

Understanding Lincoln Douglas Debate

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Webmaster's Note – The URL for the NFA-LD website was changed to reflect a permanent link.

Abstract

This paper offers an overview to NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate, highlighting elements of the event making it unique, discussing the primary judging criteria, and offering an overview to case and position structuring. The central assumptions taken in this analysis of the event are: (1) that the event emphasizes both substance and style and (2) that good argumentation is straight-forward and grounded in clarity of structure and evidence. Taken together this analysis is designed to not only offer an understanding of the event for those not yet familiar with it, but to highlight some of the central issues and points of contention in the event's development.

The central goals of NFA Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate emphasize the development of competitors' "analysis, use of evidence, and ability to effectively and persuasively organize, deliver, and refute arguments" (NFA LD Homepage). LD's founders believed that if they created a strong mission and set of rules, they would be able to lay the foundation for an event that blended the research and refutation skills of traditional debate with the strength of delivery for which individual events are renowned (Minch & Borchers, 1996). While the veracity and validity of these rules is often debated within the LD community, they are what make NFA LD unique. The mission and rules distinguish it from other forms of academic debate in that LD has a clearly proscribed judging paradigm; whereas other forms of debate allow an ad hoc application of judging standards in rounds. Furthermore, Devine (1997) argues that the narrowing of appropriate judging paradigms and approaches in LD offers the event a greater level of consistency in terms of the evaluation of proof and structure so that the debaters can focus more effectively on arguments themselves and affords the event a greater level of accessibility as a result.

These elements make LD distinctive, yet complementary with other forms of debate. For example, Parliamentary Debate—as developed by the members of the National Parliamentary Debate Association—emphasizes audience-centered debate. Thus, in terms of developing an event that emphasizes delivery and persuasion LD and "Parli" are quite complementary. However, whereas competing and coaching in Parli requires a broad based of knowledge across current events, philosophy, history, and the like, LD asks competitors to develop a deep level of knowledge about a single topic in a given year—explicating the contemporary research, critiquing it in depth, as well as developing and modifying individual arguments as they are exposed to refutation and feedback. This depth of knowledge on a single topic is what LD and team styles of debate such as CEDA and NDT (as they are presently practiced) have in common. However, because there is only one person on each side and LD mandates both research/refutation and delivery/persuasion it means that in LD the debaters must limit the numbers of

positions and amount of evidence read in a single round. In this way LD is a viable option for: programs competing in these styles of debate but wanting to supplement their competition; for individual events programs wanting to develop the research and refutation skills required by LD; and also for programs that want to focus their resources on a single event that has the potential for the delivery and style of many individual events, asks for the norms of audience adaptation found in Parli, and the research skills found in team debate.

Though the application of the Stock Issues paradigm has long been questioned in LD, recent empirical findings by Birkholt and Diers (in press) found judges in elimination rounds of LD at the national tournament communicated reasons consistent with the Stock Issues paradigm in their rationales for decision, though elements of other paradigms—most notably the Policy Maker, Critical Listener, and Dialectical Perspective were also present in their communication of decision. Ultimately these findings suggest that the founders have been successful in laying the foundation for an event that emphasizes the research and refutation skills of traditional debate with an emphasis on delivery and persuasion. Therefore, to offer an overview to LD, its central positions, and structures, I will: (1) briefly discuss the decision criteria that should be used by debaters and critics alike and (2) overview effective case and position structuring in the event.

The Decision Criteria in NFA LD Debate

The decision criteria in LD can be separated into three complementary components. The first is the evaluation of a round of debate's substance—the Stock Issues paradigm. The second is the evaluation of debaters' style in the round. Finally, we do have to consider the LD critics' responsibilities in the round of debate.

The Stock Issues Paradigm

The Stock Issues paradigm for decision making in policy debate is the oldest and most "traditional" set of criteria for the evaluation of competitive debate. Because of its ties to classic persuasion theory, the paradigm assumes that people are not likely to change from the "known" and more comfortable status quo without a substantial indictment to that status quo and proposal of a specific and solvent plan of action (Ericson & Murphy, 1987). Ulrich (1992) points out that the stock issues paradigm suggests that there are basic responsibilities that any advocate of a change in policy must face to effectively justify the proposed change.

