Lincoln-Douglas Debate:  
An Educational Exercise

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A growing commitment to Lincoln-Douglas debate and countless examples of diversified practice provide a clear exigence for extended philosophical discussion regarding the scope and function of the activity, particularly as it acquires those characteristics that will inevitably define it into maturity. The National Forensic Association's (NFA) decision to accommodate an influx of interested and talented students and this very issue of the National Forensic Journal bear witness to its unqualified commitment and the increasing legitimacy of this activity. At the same time, an unprecedented number of "border-crossers" have arrived at tournaments across the country, equipped with philosophy and technique learned and practiced in the crucible of policy and value debate. Their arrival has brought an inevitable challenge to those principles upon which this alternative form of debate was conceived and implemented five years ago.

In framing the rules that govern Lincoln-Douglas debate, forensic educators made a conscious effort to distinguish Lincoln-Douglas from other forms of competition. The original NFA Rules (1995) state that "Lincoln-Douglas Debate is a one-person, persuasive, policy debate on traditional stock issues." Although we agree with these efforts to define uniquely the character of Lincoln-Douglas debate, this essay argues that these efforts alone may be insufficient to guarantee its future viability and vitality.

We contend primarily that many debaters, judges, and coaches have lost sight of the educational purpose of forensics; far too many now view the activity simply as a contest where trophies are won and lost. In the first section of this essay, we will examine how the tabula rasa philosophy has contributed to the decline of
argumentation and debate. In the second section, we will argue that forensic educators should adopt a more interventionist philosophy of forensics when coaching and judging Lincoln-Douglas debate. In the final section, we briefly respond to some of the likely objections to the activist position we express in this essay.

**TABULA RASA AND INTERCOLLEGIATE DEBATE**

The earliest forensic educators believed that debate was an extension of the classroom learning experience. Although the theory of argumentation and debate could be taught in lectures, gaining proficiency in the application of these techniques required a forum for students to practice their argumentation skills. Debate tournaments, competitions featuring teams composed of students from different schools, were intended to provide a co-curricular setting for teaching students how to argue effectively.

Not surprisingly, the academics who judged these early debates imposed a preconceived set of standards for adjudication. Since the primary goal of debate was to educate students, there was no reason to reward weak delivery or shoddy argumentation. In fact, a review of argumentation and debate literature of this era finds that judges were encouraged to actively intervene in debates to enforce educational objectives. In his classic work, *Argumentation, Discussion and Debate*, for example, Baird (1950) advocated penalizing debaters who insisted "that 'should' implies merely theoretical desirability but carries no requirement of practicability" and/or those who used "peculiar" analysis "seemingly devised to throw the other team off guard" (p. 363). Judges and coaches of this era believed it was more important to discourage uneducational practices than to reward the performance of technically proficient debaters. Like Ehninger (1958), many feared that if judges started voting for technique over substance, debate arguments would "tend to become ever more esoteric, elaborate, and far-fetched" (p. 133).

As competitive debate has matured, there has been a profound change in the role played by the judge (Ziegelmueller, 1996). While forensic educators first conceived of the judge as an educator, many contemporary judges appear more concerned with
enforcing competitive fairness than with promoting educational standards. The new generation of judges view debate as a competitive game instead of educational exercise. Accordingly, they see the proper role of the judge as that of neutral referee charged with objectively processing the subject matter of the debate, a philosophy known as the *tabula rasa* approach. "Tabula rasa," Ulrich writes (1992), "is an approach to judging that emphasizes the desirability of having debate rules evolved from each individual debate instead of being imposed upon a round externally by the judge" (p. 312).

At first glance, the idea behind *tabula rasa* is convincing. Ulrich (1992) claims that the *tabula rasa* approach encourages debaters to develop perspectives on the evaluation of argument, that it encourages educationally sound goals, and that it is consistent with the adversary system. According to advocates of the *tabula rasa* approach, the judge should allow the "individual debaters to develop standards for the evaluation of argument" (Ulrich, 1992, p. 312). Good arguments, if they truly are good arguments, will necessarily drive out bad arguments without the intervention of the judge. So while a judge may have standards for assessing evidence and evaluating argumentation, these preconceptions should be subservient to the evaluative criteria advanced in the debate. "If one wants to reward good argument, one should equally penalize a team that does not know what is wrong with a bad argument" (Ulrich, 1992, p. 312).

