is considered overemphasized in individual events.

**Research Skills Lacking.** While it seems apparent that weak arguments are pervasive in individual events, much of the reason behind that weakness likely lies in the research abilities of the students in the activity. Put simply, they often do not have the capacity to discover the proof needed for their claims or they are unwilling to undertake the effort to find such support. This indictment covers not only beginning students, but advanced students as well. Burnett's investigation of the evidence used in the sections of a national semi-final round of extemporaneous speaking, for example, found "that fully three quarters of the evidence traceable in this semi-final round was deficient. Each speech analyzed contained at least one major violation" (8). Although extemporaneous speaking requires a different type of research, judges routinely encounter students who do not understand the author of a selection or have overlooked major areas of relevant research. Kay, for example, discovered regular comments about evidence on individual events ballots.

In short, individual events students are often correctly accused of being

deficient in research and analysis skills because of their emphasis on delivery. Ironically, and not unexpectedly, this indictment is just the opposite of the charge leveled at debate students. What we have it seems is, to borrow an idea from Myrdal, "The Forensic Dilemma." As educators, we recognize and value the skills of research and presentation. In practice, however, we have apparently defined them as incompatible opposites. Each is recognized theoretically as important, but the activities in practice have evolved in a manner that generally produces emphasis on one or the other. Accordingly, many coaches and students now cast their lot with debate or individual events, gaining one set of skills but not the other.

Students should, and can, benefit from the skills learned from competition in both debate and individual events. Given the time constraints to students, however, few will probably choose to participate in both activities no matter how hard we encourage them. Students enjoy success and few possess the time, abilities, and opportunities needed to succeed in debate and individual events while pursuing both whole-heartedly. What's worse, failure in one activity may hurt the student's confidence in both activities. The key, then, is not to tinker with the forensics system but to creatively add opportunities to it. In the following pages are potential events that can provide students with the opportunity to learn both debate and individual events skills in an individual events tournament without disrupting the tournament schedule.

#### LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

Perhaps the most easily instituted new activity for individual events tournaments is two-person, or Lincoln-Douglas (L-D), debate. Already quite popular among the high school forensic community, L-D provides students with an opportunity to mesh the skills currently needed in debate and individual events: "To be precise, L-D can be described as a combination of extemporaneous speaking, oratorical skills and debate techniques" (Ambrose 41).

L-D debate is an individual event since one person debates another. Furthermore, L-D debate produces "greater emphasis on traditional oratorical skills and persuasion" than does team debating (Pollard & Prentice vi). Consequently, less research is required of L-D debaters than team debaters. At the same time, however, L-D participants must learn the arts of analysis and refutation needed for debate since they are, after all, "dealing with vital issues and values that are not easily settled" (McCall 37) and with the opinions and evidence of another person.

Traditionally, L-D debate functions with resolutions of value on what can generally be considered political topics established well before the tournament. But because the goal of these additional events is to expose as many students as possible to the skills needed for debate and individual events, several creative options for L-D resolutions are available.

**Team Debate Resolutions.** To encourage the participation of team debaters who desire experience in an activity with more of a stress on delivery, individual events tournaments can offer L-D on a resolution similar to the NDT or CEDA topics. With judges expecting slower, persuasive delivery team debaters would be forced to adapt their presentation style to fit these expectations. Students not participating in team debate would still be able to compete in this activity because its shorter time limits and recognition of delivery skill would prevent them from being "out-researched."

**Off-Topic Resolutions.** These topics could be value topics, but would more profitably expand the scope of the event to include newsworthy or popular topics that may be resolutions of value, fact or policy. The Missouri Valley Forensic League, for example, regularly includes off-topic team debate at its annual tournament with resolutions that vary in their substance. In 1988, the tournament asked affirmative teams to choose from a list of presidential candidates and defend one as the best choice for president. Such topics might be more likely to increase the number of participants in an L-D division.

**Literature Resolutions.** Given the acknowledged need for students of interpretation to improve their argumentation ability, tournament administrators could establish an L-D division in which students debate the merits of particular authors or pieces of literature. Any person familiar with English literature classes or instructors realizes the potential for vigorous debate these kinds of topics allow. In fact, literature topics may also provide the forensic community with an avenue to increase its visibility by inviting English faculty members to serve as judges of literature debates.

L-D debate offers us these and many other creative opportunities to simultaneously teach students the skills of debate and individual events. To encourage research, topics should be announced some time prior to the tournament, but analysis and refutation skills can be learned even in events such as Impromptu L-D Debate. What makes L-D debate even more promising as an addition to individual events tournaments is the ease with which it can be included in the tournament schedule. In most cases, depending upon the time limits established, it is possible to schedule two debates in front of one judge during one round of the other individual events. Such a schedule conserves judges and makes it possible for students to enter at least one other event in that conflict pattern. Two day tournaments can hold elimination rounds while one day tournaments can simply figure final places based upon win-loss records and speaker points.