The five central responsibilities developed in the NFA Stock Issues paradigm include: topicality, significant harm, an inherent barrier to change, the inclusion of a specific plan, the solvency of the harm or comparative advantage gained by the enactment of the plan, and as an option counterplans for the negative. First, the NFA LD Stock Issues paradigm requires that affirmative proposals be topical. This refers to the jurisdiction of the judge to actually listen to the debate as well as the affirmative's ability to fall within the parameters of the res-

olution (Minch & Borchers, 1996; Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983; Ulrich, 1992). Second, the affirmative must show a significant harm to the status quo, representing the credible reason to be dissatisfied with existing policies (Minch & Borchers, 1986; Ulrich, 1992). Third, in addition to showing that the status quo is deficient, the affirmative must also prove that there is a barrier that, absent a policy change, prevents the status quo from correcting itself—this is known as inherency (Birkholt, 1999; Minch & Borchers, 1996; Ulrich, 1992). Fourth, after the affirmative provides a specific plan to change the current system, s/he must demonstrate the ability of the proposed plan to eliminate or reduce the harms and/or accrue a substantial advantage; essentially this is a demonstration of the degree of cure projected to come from the plan proposal (Minch & Borchers, 1996). This fourth element includes both questions of solvency and desirability articulated by Ulrich (1992) in his discussion of the traditional Stock Issues paradigm. Fifth, the negative is permitted to offer a counter proposal (i.e., a counterplan). This alternative proposal must be competitive (i.e., solve the same harms as the affirmative proposal), have a comparative advantage to the affirmative proposal, and may not be topical (so that the negative is still negating the resolution) (Minch & Borchers, 1996; NFA LD Homepage). This element is a little different because it is not required, rather is allowed.

Evaluation of a Debate's Style in LD

Because LD identifies itself as being part of an Individual Events community and because the founders wanted to lay a foundation for the event to emphasize persuasion and an appealing style in delivery, NFA LD includes a compelling delivery as a critical part of the judging process (Minch & Borchers, 1996, NFA LD Homepage). Outside of a specific provision against rapid-fire delivery (NFA LD Homepage), there is little qualification of what it means to have a compelling delivery. Bile (1996) argues that LD, "has significantly expanded opportunities for students to experience the benefits of educational debate... unfortunately...[it] has failed to realize its full pedagogical potential...part of this failure can be attributed to ambiguities in the current rules" (p. 37). As such, he lays out the Dialectical Perspective specifically as a way to adjudicate rounds of NFA LD. The strength and value of this perspective is that it offers specific criteria on which a compelling delivery may be evaluated in rounds. As such it is an ideal complement to the evaluation of the substance of the round and Stock Issues Paradigm.

Bile (1996) argues that we should not view a debate round as a "war of words," rather; we should consider the relationship—within the debate context—of the participants (i.e., judge and debaters). Bile (1996) therefore proposes four specific evaluative criterion and four meta-philosophies to be used in the evaluation of and communication about the debate round. The first evaluative criterion is cooperation, which focuses on the debaters' ability to conform to appropriate rules and norms of the event (Bile, 1996). The second criterion is comprehensiveness, which asks whether the debaters have dealt with the subject matter as thor-

oughly as possible (Bile, 1996). Third, the arguments should be candid meaning that they are made clearly so that they are more open for examination and critique (Bile, 1996). Finally, Bile argues that debaters should be evaluated on their critical skills, that is, their use of the most rigorous tests of the positions presented that is possible.

Underlying these four evaluative criteria are four meta-issues that Bile (1996) suggests should also inform the decision making process and be communicated on written ballots. First, the evaluation of debates ought to integrate delivery and content issues into a single evaluative framework. Second, judges and debaters should be viewed as partners in the decision making process because without all three individuals, there could be no debate. Third, judges should reward friendly, respectful, and productive exchanges between debaters. Fourth, debaters should be evaluated on holistic argumentation. Finally, Bile argues that the decision itself should be made holistically. Therefore, in the evaluation of the round, there should be a focus on the round as a whole, not what is done in particular speeches, rather across the debate.

Critics' Responsibilities in Rounds of LD

Before I discuss the responsibilities of critics in rounds of LD, the discussion to this point has suggested two central assumptions about the nature of decision making in NFA LD. First, as an event that focuses on research and refutation skills while emphasizing delivery and persuasion the debaters ought to debate with both technique and style—being evaluated accordingly. Second, when evaluating rounds of debate there is a duality of responsibility; because the event is built on an interaction between the debaters and with the critic (Bile, 1996), over the course of the round the competitors have a responsibility to adapt to each other and the critic. However, the critic ought to also adapt to the norms of the event.

