

## DEBATE SCHOLARSHIP: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Although there has been a great deal written about academic debate over the years, comparatively little has been written about debate research. Outside of a few bibliographies,<sup>1</sup> content summaries,<sup>2</sup> and calls for specific contributions,<sup>3</sup> no one has seriously addressed debate scholarship as a conceptual entity. Rather, the existing literature on debate scholarship has focused on either identifying or categorizing what has already been written. While such schemes are useful for recording what has been written about debate, they fail to assess the state of debate scholarship. Thus, there seems to be a need for some scholarship about debate scholarship.

As part of a larger collection of essays on forensic research, which is the theme of this special issue of the *National Forensic Journal*, this essay attempts to assess the state of debate research. It is not about a particular set of theoretical questions, but rather speaks to some broader issues underlying much of our writing about debate. Toward that end, this essay attempts to establish four different needs: first, the need for a new conception of debate pedagogy; second, the need for a philosophy of competitive debate that joins educational goals and practice; third, the need for reforging the connection between debate and argument; and fourth, the need for debate theory which improves debate practice. By establishing these needs, this essay implicitly critiques existing debate scholarship while simultaneously suggesting some possible areas of future inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Russell T. Church, "Bibliography of Argumentation and Debate for 1979," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 17 (1981): 159-172; Russell T. Church and David C. Buckley, "Argumentation and Debating Propositions of Value," *Journal of the American Forensics Association* 19 (1983): 239-250; Walter Ulrich, *Debate Bibliography* (Kansas City: National Federation of State High School Associations, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, David A. Thomas, "Research in Debate From the Past Five Years: Trends, Omissions, and Recommendations," in *Advanced Debate*, eds. David A. Thomas and Jack Hart (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1987), 15-28.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, G. Thomas Goodnight, "The Re-Union of Argumentation and Debate Theory," in *Dimensions of Argumentation: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation*, eds. George Ziegelmüller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1981), 415-432.

At the outset, it must be conceded that this is necessarily a subjective assessment. Those who conceive of debate differently may well find some of the claims and explanations developed objectionable, although all would surely recognize the importance of the topics being addressed. This essay is also grounded in my own experiences, largely in interscholastic and intercollegiate policy debate, and may therefore overreach when it speaks about “debate” as if it were a homogeneous entity. Bearing these qualifiers in mind, it is now possible to address some of the needs of debate research.

#### Debate Pedagogy

Expressed in the simplest of terms, debate pedagogy is scholarship about doing debate. If asked, most members of the forensic community would probably say that the primary problem with debate pedagogy to date is that it is in short supply.<sup>4</sup> This argument claims that we need more scholarship about doing debate, especially given the shortage of educators qualified to teach debate.<sup>5</sup> This deficiency could be redressed, the argument continues, if only we encouraged members of the debate community to write more about debate.

In fairness, there is a certain amount of truth in this line of thinking. Someone who entered the debate community without appreciable experience would find themselves in a strange new world inhabited by “turnarounds,” “countervalues,” “permutations,” “holistic focus,” and “topical counterplans.” While these educators might be willing to take the time to learn the activity, there is a relative paucity of writing on teaching people how to debate. Although we have a wide variety of texts and guides, there is a need for even more introductory material designed specifically for those interested in joining our community. Indeed, much of what we label as “forensic pedagogy” presupposes a great deal of knowledge regarding contemporary procedures and practices.<sup>6</sup> These newcomers to the activity need more practical works which explain details ranging from case construction to refutation.

The real problem with this critique of forensics pedagogy, however, is that it is far too simplistic and charitable. It correctly diagnoses a quantitative deficiency, but it is unable to explain why debate coaches seem unwilling to write about debate. To my thinking, this is the more

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<sup>4</sup>A new publication, *The Forensic Educator*, is a healthy development in this area. This publication is intended “to share insights, information, teaching strategies and ideas regarding high school forensics.” “Preface,” *The Forensic Educator* 1 (1986/1987): 2.

