

ON THE AIR

The Connection Between Educational Broadcasting and the Debate World

by Paul L. Gaba



(above) Pete Bowers, the author's radio teacher and mentor at WBFH-FM in Michigan

QUIZ TIME: Who among these is not like the others? Oprah Winfrey, Tom Brokaw, Jane Pauley, Paul L. Gaba.

That last guy? That would be me. Yes, putting myself in the same sentence with three iconic broadcasters might seem narcissistic and vain. But I do have significant broadcasting training and experience. I'm just using that training differently—in a career called speech and debate.

I've been coaching speech and debate in Florida since 2000, and hundreds of students have enrolled in my class the past 17 years. Many have inquired about my own debating experiences. Sadly, my high school offered no such program. However, "radio broadcasting" was an option, and I spent two-and-a-half years as a DJ and newscaster in Michigan at the Bloomfield Hills School District's educational radio station, WBFH-FM. And while "radio broadcasting" and "debate" might seem as alike as chalk and cheese, the skills I learned at "The Biff" prepared me for all of my professional experiences.

While yearbook, newspaper, and marketing were available, I quickly caught the radio bug. It was exciting, a chance to do something beyond the mundane

required courses. It offered an opportunity to speak into a microphone and spin tunes—for a grade! And to wear cool shades and sign autographs—for groupies! And to emulate the cool cats on *WKRP in Cincinnati* (a staple of early 1980s air aces).

But beyond these perks were numerous life skills, which are universally applicable to those taught in debate. Both hone critical thinking, researching, writing, and oral communication abilities. Both involve mentorship of students from an adult supervisor, and of newer students by program veterans. Both utilize real world knowledge. Both are comprised of close-knit groups of highly intelligent and motivated young adults, many of whom remain friends long after graduation. Both teach management, teamwork, confidence, and important "people skills." And both give youth a purpose.

At the time, I didn't realize this; but one of the great things about education is its impact is measured futuristically. Looking back, I see the powerful foundation radio provided me scholastically and professionally.

My radio teacher and mentor was Pete Bowers, who was the only general manager WBFH knew from its inception in 1976 until his retirement in June 2017.

And I can say, unequivocally, the biggest positive influences in my life include Bowers, who helped guide me to a focus on broadcasting and journalism as an undergrad at Central Michigan University, and later into teaching.

"Even though most of my students didn't go into broadcasting, it's still one of the best classes someone can take because of the life skills they learn," Bowers says. "You keep hearing, 'People need better communication skills.' Well, I hope that's what they learn here."

Great teachers like Pete Bowers make a difference. And he cared, *passionately*, about the product being put on the air, and—more importantly—for the students under his guidance.

Practical application of life skills is common to both debate and radio. "You can read a book on how to be an on-air personality 30 times, but you'll never be good until you actually do it," Bowers says. "And every time you do something, the better you will be. I had [the students] do show prep, so they knew what 'hot topics' were out there to talk about. I mean, for the school musical, you have three months to prepare for a few shows; in radio, you have three minutes to prepare for each performance."



“

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Frank Novak, WBFH alum and current Marketing Manager for the Detroit Lions, says, “The exercise of on-air prep, such as compiling news stories, sports scores, and writing on-air commercials, provided as much useful real-world experience as any college course would.” He continues, “The skills I learned played a huge role in not only building that first resume, but providing me with the background and experience I could take into the ‘real world.’”

Along with “live” impromptu and extemp moments (quick, how does the DJ handle dead air when the song doesn’t play on cue?), radio and debate go hand-in-hand in myriad ways. Morning shows are full of humorous (and often team) interpretations as part of the schtick. Sportscasting requires “setting the scene” for listeners. Newscasting or hosting a talk show mandates being on top of current events, locally and globally, as well as solid oration and interviewing skills. And radio is, of course, “theatre of the mind,” with no costumes or props—just like many interpretation events.

“In radio, you have to be compelling and interesting, because there’s nowhere to hide. It’s up to you to engage the audience, and I learned that in educational radio,” says another WBFH alum, Matt Friedman, founder of the Tanner Friedman Strategic Communications public relations firm in Detroit. “You are on the spot at some point, and you have to figure out a way to deliver.”

There’s also management skills. “Regardless of what you may go into as a career, you will most likely have people working underneath you,” Bowers explains. “You have to handle those kinds of responsibilities at a high school radio station.” Radio students manage and work in various departments, such as news, sales, and promotions. Debate offers similar leadership as interp, congress, or debate events captains, among other options. And both programs usually have a student president to coordinate and lead by example.

As with debate, high school radio veterans work with newer students to learn the ropes, whether in using

digital recording equipment, writing news copy, or airing phone calls live. Students also need to be able to conduct interviews, do sports broadcasts and remotes from news events, and handle other “professional” broadcast duties, in between studying for exams and doing homework for other classes.

“It’s fun to see advanced students work with the newer staff to learn these things,” Bowers says. “I could go in there and do that, but it’s way better when one of your advanced students engineer shows and teaches them how to be an air personality—how to run the board,

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find things they need to play, read the weather live. They learn what it’s like to be the teacher.

