Improving the Pedagogical Value of Debate:  
A Call for Oral Critiques

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As present competitors in NFA L-D debate, we recognize the activity not as a competitive end, but as an educational means to develop communication, argumentation, persuasion, and analytical skills. These skills are not only crucial in the forensics arena, but are skills we can carry forth in other academic and career pursuits. We are not alone in our beliefs. Most collegiate debate programs justify their expenditures to academic institutions with the rationale that debate uniquely supplements the student's educational growth (Smith, 1990).

While recognizing debate as an educational exercise, we argue that the means of pedagogical exchange between the judge and competitor is inadequate. At present, the ballot serves as the only medium for educational feedback. Few judges utilize other alternatives such as the oral critique. It is our experience as competitors in NFA L-D debate that few judges feel permitted to verbally evaluate the debate upon its conclusion while some are even unfamiliar with the concept. We attribute the judge's hesitations in offering oral critiques to the ambiguity in the Rules of Competition for NFA L-D debate, hereafter referred to as the "Blue Sheet." Under "The Philosophy of NFA L-D Debate," the Blue Sheet calls for competitors to "be evaluated on their analysis, use of evidence, and ability to effectively and persuasively organize, deliver and refute arguments." While the Blue Sheet recognizes the educational worth of feedback, it falls short in elaborating on how this evaluation should be communicated. We believe oral feedback which does not disclose the decision of the round should be specified as an option to supplement the ballot as a means of evaluation. As advocates of the oral critique, we will first analyze how the present ballot system fails in offering optimal educational feedback. Second, we will propose a model for oral critiques. Third, we will present the advantages of supplementing ballots with oral critiques. Finally, we will address relevant educational
concerns.

THE EDUCATIONAL LIMITATIONS OF BALLOTS

The present reliance on the ballot as the sole means of communicating feedback is extremely problematic. To begin with, there are many feedback limitations of the instrument itself. Given the "finite amount of space" provided on a ballot, Walter Ulrich (1983) explains "any discussion of an hour debate cannot cover all the issues." Within the limited amount of space, it is impossible for the debaters "to be evaluated on their analysis, use of evidence, and ability to effectively and persuasively organize, deliver, and refute arguments" as called for in the Blue Sheet. The judge must employ one of two options. They can either briefly, but inadequately, discuss all the relevant issues, or they can isolate one of the issues for an in-depth review, leaving the other issues in question. In either case, the ballot fails as an educational instrument for the debater.

In addition to the ballot's inability to physically deliver a thorough critique, several other problems stem from the instrument itself. On many occasions, we have received incomplete ballot packets. Our own experiences with missing ballots along with that of others' indicates the problem is not rare or isolated, but expected with the shuffling of hundreds of ballots in the tabroom. When ballots are lost, so are potentially valuable comments and suggestions from judges. Many of the ballots that are received are also illegible. Illegible handwriting makes ballot comprehension difficult and sometimes, impossible. We do not blame the judges for what often amounts to cryptic ballots, but rather, the inadequate amount of time judges are given to write ballots and the pressure they are under from the tabroom to turn them in (we suspect this may also be the reason for unwritten ballots we have received on a few occasions). We therefore feel the ballot itself and the context in which it is written have compromised effective evaluations in NFA L-D debate.

The present ballot system is also educationally unsound because it employs delayed feedback. Since ballots are not received until after a tournament, the tournament becomes the educational experience as opposed to each individual round. This allows for a
competitor to continue possibly ineffective argumentation from round to round throughout a tournament which may have been corrected by more immediate feedback. The impossibility of educational growth during a tournament is especially a concern for programs in which students may compete in only one or two tournaments to fulfill class credit requirements or programs that are limited in traveling because of budgetary limitations.

Additionally, immediacy is important to the educational value of a round due to the biases in individual memories. As the number of rounds accumulate, the debaters' memories become muddled. Their flow sheets and their personal memories of the rounds may not coincide with either their competitor's recollection or that of their judge. By the time the debaters have an opportunity to read their ballots, often a day or two later, they may not remember the specifics of the round. In a hazy recollection of the tournament, the issues of round one may be muddled with those of round three. Due to selective memories, ballot comprehension becomes frustrating and difficult to apply in future competitions.

A MODEL FOR IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL VALUE

We believe that oral feedback should supplement ballots for optimal educational value. Feedback, oral or written, can address three areas relevant to debate: communication skills, strategy, and reasons for decision. Feedback on communication skills answers questions such as: was the constructive speech well-organized? Was the constructive speech well-supported with strong evidence carefully selected for its persuasive value? Was the constructive speech delivered well- good eye contact, polished nonverbals, appropriate rate of speed in delivery, vocal variety to create appeal and to emphasize key ideas in evidence and analysis? Did the rebuttal speeches align competing positions and then compare and evaluate the competing evidence and reasoning behind competing claims? Did the rebuttal speeches concisely and persuasively summarize the rationale for a decision? Did the advocates deliver their speeches in appealing ways? Was the cross-examination skillful?