Taken together these assumptions about the evaluation process suggest that the central responsibility for an LD critic is to evaluate LD qua LD. This is an assumption made in other forms of individual events competition; for example, we would not expect the same types of evaluative criteria or methods to reach a critical decision to be applied to poetry as is applied to informative speaking. Bierch (2001) argues that to be an effective listener, the listener ought to demonstrate that they are listening and understanding the speaker in terms appropriate to the setting. Moreover, Bierch (2001) argues that speakers who think they are being listened to effectively are better able to develop their analysis simply because they feel they are being treated fairly. This supports Bile's (1996) argument that debate ballots ought to reflect the evaluation of a whole round rather than particular speeches, along with the aforementioned criteria for effective debate ballots.

The most effective way for a judge to begin to evaluate LD qua LD is to 'flow' or keep linear notes on the progression of the round. Proper flowing of debate rounds means that in a quick glance at his or her notes, a critic should be

able to see the progression of a single argument across the entire round of debate. This more effectively allows the critic to comment effectively on technique, adaptation, and delivery issues as they related to the arguments made in the round. Flowing also helps judges to more effectively evaluate the round based on arguments made in the round, not necessarily truths they "know" or believe to be that are not made in the debate round. The other critical step in evaluating LD qua LD is for the critic to incorporate their own strengths and backgrounds into comments on style and argument development, while leaving evaluative criteria from other events they coach, judge, and/or have competed in out of the decision. Therefore, by flowing and evaluating rounds of debate only on criteria established for NFA LD competitors can more fairly adapt to the nuances of preference held by individual critics while still being able to compete effectively in their event.

Effective Case and Position Structuring

Because rounds of NFA LD should be evaluated based on a Stock Issues Paradigm and arguments evaluated for both their substance and style as the Dialectical Perspective suggests, there are ways in which cases and positions should be structured to effectively debate in the context of NFA LD. As such, in this section I will offer overviews to the effective and appropriate construction of many of the primary positions necessary in LD and briefly discuss some of the central challenges and contemporary issues related to position structures.

Structuring Effective Positions

Because other forms of debate do not focus their evaluative criteria for the substance of a round of debate on solely the Stock Issues paradigm and because there are typically four constructive speeches across the debate, there are often many types of case and position structures that can be effective and appropriate to those debate rounds. However, that is simply not the case in NFA LD. In discussing the structure of effective positions, I will not address the structure of every possible position; rather I will focus my discussion on the most positions central to LD: case construction, the development of topicality, disadvantages, and on-case front line argumentation. My discussion is based on a single assumption coming from over a decade of involvement in the event as a debater, coach, judge, and researcher—good debate is not about being tricky in the development of positions, it is about creating straight-forward positions that highlight the debater's strength of the research, analysis, and delivery.

Affirmative case construction. There are two affirmative case construction structures that are effective and appropriate in NFA LD debate. First is the "plan-meet-need" structure. In the first contention the affirmative establishes the "significant and inherent harm in the status quo for change." Given the time and emphasis on a conversational-style delivery, the debater will have time for approximately three to four pieces of evidence. This means that a good piece of

evidence—while perhaps emphasizing the description of the problem, degree to which this is affecting particular populations, or reasons why the present system is unable to change—ought to have components of all three elements to establish an effective harms story. Done well, the evidence selected for this first contention will afford an affirmative the basis for any arguments necessary in refutation of negative attacks and summary of the problem in rebuttals. The second component to the plan-meet-need case structure in LD is clearly establishing the proposed plan of action. Plans need not be overly detailed, but need to provide the specific provisions that will enable the plan to solve the harms. The final component in LD's plan-meet-need structure is solvency. Again, choosing three to four effective pieces of evidence, the solvency must directly relate to the provisions of the plan and solve each of the harms described in the first contention. A helpful way to structure the solvency contention is to make sure that each of the pieces of solvency evidence parallels the harms evidence. Like the harms evidence, good solvency evidence should provide all the details that afford the affirmative clear and concise refutation to attacks and rebuttal.