Although these are commendable goals, in practice the *tabula rasa* perspective has had disastrous consequences for the quality of argumentation in competitive debate (Cutbirth, 1983; Dempsey, 1983; Dempsey & Hartmann, 1986; Ganer, 1987; Herbeck, 1990; Herbeck & Katsulas, 1988). As more and more judges have ceased to impose educational standards in debate rounds, gamesmanship elements (i.e., excessive speed, counter-intuitive arguments, destructive theoretical constructs) have begun to be utilized with greater frequency by debaters. Knowing that judges will passively assign credibility to all arguments and allow a wide range of competitive practices, debaters have advocated increasingly abusive theoretical constructs and preposterous arguments. Experienced competitors often overwhelm
weaker opponents, not with greater depth of analysis, but by employing speed, unusual theory, or esoteric arguments. By rewarding debaters who employ such tactics, judges have encouraged others to teach and learn them until these gaming techniques overshadow substantive argument as preferred strategy in the forensic community. Such judge passivity is responsible for the often dramatic decline in the quality of debate arguments and the promotion of shallow practice nearly devoid of educational utility. Ganer (1987) has observed:

Many of the problems in contemporary debate can be traced to those who persist in divorcing debate from general academic concerns of argumentation and viewing debate as nothing more than a "game," in the antitheoretical rather than theoretical sense, to be played under the sponsorship of an academic institution. (p. 387)

In the blunt assessment of Rowland (1984), "the tabula rasa perspective, when applied without limits, leads to bad debate arguments" (p. 83).

Despite these concerns, most judges in policy and value debate operate within the tabula rasa philosophy, believing that it is warranted as it promotes diversity of thought and ensures competitive fairness through critical objectivity (Freeley, 1981; Matlon & Cross, 1978; Rowland, 1984). Regrettably, the widespread assumption of a tabula rasa perspective has had profound and deleterious consequences on the quality of debate sponsored by the National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). If the tabula rasa philosophy comes to be widely accepted in Lincoln-Douglas debate, the educational experience, like that of NDT and CEDA will be dramatically diminished. If Lincoln-Douglas is to be more than a competitive information processing game, forensic educators must be willing to enforce the educational objectives of debate and insist on practices that teach students to argue effectively and communicate persuasively.
LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE AS AN EDUCATIONAL EXERCISE

Partially in response to abuses witnessed in policy and value debate, forensic educators devised Lincoln-Douglas debate. The motivations behind Lincoln-Douglas debate are laudable, yet in order to maintain its distinctiveness, we need to adopt and enforce a perspective on judging and coaching that is designed to further specific academic objectives. Competitive practices, arguments, and tournament procedures that run counter to this conception of debate need to be changed. Consistent with this thinking, we argue for a philosophy of forensics based on debate as an educational exercise. Such a view, we hasten to add, is consistent with the positions endorsed by both the first and second National Developmental Conferences on Forensics (McBath, 1974; Parson, 1984).

As coaches, we bear a responsibility to foster practices that will improve the quality of argument in competitive debate. This means that we must make a meaningful effort to instruct our students in the principles of argumentation. We must insist upon the construction and delivery of theoretically sound positions in debates. We must encourage students to make effective use of evidence in support of their positions. Similarly, we should teach students to critically assess positions as part of the preparation process and to test reasoning offered in debates.

At the same time, judges must demand that debaters conform to prescribed standards in debates, by becoming more than information processors who mindlessly assess and weigh tactical maneuvers in rounds. Minimal standards for arguments must be maintained. Debaters must be encouraged to fulfill completely their role as advocates, and be rewarded for adhering to principles of cogent argumentation delivered in a comprehensive fashion. Further, debaters must be given incentives to cultivate a persuasive style of speaking.