<sup>5</sup>See Adrian W. Frana, “Confronting the Coming Coaching Shortage,” *Forensic Educator* 4 (1989/1990): 23-26.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the special issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* containing “Essays on Forensics Pedagogy.” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 23 (1987): 183-235.

difficult and insightful question. Forensic educators do not write about debate for a reason. It is my contention that forensic pedagogy is deficient because many inside and outside of the forensic community believe that it is concerned with “performance” as opposed to “substance.”<sup>7</sup> This is damning, because “performance” is traditionally perceived as being subservient to “substance” in importance and intellectual merit. As a result of this thinking, many competent forensic educators intentionally avoid writing about debate for fear that they will be ostracized from the communication discipline. When such forensic educators do write about debate, they carefully distinguish such work from their “scholarly” writing. All too many forensic educators count any writing about debate as service, while laboring to produce more traditional projects to satisfy publication requirements. Such attitudes are only reinforced by colleagues, review committees, and university administrators who often denigrate the importance of contributions to pedagogy.

This thinking directly threatens our activity in that it assumes that we must teach our students how to win debates *or* how to think critically and argue effectively. It suggests that there is a difference between formulating, researching, and assessing arguments and the actual practice of debating. If this thinking is accepted, our scholarship and intellectual efforts are destined to be regarded as an enterprise concerned with teaching technique at the expense of substance. We will become the sophists of our age, susceptible to the traditional indictments elucidated by Isocrates and others.<sup>8</sup>

If debate is to thrive and prosper in the years to come, we must challenge this stifling view of forensics pedagogy. Rather than distinguishing technique from substance, we must work to join them together in our writing, teaching, and coaching. We must define debate pedagogy as a union of “performance” and “substance.” Our goal should be to produce students who are capable of thinking critically and arguing effectively. While he was speaking to the broader goals of the study of argumentation, Michael Calvin McGee explained this view as follows:

I hope to see an argumentation practice that self-consciously aims to avoid an oligarchy of expertise which would condemn our students to the sad occupation of greasing organizational procedures.

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<sup>7</sup>My argument here is based on insights developed more fully in Michael Calvin McGee, “The Moral Problem of Argumentum per Argumentum,” in *Argument and Social Practice: Proceedings of the Fourth SCAIAFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. by J. Robert Cox, Malcolm O. Sillars, and Gregg B. Walker (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1985), 1-15; and Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Rhetorical Criticism in the Liberal Arts Curriculum,” *Communication Education* 38 (1989): 184-190.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Isocrates, *Isocrates 11*, trans. by George Norlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

I aspire to contribute to a theory of argumentation aimed at understanding the cultural materials which we must use to carve out the best possible life-world. Above all, I hope to live in a community where reality is lived, truths are made, and facts are used.<sup>9</sup>

If we adapt this view of argumentation to debate, it suggests that we must think of forensics pedagogy as more than exercises in the practical or advice on how to win more debates. Rather, debate pedagogy should be concerned with teaching people how to argue real issues, to find truths and make decisions.

This is not to suggest that we need to lessen or to conceal the competitive nature of our enterprise. There can be no doubt but that the competitive setting motivates much of what we do. However, we do ourselves a disservice when we allow debate pedagogy to become nothing more than advice for winning debates. We need to develop a sense of pedagogy which transcends competitive considerations. In its place, we need to develop and nurture a more sophisticated sense of our scholarship. We need to recognize and celebrate the importance of debate pedagogy and to produce pedagogy worthy of such acclaim.

#### **A Philosophy of Competitive Debate that Joins Educational Goals and Practice**

There has been a great deal written about the educational values of debating.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, little attempt has been made to relate these educational values to contemporary debate practice.<sup>11</sup> A growing body of evidence reveals that a disparity may be developing between our educational objectives and the forensic experience that we are providing to debaters.<sup>12</sup> Working from a survey of participants at the National Debate Tournament from 1947-1980, Ronald Matlon and Lucy Keele found that former NDT participants perceived there to be a decline in argument quality and an increase in esotericism. They report that "by decade, the following beliefs are clear: that the use of jargon is on the increase, that unrealistic and spurious arguments are on the increase,

<sup>9</sup>McGee 12.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Kent Colbert and Thompson Biggers, "Why Should We Support Debate?" *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (1985): 237-240; and Dan Kahler, "A Case for the Vocal Arts of Speech, Drama and Debate," *Forensic Educator* 1 (1986-1987): 5-7.