The second case construction structure appropriate to NFA LD is the "comparative advantage" case. This structure contends that the proposed affirmative plan offers important advantages to the status quo. In the first observation of the case, the affirmative needs to construct the inherent barrier to change in the status quo. This should be done with one or perhaps two pieces of effective and clear evidence citing specific reasons why the present system has failed to adopt change. Immediately following is the affirmative's plan—following the same guidelines as discussed in the plan—meet-need structure. The remainder of the case structure focuses on advantages. Because of LD's substance and style issues, an affirmative is typically only going to be able to construct two and perhaps three effective advantages to the plan. Advantage structure begins with one or two effective pieces of evidence indicating the nature of the significant harm in the present system. The following one or two effective pieces of evidence specifically indicate how the plan will offer a comparative advantage to addressing the harms in the status quo. In order to be effective, comparative advantage cases should have more than one advantage.

Topicality. Topicality is often one of the most frustrating positions run in NFA LD—regardless of whether it is topicality, effects topicality, or extra topicality—because it is often poorly structured. A poorly structured position leads to poor debate on the issue. There is a **single** effective and appropriate structure that should be used when constructing any topicality position. The structure, in the appropriate order of presentation is: standards; followed by the test of topicality, if there is one proposed by the standards (this is certainly not a requirement of effective topicality positions, but is often useful); violation of the standards; and impact. There are several reasons—despite some current practices—that this is the only appropriate structure for topicality arguments, each of which has to do with the function of the necessary components.

First, the standards establish the "theory" as to what it means to be topical in any particular round of debate. Standards typically include definitions of terms

as well as concrete evaluative criteria for the judge to be able to decide whether a particular affirmative plan is within the jurisdiction of the resolution; thus enabling them to enact it if it is beneficial. The topicality violation is simply an argument that an affirmative plan is not topical based on standards presented. Without standards established first, these violation arguments are weakened because they are not contextualized for the critic. Effective standards are those that give objective and clear criteria on which a judge may evaluate the topicality of an affirmative plan. Ineffective standards, such as "reasonability" or "fairness", offer vague criteria that essentially ask for a judge to intervene with his or her own opinion of plans that may or may not be topical.

If a negative has proposed that the best way to test whether or not an affirmative plan is topical is by offering a test of the topicality, which is the second component to the topicality position that must be established. Tests for topicality must come before the violation because they, like the standards, establish the objective criteria on which the argument for the violation is built.

Once the criteria for evaluating a plan's topicality have been established, the negative should offer the argument(s) indicating why the affirmative's plan has violated the jurisdiction granted by the resolution to develop plans of action. Good violations analysis directly and specifically applies the standards (and test) of topicality to the affirmative plan in order to concretely demonstrate the affirmative has failed to meet his or her prima facie burden of proposing a plan within the jurisdiction of the resolution, thus affirming the resolution.

The final element that needs to be included are the implications of the topicality violation in the round. Because different types of topicality have different implications, these need to be clearly and specifically delineated by the negative. Essentially, this element of topicality is the debater's specific request for action to the judge in the round.

Disadvantages. While helpful in the opposition of an affirmative's plan, they ought not be considered necessary. However, if the negative argues that the affirmative plan, if put into action, will create disadvantages s/he should make sure that it has link, uniqueness to plan, and clear negative impacts. Little, outside of excessive use of topicality, perplexes critics more than excessively generic disadvantages that they see run far too frequently. Effective disadvantages are specific to cases/plans or case areas. This means that the first component is an effective link of the disadvantage to the affirmative case. This may be made with strong analysis and/or an effective piece of evidence specific to the case or case area. A second component to an effective disadvantage is the degree to which a disadvantage is unique to the affirmative plan. This is most often an argument made by the negative to establish why the disadvantage ought to be given weight against the affirmative's plan versus all other possible plans. Finally, effective disadvantages in LD must have impacts that outweigh advantages or benefits that the affirmative is trying to claim.

On-case front line attacks. The final and most under used type of position in NFA LD are on-case front line attacks against the case based on any of the other stock issues. These positions may apply to specific pieces of evidence

within an affirmative case or entire contentions. These positions should also have a clear structure in order to be effective. This structure should be used not only in the construction of negative front line attacks, but effective responses to arguments made against a portion of case or position run in a round of debate. This is based on classic rebuttal structure. The debater should: (1) clearly identify the specific argument being attacked; (2) make a clear, concise, and specific claim in refutation of the case or position; (3) concisely explain the claim; (4) offer support for the claim—the can certainly be direct evidence in refutation of the point, but solid analysis can also function as effective support for the claim; and (5) the debater needs to place an impact on the argument—indicating what this argument means in the context of the round.