We insist that coaches, competitors, and judges stop treating debate as a game. If debate is merely a game, it may be appropriate for judges to act as referees assigning points to the participants. By contrast, debate should be an educational exercise designed to serve as a "laboratory for teaching argumentation skills"
(McBath, 1974; Thomas, 1980). Forensic educators must intervene as necessary to redress some of the "irrational practices currently emphasized in academic debate" (Rowland & Deatherage, 1986, p. 246). While it is impossible to address all of these problems in a single essay, several significant issues confronting Lincoln-Douglas debate are addressed in the paragraphs that follow.

**Rate of Delivery**

Intercollegiate debate is experiencing fragmentation because of dissatisfaction with traditional forms of competition. At one time, a heterogeneous mix of persons were involved in policy debate. Participants included students with and without high school debate experience; coaches included those who were formerly college debaters, high school debate coaches, and speech and argumentation teachers. Today, some forms of debate have become so specialized that only a very small group of students and coaches are able to participate. Over the past two decades, critics (McGough, 1988; McGlashen, 1990) have noted that specialization of several kinds—the development of a sophisticated debate theory literature, the emergence of arguments (both affirmative and negative) virtually devoid of real world relevance, and the increase in the rate of delivery to the point where few are even able to comprehend a debate—has functioned to limit severely the audience attractiveness of the activity. Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley (1987) rightly note that "Academic debate has become an activity that those of us actively involved in it value, but which cannot be celebrated in the presence of our faculty colleagues, university administrators, community leaders, or even alumni if they graduated more than ten years ago" (p. 186). Rowland and Deatherage (1988) concur noting that "to many observers the practices . . . seem absurd" (p. 247). Even former debaters (Pinkus, 1983; Snow 1987) have expressed serious reservations about contemporary trends in academic debate practice.

One of the leading causes of disaffection is the rate of presentation. The arguments advanced by advocates defending rapid delivery are clear, and some of these arguments are persuasive in certain contexts. However, such presentation style is not
appropriate for Lincoln-Douglas debate. As the "Rules for Competition" (1995) state, Lincoln-Douglas "is a communication event, by which we mean the philosophy of the activity is consistent with that which governs other individual events." "Spread delivery" is "antithetical to the purpose and intent of this event," and accordingly, it should constitute grounds for voting against a debater who speaks too quickly. Encouraging judges to admonish debaters, as the Rules do, is not a sufficient sanction. Judges should, without hesitation or anxiety, vote against debaters who speak at an inappropriate rate of speed.

Of course, the appropriate rate will vary from debater to debater, from round to round, and from judge to judge. Notwithstanding this fact, we are adamant in our commitment to the principle that Lincoln-Douglas debate is a communication event intended for a general audience. It may be appropriate to speak at an accelerated rate in the more specialized forums provided by policy and value debate. The fact that an accelerated rate is acceptable in some forums, however, does not mean that such presentations are appropriate in all forums. Far from seeing this as a limitation, the diversity between the forms of debate should be preserved and protected.

**Quality of Argumentation**

If we are to improve the quality of argumentation, forensic educators must be willing to enforce educational standards on the activity. This would require a change both in the way in which we prepare debaters and evaluate debates. With respect to coaching, it would require that we impose the same educational standards on our debaters that we eloquently espouse in our professional writings and associations. Such constructive role-modeling is absent, as was documented in Matlon and Keele's (1984) survey of former NDT participants. It found that "there is a recurring caution expressed in several places that directors set a standard for the ethical integrity of arguments and to teach students the objectives of honest, rational, real-world arguments and to stop game-playing" (p. 202). The implication of such a change in thinking about the nature of debate is clear. If we believe that debaters make implausible arguments,
then we need to encourage our own debaters to develop reasonable positions that are supported by compelling evidence. Rather than bitterly complaining about certain types of arguments, we need to convince our debaters that better arguments exist. To put it simply, meaningful change in debate practice will not occur until we clean our own houses. A necessary first step in a program to protect Lincoln-Douglas debate is for coaches to ensure that their own students debate in an exemplary fashion.