<sup>11</sup>For a notable exception see Kent R. Colbert, "The Effects of CEDA and NDT Debate Training on Critical Thinking Ability," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 23 (1987): 194-201. As the title suggests, this study compares the effect of both NDT and CEDA debate training on a student's ability to reason effectively and thus directly assessing the relationship between existing practices and educational objectives.

<sup>12</sup>Any number of authors could be cited to substantiate this claim. See, for example, Michael McGough, "The Decline of Debate: Pull It Across Your Flow," *The New Republic* 10 Oct. 1988: 17-19; Karen McGlashen, "On the State of Debate," *California Speech Bulletin* 23 (1990): 26-28.

that lack of synthesis of thought is more noticeable, that quantity over quality is apparent, and that too much reliance on evidence at the expense of developed arguments surfaces more in the last decade."<sup>13</sup> Commenting in "On Collegiate Debating," former debater Craig Pinkus charges that contemporary debate is "an exercise which would provide good training for only two occupations: becoming an auctioneer and making Federal Express commercials. And that's all."<sup>14</sup> Such evidence is disconcerting, for it suggests that we have lost sight of the goals of our activity.

At the same time that there has been a change in the nature of competitive debate, there has also been a change in the way that forensic educators view debate. In earlier days, debate was seen as an extension of the classroom. Debate as a co-curricular activity existed for the primary purpose of teaching students how to argue effectively. Educators imposed a preconceived set of standards of what constituted sound argumentation. Debaters who deviated from these norms would receive expert feedback from critics recommending ways of making their cases and negative positions conform to sound argumentative principles. If during a debate one side initiated blatantly unsound arguments or theory positions, it was the responsibility of the judge as an educator to vote against that team, regardless of whether their opposition was technically proficient enough to beat them on the flow sheet. It was in that pedagogical spirit that A.C. Baird advocated penalizing debaters who insisted "that 'should' implies merely theoretical desirability but carries no requirement of practicability" and/or who used "peculiar" analysis "seemingly devised to throw the other team off guard."<sup>15</sup> Educators believed it was more important to discourage unsound and uneducational practices than to reward the performance of technically proficient debaters. The fear existed that if critics started voting for technique over substance, debate arguments would, in the words of Ehninger, "tend to become ever more esoteric, elaborate, and far-fetched."<sup>16</sup>

A profound change in attitude is evident today. Instead of regarding themselves as forensic professionals or educators, many critics see themselves as referees more concerned with enforcing competitive

<sup>13</sup>Ronald J. Matlon and Lucy M. Keele, "A Survey of Participants in the National Debate Tournament, 1947-1980," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 20 (1984): 203-204.

<sup>14</sup>Craig Pinkus, "On Collegiate Debating," *Spectra* 19 (1983): 6. See also Norman Snow, "Letter to the Editor," *American Forensic Association Newsletter* 9 (1987): 11-13.

<sup>15</sup>A. Craig Baird, *Argumentation, Discussion and Debate* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950) 363.

<sup>16</sup>Douglas Ehninger, "The Debater about Debating," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44 (1958): 133.

fairness than with promoting educational standards. According to Rowland and Deatherage, “judges have focused on fairly resolving debates, while largely ignoring the educational effects of some of the practices that refusing to intervene was encouraging.”<sup>17</sup> Judges now view their role as that of a neutral critic charged with processing information and producing an impartial decision. Indeed, the common debate ballot no longer asks who did “the better debating.” Rather, the ballot now asks simply “who won the debate.”<sup>18</sup>

This attitude toward judging debate has come to be known as *tabula rasa*. This phrase reflects the idea that the good critics should approach each debate without preconceptions. While some claim this constitutes a paradigm, it seems more properly characterized as an attitude toward judging in that it transcends the traditional paradigms. Most policymakers, hypothesis testers, or advocates, for example, also claim to be *tabula rasa* judges. The spread of this mentality has been justified on two accounts: promoting diversity of thought and ensuring competitive fairness through judge objectivity. Walter Ulrich, the leading proponent of *tabula rasa* judging, explains:

