

Policy Debate is Committing Rhetorical Suicide: Let's Save Lincoln Douglas

by Dan O'Rourke

Thirty-five years ago I was a mediocre high school extemper. Though I did not win much, I learned a great deal about public speaking and myself through the competitive experience. In college, I continued to compete in forensics and began my study of communication in earnest. I went on to earn a Masters and Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Public Address, but believed that my association with competitive speech and debate had come to an end. Three years ago, I was pleasantly surprised when my son entered the world of high school debate. He was chosen to compete in an event called Lincoln Douglas debate. I assumed this event would be a form of one-person Policy debate. Fortunately, I was wrong.

In 1974, my senior year, my home state of Ohio was at the pinnacle of Policy debate. Toledo Whitmer had recently won its second national championship and third consecutive state championship.¹ Policy debate was so popular that tournaments held four flights of debate for varsity, junior varsity, sophomore, and novice competitors. In the pre-internet/computer days, Policy debaters learned to “tear apart” the government documents section of the local academic library to fill their file boxes with evidence cards. These individuals were among the best and the brightest at every high school. We “speechies” found the rate of speaking in Policy to be too fast but there were constraints on the delivery of successful debaters. The majority of weekend judges were speech coaches and parents; therefore, Policy debaters were limited in their acceptable rates of delivery. This is the world of debate that I had known.

I reentered the world of forensic competition in 2006 and was ready to begin my role as a debate parent judge. I assumed that I could evaluate any category of debate since I had experience, advanced training in argumentation and debate (I teach an Argumentation course in college), and I had

studied the new topics. Sadly, I was mistaken. My first round of Policy I was assaulted with the question, “What is your paradigm?” I had no idea of what they were talking about so I offered a list of my past qualifications in an effort to prove myself worthy of judging four teenage debaters. Second, I readied my pen and legal pad to flow the round. It was an impossible task. The rate of speech, the disorienting double-breathing techniques, and the rampant debate jargon made the first affirmative incomprehensible to me. Meanwhile, my former-debater judging colleague typed feverishly on his laptop to flow but disdainfully played Solitaire during prep times. I soon learned that this was the state of Policy debate. Numbers of competitors were down, public schools were dropping Policy programs, and only an elite class of competition was flourishing. It quickly became apparent to me: Policy debate is committing rhetorical suicide.

This issue has concerned me for the past three years and so it was with great interest that I read Steven P. Kennedy’s article in a recent issue of *Rostrum*.² I am heartened that there are a few quality judges holding Policy debaters to a reasonable standard of communication. Sadly, however, I am far more pessimistic than Kennedy about the state of Policy debate and believe it may be too late to save it. Lately, I have been seeing more and more of the negative characteristics of Policy creeping into rounds of Lincoln Douglas competition. My purpose in writing this essay is to identify these trends and offer suggestions to save Lincoln Douglas debate.

First, judging panels for Lincoln Douglas debate must be extended to include qualified judges from all areas of speech and debate. Policy debate has become a contest for Policy debaters, run by Policy debaters, and judged exclusively by ex-Policy debaters. Anyone wishing to see a championship round of Policy debate should refer to the Web site <http://www.schooltube.com/video/3312/2007-Glenbrooks-Policy-Debate->

Championship-Part-1.³ I offer this round from the Glenbrooks tournament as a top-flight example of Tournament of Champion style of Policy debate. There is no “real world” application to this form of communication. Teachers would not permit such histrionics in a classroom. No judge would tolerate it in a courtroom and legislators would bar it from political debate. When I show this example to friends and academic colleagues, the reaction is either revulsion or laughter. Where is the academic application to Policy debate? Could this example of Policy debate in any way be considered effective communication? Lincoln Douglas debate can save itself by reaching out to a wider audience. The value-oriented debate was initiated as a corrective to the perceived problems of Policy. Tournaments should consciously place non-debate judges in elimination rounds of Lincoln Douglas debate to ensure that it remains an audience-centered form of persuasion. All speech and debate judges should be trained in the time limits and rules of the event. In Lincoln Douglas, all judges should be informed about current events but be able to evaluate the affirmative and negative arguments without political or social bias. Ideally, this would mean that any well-informed citizen could serve as a credible judge for Lincoln Douglas debate.

Second, Lincoln Douglas debate must minimize the use of jargon. Jargon is defined as “the specialized vocabulary and idioms of those in the same work.”⁴ It should also be noted that a secondary definition is “jibberish,”⁵ which would reflect the understanding of those outside the select profession. Every discipline develops its own shorthand terms to save time in discussion and to distinguish one specialized area from another. Over the years Policy debate has become inundated with acronyms and strategies that have been reduced to jargonistic phrases known only to those schooled in “Policyspeak.” Kritikal analysis strategies on “eco-fem, capK, Heidegger, or

eco-Buddhism”⁶ might as well be spoken in Greek to the average judge. Lincoln Douglas debaters have begun to develop a terminological set of their own. Debates must focus on values, evidence, and issues rather than rhetorical skirmishes over the superior use of jargon. Joseph Martin III recently wrote: “(LD) Debaters... often make use of the world of philosophy to give the appearance of authority, intelligence, and gravitas.”⁷ Philosophy can inform or obfuscate. Arguments derived from Locke’s Social Contract can succinctly explain complicated relationships between the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of the state. However, when such philosophical treatises obscure rather than explain an argument to the judging panel, they are reduced to jargon that alienates judges.