This same commitment to promoting sound argumentative practices should be rigorously adhered to and enforced by judges. Rather than serving as neutral referees, judges should take on the role of active critics. From this perspective, critics should use their debate expertise to encourage quality argumentation. Judges should not be required to accept any argument that violates traditional standards of adequacy or validity. At a minimum, judges should require clear presentation, development and explanation of all arguments, and, if evidence is used, the author and specific qualifications should be presented. When bad arguments are advanced, judges should not be afraid to call them bad arguments. For too long, debaters have been allowed to set the agenda for what is permissible. The time has come to abandon this philosophy as it no longer serves pedagogical interests. Instead of abrogating control for assessing a debate, critics should enforce educational standards on the activity. This sort of activist stance was described by Dempsey and Hartmann (1986) when they wrote: "Where judges of academic debate view the educational values of debate being threatened by the perpetuation of certain practices, even when these practices have been adequately defended in a given round, they too have an obligation to intervene" (p. 172). Such selective intervention, which rewards high quality argumentation, will rapidly eliminate detrimental gamesmanship, and will make the practice of Lincoln-Douglas debate consonant with its theoretical moorings.

This does not mean that the NFA community should endorse wanton or indiscriminate judge intervention on every issue in every debate. It does mean, however, that judges should be more willing to impose their own minimum standards on arguments and practices within a debate. Muir and Panetta (1987), among others, have tried to set appropriate guidelines for judge intervention. The alternative,
forcing judges to assume that all positions are debatable and all arguments are plausible, misconstrues the nature of the critical act. "To acknowledge critical subjectivity," Balthrop (1983) notes, "does not weaken the intellectual value of the perspective. What is important is that some checks exist which keep subjective interpretations bound to the event and to the community's, or field's, standards of appropriateness" (p. 9).

Evidence

Two related problems concerning the use of evidence in Lincoln-Douglas debate must be considered. First, if Lincoln-Douglas debate is an educational exercise designed to teach argumentation skills, it must necessarily involve the use of evidence. While Lincoln-Douglas should emphasize effective communication skills, debate is more than an exercise in persuasive speaking. Accordingly, the "Rules of Competition" (1995) appropriately state that Lincoln-Douglas debate requires "evidentiary support of arguments." Irrational fears that any similarity to policy and value debate denotes the transformation of Lincoln-Douglas into NDT or CEDA constitute a paranoia that only weakens the substance of the activity. Forensic educators should insist on evidence when preparing students to debate and when assessing arguments made in debates.

A second problem, not yet readily apparent in Lincoln-Douglas debate, also needs to be addressed. All too often, contemporary debate privileges the quantity of evidence over the quality of evidence. As evidence increases in Lincoln-Douglas, debaters may begin to support argumentative claims with copious amounts of data at the expense of supporting warrants. Rather than explaining the reasons used to justify a particular conclusion, many policy or value debates have become little more than exercises in reading evidence offering summary judgments. The content of these debates can be reduced to the presentation of a list of claims complete with an expert opinion providing authoritative endorsement of the conclusion. All too often, there is very little explanation for the connection between the evidence and the claims that the evidence is advanced to support (Leeper & Herbeck, 1991/1992).
The evidence substantiates the claim, but it provides no warrant or explanation for why the claim is correct. As a result, the reasons justifying the conclusion are unknown.

Regrettably, the "Rules of Competition" have little to say about the quality of evidence in a debate. Instead, the Rules discuss the minimal elements of a source that must be introduced, the process of challenging evidence, and the type of information that may be offered as evidence. While this discussion is both necessary and important, the Rules ignore more significant questions concerning the assessment of evidence.

As educators, we must encourage the debater to do more than "provide many claims, little data, and no warrants" (Leeper & Herbeck, 1991/1992, p. 24). Along the same lines, we should also encourage students to evaluate critically the evidence that they are utilizing. This is no idle charge as advocates beyond the debate context have regard for qualifications and reservations on arguments.