Central Challenges Related to Position Structures

Each of these position structures offered represents an ideal based on the needs and constraints of argumentation in NFA LD. These are however, not without challenges or controversy in current practice. There are three central challenges in contemporary practice related to position structures.

Evidence placement and use. The first of these challenges or issues is evidence placement and use. The needs of the event and decision criteria—based on a combination of substance and style—call for LD to be a straight-forward substantive debate. However, the use of evidence and its placement sometimes creates a challenge to this goal. In order to adequately discuss and develop issues in a single constructive speech per side of the debate, a debater ought to place his or her strongest pieces of evidence in the case itself or front-lines of any positions. Unfortunately, debaters often believe that they can be strategic by saving their best pieces of evidence for rebuttals. Aside from fostering bad debate, it does not push the debaters to use their analytical skills to effectively argue why their position is the best position in the round—rather it makes them overly reliant on reading additional evidence in their rebuttal(s). When debaters fail to place their best evidence in their cases or front-line positions, it almost always means that they must spend their time in the rebuttal rebuilding their case or position with pieces of evidence rather than offering solid analysis to explain why their opposition's position is inferior or does not have nearly as significant of impacts, etc. The result is inferior quality debates and a lack of emphasis on good analysis.

Topicality. Topicality itself is often a challenge in debate because judges feel they want to hear substantive debate and often articulate that topicality debate seems to take away from substance. I believe this is an evaluation of the issue rising from poorly constructed topicality positions and over-use of topicality positions. Issues that contribute to this tension about topicality include: (1) the use of poor standards, such as reasonability and fairness, that take the issue away from a concrete test of the plan's ability to fall within the boundaries of the resolution; (2) on some topics—such as welfare reform for the 2002-2003 season—where there were almost infinite numbers of topical, although somewhat predictable, cases and the sheer number of cases that were simply not topical

forced negative debaters to argue the issue most rounds; (3) a lack of innovation in the objective or concrete ways to test an affirmative plan's topicality; and (4) an emergent trend to structure topicality improperly placing the standards after the violations which only serves to weaken and obfuscate the issue for judges.

Abuse as argument against cases and positions. There is one particularly disturbing trend in the practice of NFA LD that takes away from both the substance and style of the debate. All too often in recent years debaters have used "abuse" standards as measures for the evaluation of cases, topicality, disadvantages, and other positions. The affirmative or negative's abuse of a research burden has never been and will never be an appropriate reason for a judge to accept or reject a position in a debate round. For instance, when an affirmative proposes a non-topical plan, the reason a judge should vote against the plan is not because it 'places an unfair research burden on the negative', it is because the plan's actions lie outside of the authority of the judge granted by virtue of the resolution. Simply put, the judge may not enact a plan that s/he is not allowed to enact. Often these abuse-based arguments are supplemented with the following rationale, "I could not have possibly predicted this particular argument would be run in this round." If the position refuted with the abuse analysis lies within the jurisdiction of the resolution, then what this argument communicates is that the debater making the argument failed to research effectively before the tournament—nothing more, nothing less.

Conclusion

NFA LD is a valuable event for both debate-only and mixed squads because it blends the research, argumentation, and refutation of traditional forms of debate with the style and excellence in communication developed by Individual Events. When performed and evaluated effectively, the event uses a Stock Issues model for evaluating the substance of the arguments presented in the round in combination with a critical evaluation of the style with which the arguments are developed and delivered. I have argued in this paper that applying both the Stock Issues Paradigm and Bile's (1996) Dialectical Perspective is an effective way to understand and actively apply LD's mission and event goals. Furthermore, I have highlighted effective case and position structures for some of the primary positions argued in rounds of LD—demonstrating the elements that are necessary to maintain the balance between substance and style, and highlighting some of the challenges and contemporary issues relevant to those structures. In the final analysis, what makes any event great is achieving a balance of substance and style—when performed and evaluated well, LD offers both pedagogical and competitive excellence, adding an important component to the National Forensics Association's events offerings.

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