*Tabula rasa* is consistent with an important goal of debate—encouraging intellectual experimentation—since it permits all issues to be open to discussion. New theories can be introduced and old ones modified. This invites debaters to understand the reasons behind theoretical positions. Instead of arguing that inherency is a voting issue, speakers are required to understand why inherency is important and what functions inherency performs. The *tabula rasa* approach also creates a sense of fairness, since both teams know that the judge will be open to all of their arguments.<sup>19</sup>

Subscribing to this reasoning, most judges have adopted a *tabula rasa* philosophy and as a result have ceased imposing educational standards on debate.<sup>20</sup> Worse yet, according to Ganer, “we have carried the

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<sup>17</sup>Robert C. Rowland and Scott Deatherage, “The Crisis in Policy Debate,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 24 (1988): 248.

<sup>18</sup>The importance of this subtle, yet highly significant, change is developed more fully by B. Christine Shea and T. C. Winebrenner, “Abusing the Debate Situation,” paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, Nov. 1989.

<sup>19</sup>Walter Ulrich, *Judging Academic Debate* (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook, 1987) 38.

<sup>20</sup>See Austin J. Freeley, *Judging Paradigms: The impact of the Critic on Argument*, in *Dimensions of Argument*, 433-447; Ronald J. Matlon and John D. Cross, “An Analysis of Judging Philosophies in Academic Debate,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 15 (1978): 110-123; and Robert C. Rowland, “*Tabula Rasa: The Relevance of Debate to Argumentation Theory*,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (1984): 76-88.

notion of a blank slate to an extreme that is unwarranted in any type of real-world application."<sup>21</sup>

Knowing that judges would passively sit back and approach all arguments in a credulous fashion, debaters have responded by advocating increasingly preposterous arguments and abusive theoretical claims.<sup>22</sup> Experienced debaters quickly learned that they could overwhelm most of their opponents by employing speed, unusual theory, or esoteric arguments. By rewarding debaters who utilize such tactics, judges have encouraged other debaters to copy them until they eventually have come to be viewed as legitimate strategies in the forensic community. Such judge passivity is responsible today for the decline in the quality of debate arguments and the promotion of esoteric theory having little educational utility.<sup>23</sup>

As forensic educators we need to reflect on the appropriate philosophy for judging debate. Specifically, we need scholarship which looks at the connections between judging criteria, contemporary debate practice, and the desired educational objectives. We desperately need a philosophy of debate which can interface these goals with debate practices. Several scholars have already addressed this task, although their work is only a beginning. Douglas,<sup>24</sup> for example, has suggested that if we conceive of debate in terms of an inquiry method for examining and testing ideas of contemporary societal problems instead of as a pedagogical method for training skills of speaking, we may still yet establish a living bond between forensic and contemporary educational demands. Along the same lines, a recent essay by Miller<sup>25</sup> has suggested that the imposition of more ideological judging standards would "move debate back on an educational path."

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<sup>21</sup>Patricia M. Ganer, "The Emperor Phenomenon: The Necessity of Critic Responsibility," in *Argument and Critical Practice: Proceedings of the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. by Joseph W. Wenzel (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1987): 389.

<sup>22</sup>See Jack H. Howe, "CEDA's Objectives: Lest We Forget," *CEDA Yearbook 2* (1981): 1-3.

<sup>23</sup>A number of critics of the *tabula rasa* perspective predicted this would happen. See, for example, Craig W. Cutbirth, "Is Debate Becoming the New 'Sport of Kings'?" *Debate Issues*, (1986): 13- 15; Richard Dempsey, "The Myth of the *Tabula Rasa Judge*," paper presented at the Central States Speech Association Convention, Lincoln, NE, (1983); Richard H. Dempsey and D.J. Hartmann, "Emergent Voting Criteria and Judicial Impotence of Critics," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 22 (1986): 167-175; and Ralph E. Dowling, "Debate as Game, Educational Tool, and Argument: An Evaluation of Theory and Rules," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 17 (1981): 234-241.

<sup>24</sup>Donald G. Douglas, "Toward a Philosophy of Forensic Education," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 8 (1971): 41.

