

The Ethics of Debate Coaching

by Tom Fones

“I’m a card-cuttin’ machine.” These were first words out of his mouth after I asked him to describe why he wanted to be an assistant coach at my school. I didn’t know how to respond. He meant that as a good thing, I’m sure. How was I to politely say that I thought what he was bragging about was unethical? How was I to make it sound friendly when I said that I thought that coaches who prepare evidence for debaters, hand them speeches and/or debate vicariously through them were in the wrong? How was I going to say that coaches who hire assistants specifically to be “super-debaters” and act as ventriloquists for their students, are immature and wrong-headed? This was not going to be an easy discussion.

Teaching someone to debate has value, in an educational sense, only when the logic of the activity is taught from the ground up, not when debaters are simply told what to say and when to say it like trained parrots. I see a clear distinction between a debate teacher and a debate coach, in that a coach is concerned primarily with wins and losses, whereas a teacher is concerned with the educational benefit for the student. By the way, this distinction has nothing to do with whether the adult is actually in a classroom or not. In short, the point of debate should be to teach students skills that they will use for the rest of their life. Trophies are simply motivational tools to inspire them to put in the effort.

The challenges of teaching debate, as opposed to coaching it, are really two-fold: 1) it takes more time to teach a student from the ground up, and 2) teaching the right way, instead of taking shortcuts may not produce instant or regular competitive success.

Some coaches say that they want “to get kids started” by handing them speeches, blocks, etc. written by coaches and/or varsity debaters. The problem with this approach is that young students are ultimately left to pronounce they don’t understand, and

become leaves without trees, advocates for positions they are unfamiliar with and otherwise struggle to explain arguments they cannot even begin to fathom.

Winning is a double-edged sword. Obviously, success is motivating, and continuing lack of success can discourage students (and adults for that matter.) But winning debates can be seductive in a negative way. Pretty soon the educational function of debate can be obscured, the trophies can become the be-all and end-all, and victory becomes educationally self-destructive. Thus, all adults who lead debate programs need to seriously examine why they’re in the activity in the first place. In particular, they need to ask themselves whether they are using the competitive nature of debate to facilitate learning, or to satisfy their own ego needs. Ultimately, the answer to that question informs the way debate programs are run. It is sad to see adults clutching debate trophies to their chest in search of validation. That level of short-sightedness is understandable in students, and even in recent graduates, but when someone who should know better still indulges in such narcissism, it sets a very bad example for students.

Of course, no debate teacher will be perfect all the time. It’s hard in the rush before a tournament to keep from stepping over the line between helping one’s students and doing their work for them. We need to give ourselves permission to make mistakes occasionally. There is a massive difference, however, between an occasional slip and an ongoing policy of cutting corners to gain a competitive advantage. We must strive to remember that we are educators first, and that awards are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves.

If you agree with the above, the question becomes what can you do about it? First of all, you can try to be a teacher, and not just a

coach. Give the students the chance to make their own mistakes. Assume that you and your assistants, if you have them, are being watched by the parents, administrators, and school boards as you work with the students. Ask yourself if they would see what you’re doing as legitimate teaching or debating vicariously. If you feel you need to hide your methods from the people who pay for your program, who supervise your school, or whose children you’re working with, that should tell you all you need to know.

Second, you can speak out. Obviously, it isn’t a persuasive approach to criticize individual teachers or coaches, but stressing the educational nature of debate in a positive way can be helpful. Tell other coaches how you do things and don’t let your assistants violate your rules.

Finally, when you judge, you can regard speeches that are delivered in a way that indicates the student has no idea what they’re saying can be treated appropriately. Students should be able to clearly explain their arguments when questioned: Otherwise, their credibility is drastically undermined. Having someone lose because they don’t know what they read is totally appropriate, not to mention motivating.

Academic debate is a wonderful activity that can teach amazing skills to young people. It is our obligation to support the positive aspects of this experience. ■

About the Author

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