Finally, I should make clear that I do not intend to privilege one type of activity over another with these proposals. As Pollard and Prentice note: "L-D should not be viewed as a replacement for team debate or as a superior form of argument because it de-emphasizes elements that are subject to abuse in team debate" (vi-vii). Students participating in debate only will probably learn more

about research, refutation, and analysis; students participating solely in individual events will probably develop better presentational skills; but students who participate in L-D can learn something about each type of skill.

#### Audience Debate

Although I hate to use the term "audience debate" because of its implication that other types of debate preclude audiences, it is clear that many students no longer possess the opportunity to present their facts and opinions to general audiences rather than judges (even with L-D we probably cannot expect large audiences in preliminary rounds given the number of students who enter multiple events). Thus, the advice of Cronen seems appropriate: "Although tournament debating has significant value, it must be supplemented with equal attention to audience debating. Audience debating would provide the student debater with the opportunity to apply the concepts of ethical proof, pathetic proof and audience analysis to the special rhetorical situation of a debate" (268). As Cronen implies by omitting logical proof from his list, most audience debates do not focus on the use of evidence. That is not to say, however, that audience debates using a good deal of evidence cannot be popularly established.<sup>4</sup> With the time and energy constraints of individual events tournaments, however, the more lighthearted type of audience debate seems most feasible.

In particular, what I have in mind is the establishment of audience debates in the "dead" period between the completion of the final round and the awards assembly. The advantages of this time slot are numerous. First, it provides tournament administrators a little extra time to tabulate and double-check results. Second, students have an activity to enjoy instead of sitting around and waiting. Third, the public can be invited to the debate and to come early for final rounds, giving the host program and the forensic community some well-deserved publicity.

Unfortunately, only a few students would be able to participate in this activity at each tournament. But on the plus side, students would be paired with students from other schools (since no sweepstakes points would be awarded); interest in acquiring debate skills might grow among those who never thought they would like such an activity but change their minds once they see that it can be fun; and the group activity would end the tournament on a "communal" note.

Organizers of audience debates, though, should remember some key concepts. To begin with, the topic should be one of general interest for students and the public (if invited). A boring topic, after all, will likely produce a boring debate. Next, the participants in the debate should be chosen in advance of the tournament. Although audience debate is more oriented toward pathetic and ethical appeals, students should be prepared with logical proofs. As Mills urges: "The absence of a critic's decision should not result in shoddy prepara-

tion" (96-7). Finally, student debaters should be instructed in proper and valid means of refutation. Without such advance training a student often "either ignores the demands of a particular audience situation or else over-adapts by substituting wit, sarcasm, and ad homonym arguments for other means of support" (Boaz & Ziegelmueller Z71). Wit and sarcasm, of course, can make an audience debate lively, but they should not be used exclusively and at the expense of solid support. Audience debates may be entertaining but "they should never be regarded as entertainment. Debates presented before public audiences should be regarded as an opportunity to educate the student about audience analysis and to educate the audience about debate" (Freeley 285).

#### HOW DO WE MAKE THIS WORK?

Including these creative events in a tournament schedule is simple enough; making them successful, however, is not such an easy matter. Audience debates can generate enthusiasm among students and coaches, but they should not be relied upon to produce instant and widespread popularity. Other steps that can boost interest are: waiving of entry fees for L-D debate slots; establishment of an L-D debate league with schools that would host the event and in which students could maintain cumulative records; tournament-provided evidence packages to encourage students who might be hesitant to participate because of the investment in time needed for research.<sup>5</sup>

The success of these creative events also depends, to some extent, upon the structure of the activities. Ideally, a uniform set of guidelines could be agreed upon if a league is established. Without any formal organization, however, the responsibility for good topics as well as smooth and fair schedules falls on tournament administrators.

If these proposed creative events are added to individual events tournament we can accomplish two significant goals. First, we can add some stability to the uneasy alliance of debate and individual events by bringing individuals from both activities into a common venture. Second, we can take a big step toward solving the Forensic Dilemma by re-emphasizing the need to possess all the traditional skills of forensics: discovery, organization, refutation and presentation. By bringing forensics closer to its foundation of training citizens for public debate we can put it on stronger ground for the future.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Even though CEDA debate focuses on values, recent resolutions often ask debaters to consider the value of implicit policies, e.g., topics on drug testing and Central America.

<sup>2</sup>In an effort to increase interest and participation in team debate at its annual tournament many League members are planning to include off-topic L-D debate at their institution's tournaments in the 1988-89 academic year.

<sup>3</sup>Impromptu L-D Debate is an experimental event that has been offered

twice in recent years at the annual tournament of the Nebraska Intercollegiate Forensic Association. Students are told approximately one month in advance of the general topic area, i.e., the presidential campaign, but are not given the specific resolution until shortly before each round begins. Resolutions change from round to round.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Boaz and Ziegelmueller discuss the now defunct Wayne State University Debate Days tournament, an event in which policy debaters presented their arguments in various settings around the city with different types of judges rendering decisions.

<sup>5</sup>Such an arrangement has been attempted before (see Marks & Pearce). This type of incentive might best be limited, though, since forensics is supposed to teach students how to research as well as how to use research.

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