

The Composition Teacher as Debate Coach

Arthur Wayne Glowka

When my department chairman first asked me if I would be interested in starting a debate team, I was hunched over the ditto machine trying to figure out why my purple ditto master had developed a crease right down the middle of the page. I had never been a debater, and I stutter when I try to talk too fast. I had attended a debate once in high school, but my attendance had not gotten me the date I had wished to get with a tall blonde debater. I had no choice but to tell my chairman that I would feel uncomfortable directing an activity in which I had no experience whatsoever. Although I bent back over the ditto machine at this time, volunteers were once again solicited, and I gave in as others around me with the same ignorance of debate agreed to test student interest in starting a debate team. We succeeded in getting some students together for a couple of meetings, and we were lucky to get some students who had debated in high school and who could tell us approximately what we were supposed to be doing. The following quarter I became the debate coach, and I found out that the

composition teacher who is willing to listen and learn can make a contribution to students who want to compete in debate.

My initial hesitance in getting involved with a debate program is something many composition teachers will understand. But there can be definite benefits for composition teachers who start debate teams. In many colleges the English department is looked upon as a "service" department. Consequently, English teachers in such schools tend to see only freshmen and sophomores, many of whom drop out of school after unsuccessful attempts at English composition. Frustration can then become a problem for the composition teacher who faces hordes of unwilling and uninterested students taking English only because it is required. When the composition teacher has few or no majors to teach, he finds himself in an unenviable position: he starts to feel like a policeman at a riot. If such a teacher can, however, get a debate team going, he gives himself a much needed access to students from a variety of majors who are interested in learning new things and in talking about ideas. Any debater who can repeatedly stand the pressure of tournaments in which his wit and knowledge are constantly challenged is guaranteed to be different from the mass of students in freshman composition. In short, debate can offer academic escape from the tedium of reading sixty or more compositions per week.

The joy of the escape comes from working with students who have genuine skill at extemporaneous argumentation. Many people can learn to argue, but debaters develop a love of argument that will please the teacher who has been trying to get students to understand the rudiments of the thesis statement or the topic sentence. Debaters practice a highly verbal art which tests hypotheses and juggles assumptions. They draw on a wealth of information which they can shuffle into various arguments for or against a proposition, depending on the side to which they have been assigned in a particular round. They are sophisticated rhetoricians who move in their art with all the skill of a Socrates. They recognize the complexity of the world in which we live and the difficulties inherent in making a decision as a "reasonable man." Part of the escape too comes from watching the exuberance of well-matched teams as they pry and wrestle with each other's comments in speeches delivered at well over two hundred words a minute. The composition teacher at his first varsity tournament starts to recognize (somewhat in fear) that there may well be a natural aristocracy of men and women. And as he witnesses the performance of college students who had the foresight to read the professional articles of all the judges who might possibly be assigned to their matches so that the articles could be quoted before those judges, he begins to appreciate how some people get to be senators, corporate executives, and presidents. Admittedly, however, most of the debaters the composition-teacher-turned-debate-coach will see will not look like presidents or even possible college graduates. The novice debaters will need some help, and a composition teacher can help them.

Although speaker points are given in a debate for delivery, the most important part of a debate is winning the argument. Persuasion is an important mode of discourse in a composition course, and the composition teacher who picks up a debate book will find the basics of a debate argument familiar. A good debater or a good essay writer must have a sense of his audience, he must present his arguments in an organized defense of a thesis, and he must provide evidence to support his claims. Although many compositions provide evidence from personal experience, the debate argument must be supported by quotations or statistics from reliable sources. This puts debate well within the purview

of the research paper teacher--only the research will be much more extensive and thorough. In fact, a winning debate team will have done research that will make the average doctoral candidate's research look sophomoric: some teams carry around a half a dozen suitcases or more filled with notecards. But a beginning team will not overwhelm the novice coach with research, and the coach can easily teach research skills to novice debaters.