Further, rigorous and systematic evidentiary clash in debates should be rewarded. "There is nothing wrong," Ganer (1987) writes, "with a judge rejecting evidence or arguments that are counter to his or her basic values and beliefs without having to insist on matching evidence or arguments from the opposite side" (p. 392). Some sources should be accorded more weight than others. Many of the sources used in contemporary debates would not be considered credible by any rational decision maker. Debaters should discriminate between and among evidence based on the credibility of the author and the reasons provided. Even in the case of a credible source, tests of external and internal consistency should be used before decisions are made on the basis of that evidence.

IN DEFENSE OF OUR POSITION

Some in the Lincoln-Douglas debate community will likely find this line of reasoning either objectionable or even outright offensive. Although it would be impossible to anticipate and answer all the criticisms against the positions developed in this essay, we do feel a need to respond to some of the likely criticisms that will be
advanced against our proposal. In particular, attention is given to
claims that this activist stance is inconsistent with the principles of
Lincoln-Douglas debate, that this activist stance is unnecessary, and
that this activist stance is unfair to debaters. These objections are
conceptually distinct, and so each is treated in turn.

**Inconsistent**

At face value, some might argue that this interventionist
stance is inconsistent with the rules governing Lincoln-Douglas
debate. For example, the National Forensic Association's "Rules
of Competition" (1995) are considerably less strident on the question
of speed:

> Since L-D debate adheres to the communication
> principles of individual events, judges are
> encouraged to give a verbal warning to debaters
> speaking too rapidly in a round. If the speaker
> does not heed the warning in that particular round,
> the judge is strongly encouraged to give that
> speaker a loss for the round even if the student has
> otherwise "won" the debate on the basis of the
> stock issues.

On other matters, the "Rules of Competition" speak descriptively
and do not empower judges to enforce the rules with specific
sanctions.

For the most part, we concur with this stance. Debates
should be decided primarily on the argumentation in the round. We
are unwilling, however, to allow the *tabula rasa* perspective to
completely disempower forensic educators. If debaters violate
precepts of effective communication and sound argumentation,
judges should not be bound to evaluate the debate solely on
"analysis, use of evidence, and ability to effectively and
persuasively organize, deliver, and refute arguments." Judge
intervention in the evaluation of Lincoln-Douglas debate helps to
guarantee that this type of debate remains a communicative event
designed to teach effective argumentation skills.

Although others may disagree, such a stance is consistent
with the goals and objectives of Lincoln-Douglas debate.
Moreover, such an activist philosophy is crucial if Lincoln-Douglas debate is to remain different, both conceptually and pragmatically, from policy and value debate. If judges allow the rules themselves to be debated, Lincoln-Douglas debate will quickly come to resemble one-person policy or value debate. Although CEDA was originally intended to be an alternative to NDT, commentators like Ziegelmueller (1990) have observed that both organizations now face similar "issues and concerns" (p. 27). Lincoln-Douglas was not intended to be a one-person version of NDT or CEDA debate, but instead was created to afford a wide variety of students the opportunity to participate in a different type of debate. To preserve this unique form of debate, it is incumbent upon those in the community to actively enforce the "Rules of Competition" and to view Lincoln-Douglas debate as an educational exercise.

**Unnecessary**

Some will likely argue that our proposal is unnecessary. Based on a review of Lincoln-Douglas debate rounds, it might be claimed that this essay badly overstates the case. After all, the rate of speed in an overwhelming majority of debate rounds is comprehensible, most arguments are intellectually sound and substantiated with reasonable evidence, and there are comparatively few meta-theoretical arguments. Given our experience to date, this objection seems reasonable.

However, this happy state of affairs is unlikely to continue into the indefinite future. At the present time, the Lincoln-Douglas community largely benefits from both its manageable size and homogeneity. Many debaters are drawn from the individual events community and most coaches share a common conception of the activity. We suspect, however, that this homogeneity will be severely tested in the months and years to come. As Lincoln-Douglas debate has grown in popularity, a more heterogeneous mix of debaters and judges has already entered the competitive fray. Some debaters will be adept at the rapid rate of delivery sometimes practiced in policy or value debate, while other debaters will be familiar with sophisticated theoretical positions and more counterintuitive arguments. Simultaneously, judges with
experience beyond Lincoln-Douglas debate may be more tolerant of this diversity. As a result of this combination of forces, Lincoln-Douglas debate may soon confront some of the same difficulties as do NDT and CEDA.