“And as they progress as a student broadcaster, when I listen to them, I can tell if it’s an improvement, and make sure to mention it to them the next time I see them,” Bowers says. “I think that’s important for an educator, to provide that kind of feedback.”

Both debate and radio provide confidence to young adults. “My high school radio teacher gave me the confidence and knowledge to make it happen,” says Cara Carriveau, afternoon drive host at WSHE in Chicago, who started at West Bloomfield High School’s WBLD in Michigan. “His belief in my abilities was so amazing, I can’t even imagine how my life would have turned out had I not taken that radio class. I certainly would have struggled in college, and in fact, may never have even figured

out my passion for a career in radio at all.”

“High school radio made me a better conversationalist and made me well-read,” adds Christopher Grindrod, a WOFI alum from Michigan who spent several years in Bonaire (an island in the Leeward Antilles) with the international broadcast ministry Trans World Radio.

Since 2003, WBFH has been recognized as the best high school radio station in the nation six times, and the top high school station in Michigan 11 times, with numerous students earning honors in various individual state and national broadcasting categories. Fourteen students have attended the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication at Syracuse University—the top broadcast/journalism school in the nation.

“It’s nice to be recognized, but we don’t do what we do to win state and national awards,” Bowers says. “However, it is a nice motivator for younger students.”

Yet another parallel with debate.

Looking back, some of the coolest things about being in high school radio were the variety of unique experiences it provided—like playing a charity basketball game against DJs from a professional Detroit-area rock and roll station, or the annual marathon to raise money for the March of Dimes, which involved seeking pledges for songs or goofy stunts.

The irony is Bowers never planned to go into education. “When I was at Central Michigan University, I’d sit around the radio station with my broadcasting peers and we’d talk about, after we’ve been in the business for a long time, how nice it would be to buy our own radio stations, to program what we wanted, to hire who we wanted,” Bowers says. “Well, that happened to me at age 23. I remember the job posting said ‘radio station manager,’ and I said, ‘Sounds good to me!’”

“Teaching wasn’t part of it. Then [the district] said, ‘By the way, at some point we’ll be offering classes,’” Bowers says. “I told them, ‘I don’t have a teaching certificate.’ So they worked to get me vocationally certified. I had never done any student teaching, or even taken an education course. And they said, ‘Well, it’s just like any other class, except you’re in the front.’”

In some ways, this parallels the world of high school debate coaches—the difference being we become educators with the intent of teaching, and then administration swoops in and entices us into coaching. This usually happens when we are new to the profession, meaning we (a) have time and (b) need the financial stipend to (c) help pay those impending college loans.

Trial by fire. Many debate coaches (and novices) have been there.

Bowers literally built the station from scratch. There were no “Introduction to Radio” textbooks, so he used the Federal Communication Commission licensing guidelines as source material. He created 40 “minimum objectives” for students to achieve every semester, showing basic proficiency in a variety of areas such as recording promotions and writing news copy. He incorporated “old time radio” programs from the 1930s into teaching the history of radio broadcasting.

Bowers may have started out focusing on management, but he’d turned 180 degrees by the time he retired. “I got to love teaching,” Bowers says. “It was like being a stand-up comic wanna-be. I had the microphone, with which I walked around the classroom. I used props. I had lots of stories [from my college radio career], and I always tried to relate them to the topics we talked about, to try and pass along my experiences to them.


Keeping the attention of teens for 90 minutes isn’t easy.”

Looking back, I spent nearly 20 years in communications prior to becoming an educator. I took my experience at WBFH and scored a mid-week graveyard shift at the college FM station—a rarity for a freshman. While still in college, I landed employment at WWJ, Detroit’s all-news radio station. After graduation, I worked a variety of newspaper jobs across Michigan, covering everything from local high school sports to corruption in county government. And in the mid-1990s, while I was free-lancing for *The Detroit News*, Bowers offered me the WBFH assistant manager position, which led me back to college, a teaching degree, and a move to Florida in 1999.

I’m not alone in following that kind of career path. “My experience at WSDP set the trajectory of my career at the age of 16,” says Central Michigan University associate broadcast professor Patty Williamson, an alum of the Plymouth station in Michigan. “I chose my college based on the strength of their broadcasting program, worked in commercial radio for a decade, and then decided to go back to school for advanced degrees in the same field. Now I teach young aspiring broadcasters and filmmakers. The experiences I had at my high school

station gave me the foundational skills I’ve built upon for the past 30 years.”

So while Oprah, Tom, and Jane used their debate experiences to foster careers in broadcasting, I brought my radio background into the debate classroom. I incorporate many of the lessons Bowers provided over four decades as a model. The crux is helping young adults learn how to harness their inner voice and make it shine. In some cases, their voices were already there, but needed to be fine-tuned; in others, they didn’t even realize they had a voice. I can only hope to be as positive an influence for my students as Pete Bowers was for his.

Take that, Oprah! 

You can watch Pete Bowers’ retirement ceremony video, where the author and other alumni paid tribute, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwF6O0maTx4.



Paul L. Gaba is a three-diamond coach at Wellington High School. Prior to coaching debate in Florida, he was the assistant manager of WBFH-FM from 1995-1999.

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