The novice coach should read a book about debate before he approaches any students about forming a team. The mechanics of a debate are of untold importance, and the beginning coach should know this from the start. Debaters and debate judges tend to use an amazing amount of jargon, so the coach should be prepared. The mechanics of debate argumentation, however, are simple. Two teams of two members each meet to argue over a given topic. Many schools in this country use the National Debate Tournament topics. They are always political in nature, and over the last half century or so they have concerned problems of current national interest. This year's topic, for instance, is "Resolved: That any and all injury resulting from the disposal of hazardous waste in the United States should be the legal responsibility of the producer of that waste." Schools which opt to debate this topic will debate it throughout the 1983-1984 school year. Debating the same topic gives debaters the opportunity to do in-depth research and to learn for themselves that political problems of national importance often have innumerable implications. The debaters learn that there are no easy solutions to major national problems.

The individual debate round lasts about an hour and a half. Each team makes two affirmative speeches and two rebuttal speeches. Many debates also include cross-examination after the constructive speeches. The affirmative speaks first, presenting a plan for resolving some problem it sees within the status quo. The negative then responds, attacking the significance of the problem or suggesting a counter-plan. The second affirmative then makes a speech, countering the attacks of the first negative and extending and strengthening the arguments of the first affirmative. The second negative has the last constructive speech, and he attacks the plan of the affirmative, generally by showing that the plan either will not work or will result in numerous disadvantages. Rebuttal speeches then follow in which the four speakers counter attacks and review arguments in an attempt to win the decision of the judge or judges.

Although judging philosophies are complex and often controversial, the structure of the debate argument is relatively simple. The affirmative must present a prima facie argument to support the resolution. That is, the affirmative must present a plan that a "reasonable man" could accept on the basis of the arguments presented. The plan has to look good and sound as if it will work. The affirmative must show that a significant problem exists in the status quo and that the mechanisms of the status quo will not allow a solution to the problem. It must then submit a plan (a piece of legislation, for example) which could cure the problem in the status quo and which would have certain advantages over the status quo. The negative team structures arguments attacking the significance of the need, the solvency of the plan, or the disadvantages inherent in the plan. The negative may also present a counter-plan in which it hypothetically or actually accepts the arguments concerning the problems of the status quo, but provides a plan of its own with greater advantages than those of the affirmative plan. In that case, the affirmative must also attack the counter-plan. In the case of a tie, the negative wins on presumption. This follows on the assumption that a "reasonable man" does not adopt a new way of doing things unless he knows for sure that the new way will be better than the old.

The structure of the affirmative argument should make eminent structural sense to the composition teacher. In essence, it is the combination of two persuasive essays with a short descriptive essay stuck in between. The first persuasive essay, the "need" argument, claims that there is a problem with the status quo. Persuasion here depends on the affirmative's establishing the significance of the problem and convincing the judge that many harms exist in the way things are. Sufficient evidence of the harms is required, so the debater must use his skills in definition, description, process analysis, or causal analysis to draw together his facts under a strong thesis. The second persuasive essay claims that a certain plan of action can have demonstrable benefits. The argument should convince the judge to adopt the resolution. Here causal analysis plays an important role since solvency must be predicted for an untried plan. The descriptive essay between the persuasive essays, of course, is the plan itself, generally written as a piece of legislation outlining something like a board or agency with defined powers.

The negative argument, on the other hand, responds to the affirmative in a series of persuasive attacks. The negative simply reverses the thesis of the affirmative team, reinterpreting evidence presented by the affirmative or providing contradictory evidence from more authoritative sources or at least more recent sources. The negative has to respond quickly since it does not have time to prepare well-polished speeches. It does not know in advance how the affirmative will limit the topic, so it must come prepared for many possible arguments. Many successful negative cases are built out of prepared attacks whose theses are made to fit the arguments in a particular debate. Some teams, for example, carry around disaster arguments. If the affirmative argues that the standard of living will improve because of its plan, the negative gives evidence that a higher standard of living will lead to increased use of gasoline, which will lead to a gas shortage, which will lead to international tension, which will lead to war, which will lead to a nuclear holocaust.