Third, the primary function of Lincoln Douglas debate must be educational. Policy debate has become argumentation on steroids. Our hyper-competitive culture has turned a once proud educational tool into an exercise in garishness. The season begins for many debaters with a mandatory trip to a summer camp. Briefs are prepared, evidence is disseminated, and speakers are taught to breath in a way that allows them to spew out more meaningless sounds per minute. In ancient Greek society, rhetoric and the dialectic were means of engaging a learned individual in a discussion that might enlighten both parties. Critical thinking, research, and eloquence were the tools of public citizens engaged in a debate. I fear that Policy debate, or at the very least national Tournament of Champion Policy debate, has become an elitist exercise in rapid response. The fundamentals of effective communication have been lost. Research is supplemented with too much purchased evidence for fear that an opponent with the “professional material” will gain a competitive advantage. Critical thinking is now masked as “kritiques.” Tools of

persuasion, eloquence and audience-analysis, are deemed irrelevant by the judging preference sheets of competitors-turned-judges who challenge the debaters to speak faster. Lincoln Douglas debate allows coaches to introduce the students to scholarly research, moral philosophy, civics, contemporary social issues, and the study of communication. Argumentation and debate are grounded in the study of communication. High school coaches whose academic training lies in English, history, theater, political science, or some other area of academic study could benefit from a workshop in communication. The National Forensics League has committed itself to professional recognition and training of the dedicated individuals who serve as high school speech and debate coaches.⁸ I offer this suggestion not as an act of professional vanity but rather as a refresher course in the fundamentals. High school speech and debate coaches instinctively know from years of experience if a cutting or an argument will work in their district. To teach students this art of audience analysis, one must be familiar with the study of communication.

It has been a great joy to me to return to the weekends of lukewarm coffee and stale donuts that we know as speech and debate. I learned so much from the activity, my fellow competitors, and my coaches more than three decades ago that the study of communication became my chosen profession. As a second-generation forensic parent, it has been wonderful to watch my son grow as a person and a competitor in Lincoln Douglas debate. I have judged extensively over the past three years and really grown to appreciate the intellectual rigor and art of value-oriented debate. Sadly, my experience with Policy debate has been far less rewarding. My brother was a Policy debater in high school and I always admired his passion and dedication for research and the crafting of effective cases. Today, I find myself

apologizing for what has become of this once proud form of intellectual engagement.

I fear that Policy debate may soon die in the public schools. In this era of economic recession and cutbacks, it is difficult to justify the costs of a Policy debate program that requires camps, purchased evidence, paid former competitors as judges, and expensive travel to serve the needs of so few students. Elite Tournament of Champion programs may flourish in private academies but it would be a great loss to our public educational programs if students were not trained in the arts of rhetoric and argumentation. The world is becoming more diverse every day and information grows exponentially via the internet and media services. More than ever, students need to learn how to think critically, evaluate information, and test themselves and others through the effective presentation of arguments. I fear that Policy debate may be lost to us. The community of Policy debate has created a cult of communication that serves only its own purposes. If we act now by implementing a few simple suggestions, we can save Lincoln Douglas debate from the same forces of hyper competitiveness and preserve its rhetorical integrity. ■

About the Author

Dan O’Rourke is an Associate Professor of Communication at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio. He competed in Boys’ Extemporeous Speaking from 1972 to 1974.

¹ Ohio High School Speech League. http://www.ohssl.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9&itemid=30

² Kennedy, Steve P. “Sweet Home Indiana or How to Fix Policy.” *Rostrum* 84 (2), 34-35.

³ <http://www.schooltube.com/video/3312/2007-Glenbrooks-Policy-Debate-Championship-Part-1>

⁴ “Jargon.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*. 2nd college ed. 1974.

⁵ “Jargon.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*. 2nd college ed. 1974.

⁶ Richards, Jeffrey A. “The Line Between Policy and Value Debate: Notes From the National Circuit.” *Rostrum* 83, 8: 25-27.

⁷ Martin III, Joseph. “Oh Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas! Look What Has Become of You: A Call to L/D Debate Action.” *Rostrum* 83 (7), 33-37.

⁸ Wunn, J. Scott. “Empowering Educators: NFL’s Commitment to Professional Development.” *Rostrum* 83 (4), 7-10.