<sup>25</sup>Greg R. Miller, "The Forensics Critic as an 'Ideologue-Critic': An Argument for Ideology as a New Paradigm for Academic Debate," *CEDA Yearbook 9* (1988): 76.

Balancing these competing and often conflicting considerations will be difficult, according to Zarefsky, as “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.”<sup>26</sup> These difficulties notwithstanding, such an effort is vital if we are to achieve the lofty goals we have set for our activity and to secure our place among the liberal arts.

### **Reforging the Connection Between Argumentation and Debate**

In addition to reconsidering our views about debate we need to rethink the relationship between debate and argument theory. It has become fashionable of late to claim that debate is a laboratory for practicing argumentation. The “Definitional Statement” of the National Developmental Conference on Forensics clearly expresses that desire, suggesting that debates “are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences.”<sup>27</sup> Any number of forensic educators have concurred in this judgement.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, few findings of any sort have come from this laboratory. Despite years of competition and literally tens of thousands of rounds of competition, we have produced few insights into argumentation theory. There are, of course, several notable exceptions to this generalization. Wallace, for example used the stock issues in debate to establish a topoi of values.<sup>29</sup> Rowland used the *tabula rasa* paradigm of debate to illustrate some of the problems implicit in a dialectical approach to argument.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, these examples stand virtually alone. Fritch has lamented that few scholars “have attempted to use the debate forum as an arena of research data.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Goodnight has gone so far as to note that “a

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<sup>26</sup>Zarefsky, “In Search of the Forensics Community,” *California Speech Bulletin* 23 (1990): 32. The essay is Zarefsky’s Keynote Address to the National Conference on Forensics Education, Evanston, IL, 1989.

<sup>27</sup>Definitional Statement,” in *Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective*, ed. by James H. McBath (Skokie: National Textbook, 1975) 11.

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Zarefsky, 31; Ganer, 387; and Thomas Hollihan and Patricia Riley, “Academic Debate and Democracy: A Clash of Ideologies,” in *Argument and Critical Practice* 399.

<sup>29</sup>Karl R. Wallace, “The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 49 (1963): 240-249.

<sup>30</sup>Robert C. Rowland, “Tabula Rasa: The Relevance of Debate to Argumentation Theory,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (1984): 76-88.

<sup>31</sup>John E. Fritch, “The Relationship Between Debate Theory, Practice and Pedagogy,” paper presented at the 1989 Central States Speech Convention, Kansas City, MO, Apr. 1989.

significant gap seems to be developing between theories of argument and theories of debate.<sup>32</sup> Debate has, quite literally, become an end unto itself. If we use the laboratory metaphor, we are forced to conclude that debate exists as a laboratory solely for perfecting debate.

The divergency of debate from argumentation is problematic. First, to the extent that we allow debate to become an end unto itself we forfeit an ideal opportunity to study argumentation. Goodnight suggests the following possibilities: using debate to study the nature of argument fields, analyzing debates to assess changes in social structure, assessing the political implications of policy choices, studying how values are defined and linked, and using debate to test the continued acceptability and worth of social knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Fritch, also recognizing the potential of debate to serve as a laboratory, claims that debate could be used to re-evaluate traditional concepts within a relatively pure setting, to study the relationship between the purpose and the practice of argument, and to study the standards for assessing arguments and the decision making process.<sup>34</sup>

Second, when we recognize debate as an end unto itself we legitimate a host of practices and procedures which may be antithetical to acceptable principles of argumentation.<sup>35</sup> While any number of examples might be used to illustrate this point, I wish to focus primarily on the construction of arguments and the use of evidence in debate. It is my belief that contemporary debate teaches an erroneous conception of argumentation in that it emphasizes conclusions at the expense of claims. This can be demonstrated by considering the types of arguments made and by looking at the use of evidence by debaters to justify those arguments. Rather than explaining the reasons used to justify a particular conclusion, many debates have become little more than exercises in offering judgments. The content of such debates is limited to the presentation of a list of claims complete with an expert opinion providing authoritative support for each of the conclusions. All too often, there is very little explanation for the connection between the evidence and the claims that the evidence is offered to support. The evidence substantiates the claim, but it provides no warrant or explanation for why the claim is correct. As a result, the reason justifying the conclusion is lost. McGough, commenting on high school debate in *The New Republic*, noted that "in the surreal world of abstraction that is debate, one argu-

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<sup>32</sup>Goodnight 415.