Feedback on strategy answers questions such as: was the
argument in question complete, thoroughly developed or was it missing a critical piece of evidence such as a clear threshold in the case of a disad? Was the argument strategy or tactic executed effectively? Was the opposition's answers countered effectively in this debate? Were the strategies and tactics technically effective and persuasive? Are there ways to improve the effectiveness (or appeal) of the strategy or tactic employed in this round for future debates?

Feedback pertaining to the judge's decision making process addresses such questions as: what issues did the judge use to decide the debate? Why were these issues important? Why weren't other issues important? How were the individual arguments resolved to decide each of the key issues? What could the losing side do to have changed the outcome of the decision? Were there any missed opportunities? What should the student consider as a strategy if faced with a similar situation in future debates?

The oral critique model we advocate would answer the possible questions on communication skills and strategy, but would exclude feedback on the decision making process. In explaining their decision making process, it would be improbable that a judge could conceal their decision. We feel disclosures of decisions have no educational merit and serve only a competitive end. Some might therefore argue that feedback on the decision making process should be permitted in elimination rounds and at Nationals. We feel this decision rests with the NFA L-D Committee. Our recommendation is that NFA L-D rules restrict a judge's post debate discussions to communications skills and strategy.

Under this model, we believe all judges are capable of providing an educational oral critique. Some have suggested that judges with little debate experience may feel unqualified or uncomfortable in discussing a debate. However, NFA L-D debate is not simply premised on an argument, but the communication of an argument as well. Judges limited to an IE background would certainly be able to contribute oral comments and suggestions in the area of communication skills. Judges with background in debate, on the other hand, could contribute in the area of strategy. Since debaters encounter judges with diverse backgrounds at any given tournament, they could receive feedback through oral critiques that contribute to their growth as a debater in all areas. Also, we do not
advocate that the Blue Sheet should mandate post debate discussions; rather, we feel the Blue Sheet should legitimize the oral critique as a medium for feedback by specifying it as an option for judges.

**THE EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF THE ORAL CRITIQUE**

Use of oral critiques as a supplement to the ballot system will alleviate the aforementioned problems. In support of this claim, we will examine the more communicative advantages of oral critiques, the thoroughness they provide, and the benefits of their immediacy. We will also consider additional advantages of oral critiques.

To begin with, oral critiques are more logistically sound than the ballot. Unlike the ballot, they cannot be lost in the tabroom shuffle. They are also more comprehensible than the many illegible ballots competitors receive at the conclusion of a tournament. Forensics is also full of individuals who can talk faster then they can write and consequently, the oral critique is capable of delivering more information than the written ballot. They are also in keeping with the oral tradition of forensics.

In addition to these logistical advantages, oral critiques provide more educational feedback. In use with ballots, judges won't be forced to cram their analysis of the round and suggestions for improvement into a few inches of space on the ballot. What judges cannot fit into this space can be verbalized, allowing opportunity to address more issues in more detail. This process also allows for two-way communication, therefore a complete educational exchange. The questions which previously arose in response to the brevity or ambiguity of ballots can now be addressed directly by the judge. It should also be noted that judges are not mind readers and thus not capable of knowing with what issues the competitors may be concerned. For instance, a debater who has doubts about a specific aspect of argumentation can now ask the judge. This allows for personal growth of the debater in areas seldom covered on the ballot.

Compared with the ballot, an oral critique provides more immediate feedback. Research in the area of feedback generally
supports the idea that immediate feedback is more beneficial educationally than delayed feedback (Van Houten, 1980). One specific benefit of an immediate oral critique is that it best insures the retention of the judge's comments and suggestions for improvement. This advantage stems from the fact that the oral critique engages both the competitor and the judge in feedback when the round's issues are still fresh in their minds. Mark W. Smith (1990) explains:

The reason why immediate feedback allows for the most effective learning comes from the relationship between time and memory loss. Discussions held immediately at the end of the round prevent debaters and judges from forgetting the round, in whole or in part...in the period immediately after a round [the judge and competitor] have just experienced the competition and are more likely to lucidly remember each speech and each issue. There is less opportunity for the judge's and debater's memory processes to breakdown. Even if they do suffer from a recall lapse, each person has their flow sheets sitting in front of them for quick reference.

The immediacy of the feedback offered by the oral critique will help realize an educational objective of evaluations since the debaters can utilize comments and suggestions in later rounds before they are forgotten.

In addition to solving the ballots system's shortcomings in favor of logistics, thoroughness, and immediacy, oral critiques offer two unique advantages: an improved educational relationship between competitor and judge, and a more rewarding, less intimidating first time experience for the NFA L-D debater.