This past year, for example, while judging at a regional tournament, one of us encountered a rather unusual round. One of the two participants in this debate was a skilled policy debater and spoke with great speed and clarity. The opposing debater, knowledgeable in the rules governing Lincoln-Douglas debate, objected to the rate of presentation. In response, the rapid debater answered with a lengthy series of cogent arguments defending speed. The slower debater reread the Lincoln-Douglas rules, thus weakly and ineffectively dismissing the arguments defending speed without attempting to respond to any of the specifics. In the final analysis, the individual arguments in defense of speed went largely unanswered despite the presumption lodged in the rules of the activity against speed. Although this may be a relatively simple example, situations exactly like this will occur more frequently in the future as the homogeneity of Lincoln-Douglas debate breaks down due to the increasing size of the community. As our community evolves, the argument that an activist philosophy is unnecessary will quickly lose its intellectual appeal.

**Fairness**

In addition to claiming that such thinking is unnecessary, others might object on the grounds that "radical" reform of this sort is unfair. This claim to fairness is grounded in the mistaken belief that debate is nothing more than a game. Those who hold this position claim that judges should not intervene in the debate process because intervention is necessarily unfair to one side in the debate. While it is true that a particular judge's conception of debate may work to the benefit of one debater, judges have an obligation, even a duty, to enforce educational standards on the activity. It is difficult to understand why many professionals in debate are reluctant to accept this premise, given that many of these same educators routinely impose stringent guidelines in their classrooms. In public speaking classes, for example, teachers frequently require
students to give particular types of speeches (e.g., persuasive, informative, ceremonial, etc.). Would such a teacher be guilty of violating academic freedom if she failed a student for giving a eulogy for an assignment that required a persuasive speech? Would this same teacher be guilty for failing a student for not adhering to the rules of grammar or for delivering a speech in Spanish? Definitely not. Why then is it troubling to require students to advocate sound arguments in a comprehensible fashion? As Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley (1987) argue:

No one expects a professor to be totally neutral in evaluating a student's classwork, some positions have more currency than others for a variety of academic reasons. Professors are asked to apply their expertise in evaluating their student's performance, and thus provide their students with the benefits of this expertise; we should ask for no less from debate judges. (p. 190)

Given that debate judges are experts in debate, one should not fear to use that expertise to improve the quality of the activity.

Second, arguments or theoretical constructs that are inherently uneducational should not be tolerated. Claims that are constructed from evidence fragments, unqualified sources, counterintuitive reasoning, causal oversimplification, and hyperbole are simply bad arguments. The debate judge, as a professional critic of argument, should label them as such. As for theoretical issues, judges should be willing to dismiss theoretical claims that would undermine the educational foundation of Lincoln-Douglas debate.

It will, no doubt, be difficult to defend these educational interests against appeals to fairness. Zarefsky (1992) has observed that "an educational approach leads inherently to the tension between providing structured environment-formats, rules, standards, guidelines, and the like to maximize the chance of positive results, and providing freedom and guidance to students as they learn to make difficult choices for themselves" (p. 32). These difficulties notwithstanding, such an effort is essential if we are to achieve the educational objectives underlying Lincoln-Douglas debate.
CONCLUSION

One of the great strengths of competitive forensics lies in the diversity of our community. By providing students with a variety of forums, we enable them to practice a wide range of skills. If this diversity is to endure, we must be willing to actively enforce the rules that differentiate between and among policy, value and Lincoln-Douglas debate. This was not difficult in the early days of the activity, but there will be an ever increasing pressure to blur the boundaries between the different forms of debate. While we applaud debaters, judges and coaches who are able to transcend the boundaries, we are firm in our belief that forensic educators should work to maintain the integrity of Lincoln-Douglas debate.

REFERENCES


Speech Communication Association.