<sup>33</sup>Goodnight 426-428.

<sup>34</sup>See Fritch 11-13.

<sup>35</sup>This position is developed more fully in Karla K. Leeper and Dale A. Herbeck, "Policy Debate and Argumentation Skills: An Unsuitable Forum?" paper presented at annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Kansas City, MO, Apr. 1989.

ment is as good as another—provided that it is supported by a ‘quote card’ from an expert. Conversely, an assertion, however self-evident, that cannot be so corroborated is suspect.”<sup>36</sup> Worse yet, debaters are equally prone to assume that evidence should be compared based on its quantity as opposed to its quality. Thus, they will shout that they are “outcarding” the opposition by a margin of two or three to one. The clear assumption is the side with more cards on the argument should win the point. Unfortunately, neither of these practices reveal any understanding of how claims are justified or how critics differentiate between arguments.

While debaters frequently ignore explanations, they are equally likely to ignore the qualifications of the authors or publications being cited in a debate. Sources are seldom introduced with the evidence, infrequently discussed during a debate, and all too often the qualifications of the sources are not available at the end of the debate. In many debates the citation is reduced to a name and a date. Even when courses are known and provided, debaters seem unable or unwilling to critically evaluate evidence. As a result, all sources are given equal weight, regardless of their expertise or ideological bias. I routinely hear debaters quote freely from *The Plain Truth*, Lyndon LaRouche, and *The Socialist Worker*. The rigorous work of respected scientists is often treated with the same respect as a phrase or sentence fragment from a local newspaper or a flyer passed out in an airport. Such evidentiary practices are alarming, for they suggest little understanding of how claims are justified.

Worse yet, advocates are rarely willing to admit reservations or to place qualifiers upon their arguments. Debates are won and lost upon the proof of an absolute voting issue against the opposition. The need for absolute certainty, or at least the proof of a substantial risk is necessary to win many judges’ ballots. As a consequence, arguments which may exist only in a qualified form in the real world take on iron-clad certainty within the debate context. Thus, it is not surprising to hear that virtually any action will substantially increase the risk of an economic cataclysm, an environmental nightmare or a military confrontation. This result in the distortion of many legitimate intellectual positions.

Finally, contemporary debaters have little conception of audience. Admittedly, they understand which judges appreciate rapid delivery, who demands full source qualifications, and who doesn’t vote on topicality, but they show no appreciation of which arguments a judge finds intellectually preferable. Debaters rightly understand that most judges

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<sup>36</sup>McGough 19.

are information processors. This phenomenon has resulted in garbled debates which bear little resemblance to real decision making situations. We are supposed to be persuaded by one or two quotations and a sentence of explanation that nuclear war is good, anarchy is a workable form of government, and a host of other unusual, inconsistent and, perhaps to some, inconceivable positions. While a skilled researcher can probably find evidence to support virtually any claim, we do debaters a disservice when we imply that anyone can be convinced of anything as it often seems in the debate context.

Taken together, these deficiencies are disconcerting because they suggest that debate may not be an appropriate method for teaching argumentation. Debate is rewarding practices which have very little application beyond the competitive setting. It is difficult to imagine situations in which advocates present evidence but not reasons, in which advocates intentionally overclaim positions, and in which advocates ignore the preoccupations or biases of the audience. When arguing outside of a competitive debate, none of these practices would likely prove persuasive. As Rowland and Deatherage aptly point out, in a policy making setting unsubstantiated argumentation is often ignored or rejected.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, advocates are careful to qualify their arguments. While we can think of obvious examples of hyperbole, responsible advocates do not knowingly misrepresent positions. Finally, advocates dealing with real audiences know that they are not information processors.