With both the affirmative and negative arguments, the composition teacher can be of some help. A good essay, like a good debate speech, must have a clear and unified thesis statement. The thesis must be divided into sections supported by good evidence. Transitions between sections must be smooth. Each sentence should clearly state the author's (or speaker's) intentions, and it must conform to the general rules of standard English usage. It is fair in a debate to point out an opponent's misuse of a word or his faulty grammar. The composition teacher cannot, however, expect the extemporaneous productions of his debaters to have the polish of essays composed at leisure, but he can expect to find himself talking about the same problems and solutions that make up his tasks in a composition class.

There are, however, several aspects of debate that will seem alien to the composition teacher. The first and foremost is the speed of delivery at which championship debating is presented. While even novice debaters can sometimes approach delivery speeds of two hundred words a minute, experienced collegiate debaters often reach speeds of two hundred seventy words a minute. The speed allows the debaters to present a wealth of supportive evidence, but for the novice a good debate will often be quite unintelligible. After listening to several rounds of debate and suffering a few headaches from overconcentration, though, the novice soon starts to understand what is going on. He also develops a method of recording every argument presented and of relating it to previous arguments or subsequent arguments. It is often suggested that the first thing a debater should do is learn shorthand, so that his record of previous argument will be verbatim.

A second and more deeply upsetting aspect of debate that will roil the majority of English teachers is the use of jargon. Debaters can be more confusing than computer programmers. Debaters talk about "flowing" arguments, problems with "inherency," "disads," "ads," "topicality," "non-topicality," "extra-topicality," "overviews," "underviews," "absolute plan-meet-need," and other things which will be baffling to the novice. But after a little reading and a little experience with listening to debates, even the initially sceptic English teacher starts to nod his head in understanding. The composition teacher who comes to debate thinking of himself as an expert in rhetoric may well be surprised to find undergraduates who surpass him in the ability to organize and compose structured arguments. Please be warned that a major debate tournament can be an experience as humbling as doctoral comprehensive examinations.

But with a little training the composition teacher can feel at home with debate. The world of debate is, after all, the world of argument. In it, words are acknowledged as symbols dependent upon custom and perspective for meaning. Further, language in debate functions as the material for argumentative structures--structures basic to our organization of knowledge. Thus debate is the haven of the rhetorician, the man who studies form for the sake of form. He sees knowledge in terms of its presentation and realizes that form is, more often than not, the means of drawing attention to knowledge and indeed the basis of passing knowledge efficiently to another. To a Platonist or someone with unshakable convictions, educational debate will appear frivolous and meaningless, but to someone who is shaken by philosophical and scientific relativism and who sees the world controlled by massive corporations armed with advertising and by super-states armed with propaganda machines, debate becomes practical education in the structuring of human knowledge and power. The serious debater learns that knowledge is massive and that the truth is always suspect. He sharpens his wits and whets his arrogance while humbly submitting to the overwhelming mass of facts that surround any facet of our world. A good debater can end up being a good lawyer, politician, businessman, or teacher.

The contributions that a composition teacher can make in this effort are genuine and real. And the composition teacher himself can find good experience and a good education working with debate. Depending on the success of his efforts, the composition teacher who starts his own program gets valuable experience with the workings of higher education administration. In a successful program, the debate coach learns to handle travel vouchers and travel arrangements for groups of people. He must do public relations work in order to attract good students and to obtain campus and community support. He finds himself writing news releases for the campus or local paper and speaking on the radio to explain what debate is. He is called upon to judge high school debates, and he finds himself promoting his own program before high school students. He may also find himself writing budgets. In short, he can gain valuable experience with running some kind of program while still a junior faculty member. Debate allows the composition teacher an opportunity to improve his resume and to work with better students, and it will benefit him as well as his students and school.