If debate is an educational activity, the debater is clearly the student. Conventional wisdom regards the competitor's coach as the teacher, but we feel the coach shares their educational responsibilities with the judge. After all, it is the judge who actually observes the debater's performance in the round and, under the Blue Sheet, is assigned the task of evaluating that performance. We feel the educational model advanced by the ballot system is
insufficient. As the classroom supplements the student's text, the oral critique should supplement the competitor's ballot. The present system would seem to support the idea that students need not attend class, but only read the text to educate themselves. However, we know that reading textbooks alone does not provide for optimal educational growth. This is why the classroom exists to provide a forum for educational interaction between the student and teacher. Crucial in this interaction is the opportunity to ask questions, an opportunity that does not exist in mere reading of the textbook. Oral critiques are "of significant educational concern since feedback usually is a component of instructional strategies to assist reading" (Langer and Keenan, 1993). So not only does the oral critique offer its own educational value, it also enhances the effectiveness of the ballot as an educational tool. As students, debaters have questions and an opportunity for educational interaction should be in place. Judges need to be just as accessible to the debater as the teacher is in the classroom. Currently, though, a psychological barrier exists between competitors and judges. The judge is perceived as an intimidating warm body who never speaks, but will eventually author an impersonal ballot instead that, often times, only contains the awarding of a win or loss for the competitor. The competitor and judge relationship could be improved through more personal verbal exchange offered by the oral critique.

Furthermore, the oral critique would be helpful for the new debater. Since part of the philosophy of NFA L-D debate is to lower the entry barriers for new debaters, it seems only natural to provide as much support and educational feedback as possible. The oral critique would allow for this. Many novices, especially from small programs or programs led by coaches with strong IE backgrounds and little or no background in debate, may not have even had the opportunity to have a practice round before being entered in a tournament. In these cases, it seems more educationally sound to give oral feedback after those first couple of rounds to keep them from getting discouraged. For example, simple informational observations such as "stand up during cross examination" or "be more assertive" could make a difference in their next rounds. The present ballot system delays useful feedback. By the time a first time debater receives their ballots, they might
already have become discouraged and may never give NFA L-D debate another try. For an activity that is relatively young and whose continuation depends on newcomers, judges should be permitted to provide encouragement to beginning debaters immediately after a round has been concluded.

EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS REGARDING ORAL CRITIQUES

One concern regarding post debate discussions that has surfaced while writing this manuscript is that debate will continue after the round during the oral critique. In the model we advocate, however, the critique's focus is on compliments and suggested improvements the competitor can utilize in subsequent rounds, not a disclosure of decision. If judges conceal their decisions in a carefully balanced critique of both the affirmative and the negative, competitors will not feel compelled to defend their positions argued in the round, after the round. Under our model, feedback will be limited to strategy and communication skills, so fear of continued debate should be offset. Also, it should be kept in mind that the judge is the discussion leader in the oral critique and in the position to selectively respond to or dismiss questions the competitors ask. Even if a competitor feels they have lost the round and attempts to defend their ground with the hope of reversing the judge's decision, we feel that just as teachers are able to handle a student's discontentment with a grade with patience, care, and respect, the judges too will be able to handle any response similarly to a perceived loss. We feel, however, that competitors will handle oral critiques with maturity and not become confrontational. In a survey of results on the announcing of decisions and providing oral critiques at an AFA-NDT district debate tournament, results suggested that students "...are not motivated solely by the prestige of winning and that they really do value the intellectual exchange made possible by a system that acknowledges the role of feedback and provides opportunities for dialogue between debaters and judges" (Hinck and Chandler, 1992). Additionally, we believe few debaters would become confrontational with a judge after a round for fear of offending the judge and compromising a favorable
Some question how oral critiques will impact what they believe to be already tight tournament schedules. We recognize that time is an important factor at any tournament. However, we feel that if the pedagogical value of NFA L-D debate is to be realized, some time should be allocated in the schedule after each round, particularly prelims, for a judge to give an oral critique if they opt to do so. We believe 5 to 10 minutes would be adequate. Building this time into the schedule may be more difficult at some tournaments than others, but generally the scheduling problems are surmountable. Even if a schedule was so tight as to prevent time for oral critiques, a judge would still have time to offer brief comments to benefit competitors in later rounds.

A remaining fear of the oral critique may be that the reason for ballots will diminish, eventually rendering them moot. We wish again to emphasize that we do not intend for oral feedback to replace the ballot, but wish it to supplement the ballot as an educational tool. Clearly, ballots are important, especially for coaches in assessing their debaters' level of skill and progress. However, we feel ballots are often cryptic and generally difficult for coaches and debaters to refer to. While less may be said on a ballot when an oral critique is given, the debater can better understand an oral critique and through the process of taking notes during feedback, better understand what a ballot means in later review with their coach. The ballot will also remain important in providing feedback on the decision making process, a form of feedback we do not advocate including in the oral critique.

CONCLUSION

We believe that the National Forensics Association has an obligation to realize its pedagogical objective in L-D debate by correcting the inadequacies of the present ballot system. We believe the pedagogical value of oral critiques cannot be ignored and should be legitimized as a means of feedback. We advocate specifying the oral critique as an option for judges in the Blue Sheet to accomplish this.
REFERENCES