If debate is a laboratory for developing argumentation theory and perfecting argumentation skills, it is apparent that something is seriously amiss. Ganer has lamented that "if we defend competitive debate on the grounds that it teaches students to think, and if that has to be done all over once they are out of the activity, we have lost our *raison d'etre*."<sup>36</sup> To redress this deficiency we need to find the lost connection between argumentation and debate. We need to attempt and draw some conclusions about argumentation theory from the extended and ongoing experiment in debate. At the same time, we need to reaffirm that debate is a laboratory for perfecting argumentation by encouraging practices designed to improve the quality of the argument being produced. Toward that end, we need scholarship which suggest how we can integrate argumentation theory into debate practice. Such scholarship would be of value to students of argumentation and at the same time might provide an impetus for addressing some of the weak argumentative practices in debate.

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<sup>37</sup>Rowland and Deatherage 248.

<sup>38</sup>See Rowland and Deatherage 248.

### Debate Theory Which Improves Debate Practice

I have intentionally placed debate theory last on my list of needs because I believe that it is the area which requires the least amount of additional research. This lesser need, however, probably flows from the fact that we have done a much better job of developing debate theory. Not surprisingly, as debate theory has grown in complexity it has become a larger issue within debates. Michael Weiler has observed that “theoretical arguments have composed an even larger portion of competitive debates.”<sup>39</sup> Roger Solt has lamented that overemphasis on theoretical issues “express(es) the recent tendency of debate to become increasingly esoteric, overly wrapped up in itself, and divorced from real policy concerns.”<sup>40</sup>

While some have defended the development of debate theory and argued that it should be encouraged in debate rounds,<sup>41</sup> the further development of debate theory is problematic for three reasons. First, most theory does not contribute substantively to our understanding of debate. Zarefsky has observed that “not entirely without foundation is the oft-repeated charge that research of this type is trivial, even banal—and the reason is that it does not advance our understanding of forensics, the genus.”<sup>42</sup> Instead it increases our understanding of how a particular construct might be applied to gain a strategic advantage in a debate.

Second, it often seems to the informed observer that debate theory has become an end unto itself. Such theory has become so specialized that it has made debate almost indecipherable to the uninformed observer. Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley 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.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Michael Weiler, “Debate Theory: Delusion and Snare,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, CA, Nov. 1981.

<sup>40</sup>Roger Solt, “Critique of the Final Round of the 1980 National Debate Tournament,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 17 (1980): 56.

<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Robert H. Gass, Jr., “Theoretical Arguments in Debate Rounds: Toward a Justification,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 23 (1987): 220-235.

<sup>42</sup>David Zarefsky, “Argumentation and Forensics,” in *Proceedings of the Summer Conference on Argumentation*, ed. Jack Rhodes and Sara Newell (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1980) 22.

<sup>43</sup>Thomas A. Hollihan, Kevin T Baaske, Patricia Riley, “Debaters as Storytellers: The Narrative Perspective in Academic Debate,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 23 (1987): 185.

Moreover, the increased focus on debate theory detracts from the meaningful discussion of policy alternatives. The National Developmental Conference on Forensics recognizes these unique educational skills promoted by policy debate:

Conferees recognized that the traditional practice of debating propositions of public policy has many educational purposes, and they particularly endorsed its value as a means of preparing people to participate as advocates or critics in situations in which policy decisions must be made. The theory and practice of debating propositions of public policy in interscholastic competition, therefore, should be based upon sound theory and practice appropriate for realistic policy deliberations.<sup>44</sup>

While it would be unfair to link all of our woes to debate theory, there is no doubt but that some portion of this problem, either directly or indirectly, has been caused by the development of debate theory.

Finally, the growing sophistication of debate theory has created formidable barriers to participation in the activity. This becomes increasingly evident when one remembers that at one time, a considerably more heterogeneous mix of persons were involved in intercollegiate debate. Participants included students with and without high school debate experience; coaches who were formerly college debaters, coaches who were formerly high school debate coaches, and coaches who were speech and argument teachers who began debate programs from scratch. Today, the activity has become so specialized that only a very small group of students and coaches are able to compete in policy debate. While CEDA debate theory is less specialized, it now appears that theory has become more prevalent in that type of debate as well. All too often, extensive theoretical knowledge is required as a precondition of participation.

This is not to say that debate theory is evil, nor is it to argue that we should go back to the debate of an earlier era. I am not arguing for a return to "the good old days." Rather my contention, like that of Rowland, is that debate theory should be assessed primarily on its implications for debate.<sup>45</sup> While this appears easy enough, it would have a profound impact on debate theory. Robert Gass, for example, has suggested that debate theory should be evaluated according to some combination of the following seven standards: self-consistency, falsifiability or testability, simplicity, generality, predictability, repeatability, and

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<sup>44</sup>James H. McBath, ed. "Recommendations adopted by the National Developmental Conference on Forensics," in *Forensics as Communication* (Skokie: National Textbook, 1975) 20.

<sup>45</sup>See Robert Rowland, "The Relationship Between Realism and Debatability in Policy Advocacy," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 22 (1986): 125-134.

visualizability.<sup>46</sup> While these are all valid tests of a theory, they do nothing to assess the effect of a theory on the quality of debate. Theory should be evaluated based on how it interacts with debate. “Good” theory should promote argumentative clash and reasoned discussion of the pertinent issues.

Working from this conception of theory, any number of theoretical issues worthy of scholarship could be pursued. Commenting on value debate, Matlon has suggested that we still lack “commonly accepted ground regarding the model of ideal value debate.”<sup>47</sup> This difficulty, Matlon continues, is heightened by the “quasi-policy” nature of value topics selected in recent years.<sup>48</sup> To redress these problems it will be necessary to consider anew the nature of value resolutions, how values are justified, and how judges should assess competing value debates. While some of the necessary theoretical tools could be borrowed from policy debate, there are substantive differences in the two forms of debate resolutions which may prevent the importation of vital concepts such as presumption and inherency. Moreover, if value debate is to emerge as a distinct entity, it will be necessary to avoid borrowing concepts as this practice would make value debate dependent on the resolution of theoretical controversies in policy debate.<sup>49</sup>

Within policy debate there is probably less need for sweeping theoretical innovation. Recent years have seen fewer major ideas, although the introduction of the “narrative paradigm”<sup>50</sup> may have significant implications for contemporary practice. However, we need to reconsider many of the existing theoretical constructs based on how they “fit” within the existing debate format. For example, we need to adapt existing paradigms to the debate format, to develop a workable model of fiat, to define the ground available to the negative for formulating counterplans, to reconcile the different ways of viewing the resolution, and to consider how contemporary tactics affect the quality of argument. While this list could surely be extended, in many respects the research required is reactive in that it will assess previously developed constructs rather than breaking new ground.

There is undoubtedly a need for more debate theory, especially with respect to value debate. The point of the huge caveat in this essay is to urge caution—debate theory often affects debate practice in strange

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<sup>46</sup>Gass 228-223.

<sup>47</sup>Ronald Matlon, “Debating Propositions of Value: An Idea Revisited,” *CEDA Yearbook* 9 (1988): 4.

<sup>48</sup>Matlon 6.

<sup>49</sup>My discussion of borrowing is grounded in Charles A. Willard, “Argument Fields,” in *Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research*, ed. by J. Robert Cox and Charles A. Willard (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982) 24-77. Hollihan, et al. 184-193.

and detrimental ways. Debate theory should not, under any circumstance, be used to legitimize practices that run counter to educational considerations or sound argumentative practices. We should also be wary of theoretical innovations which further increase the specialization of debate.

Although I have adopted a critical tone throughout this essay, I want to end on a positive note. I believe that debate is a vibrant and vital activity. Our teaching and coaching experiences, a variety of studies, and personal testimonials all attest to the value of debate. Unfortunately, it is easy to lose sight of what is right with debate and to dwell on our failures. As a community, we have grown increasingly introspective. It often seems that everyone has their own theory about why debate is disintegrating or regressing. While such introspection frequently produces constructive reform, it often functions to divide our community into warring factions. Rather than concentrating on what is right with forensics, we spend our time trying to identify villains and assign blame. This is not to say that debate is immune from criticism; rather it is to suggest that a more constructive approach would be to try to improve our activity through our scholarship. In this positive spirit I have tried to establish some needs which might lead researchers in that direction.