

NATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPEECH & DEBATE

VOLUME VI: ISSUE 1

SEPTEMBER 2017

OBSERVATIONS OF A LAW STUDENT TURNED DEBATE COACH

BY MELISSA KENT, J.D.

OBSERVATIONS OF A LAW STUDENT TURNED DEBATE COACH

BY MELISSA KENT, J.D.*

* Melissa Kent was a policy debater for Vermilion High School who achieved Superior Distinction. She attended Bowling Green State University and received a B.A. in Environmental Policy and Law, and received a J.D. from Vermont Law School in 2017. Melissa began coaching debate for Solon High School in Ohio during the 2016–2017 season.

INTRODUCTION

Spread. Peanut butter? What do I spread, how do I spread, when should I spread? All common questions that I get from novice debaters. Spreading is a phenomenon that came about when I was a sophomore in high school. Since high school I have judged more than a hundred policy debate rounds, and now after law school, I have come back to the debate arena and I coach all types of debate including Congressional Debate, Public Forum Debate, Lincoln Douglas Debate and Policy Debate. This Article addresses two questions: whether spreading is good for debate, and whether kritiks are good for policy debate.

SPREADING

Spreading started at the collegiate level. Debaters figured out that if they could speak faster, they could fit more arguments into their speech. If their opponents spoke more slowly, then the opponents would drop arguments and lose by default. Spreading encourages debaters to speak as quickly, and as clearly as possible. But teams can hide behind spreading and let go of traditional debate strategy.

Spreading in Public Forum Debate is used more as an intimidation tactic. Stylistically, public forum is aggressive. Public forum is the only type of debate that allows for cross fire where both the asker and the answerer get to ask one another questions simultaneously. If you were the more aggressive speaker, and spoke more quickly, then your opponent might become subservient to you, and you might get to ask more questions. Spreading in policy debate has led to some controversy as to whether spreading should be taught into a classroom.¹ Quickly after the then-National Forensics League executive committee created Lincoln-

¹ Jay Heinrichs, *How Harvard Destroyed Rhetoric*, HARVARD MAGAZINE, available at <http://harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/How%20Harvard%20Destroyed%20Rhetoric.pdf>

Douglas Debate, Lincoln Douglas debaters began talking more quickly to fit in more arguments.²

POLICY DEBATE

To be a good policy debater, you have to not only be a good talker, but be a good listener. Being a good listener is becoming more difficult as teams are speaking as fast as possible. Debaters can speak at 400 words per minute which sounds like a blur to the untrained ear.³ If a debater doesn't have a trained ear, then the critical words they are listening for become a string of monotone mush. In a debate about genetically modified food, the audience would hear something like, "AndgeneticallymodifiedfoodwillleadtothedeconstructionoftheThird-Worldstarvationandviolence . . ." ⁴ This monotone, inarticulate string of words is bad for debate and education. Articulation and rhetoric are lost in speed debate.

Good debates are based on good articulation and rhetoric. In the 1950s, policy debate focused on civic issues.⁵ People would come to learn about the issues. Since the heyday of debate in the 1950s, policy debate has become increasingly inaccessible. Where debate used to be about rhetoric, it is now "about processing information and creating webs of logic backed by evidence."⁶ Debate inherently is about the web of logic and chains of evidence to support claims. However, the only way to convey your argument to the judge is through speech. Today, a judge still awards speaker points on a 1-30 scale to the best speaker in the round. These speaker points are used to break ties, and are valuable to the debaters. Debaters should not focus solely on substance, but focus on form as well. Other debate coaches have observed that debate has been reduced "to the number of arguments . . . an arena for experts in the field who have learned to listen at a rapid rate, who are generally concerned more with substance than they are with the oral [rhetoric]."⁷

Instead of focusing on rhetoric, debate coaches focus on fixing articulation problems brought on by speed debate with a variety of speed drills. Rather than critical practice time being focused on the substantive issues in the round, debaters

² GARY ALAN FINE, GIFTED TONGUES: HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE AND ADOLESCENT CULTURE 26 (2010). The National Forensics League is now the "National Speech & Debate Association."

³ *Id.*

⁴ Michelle Boorstein, *Falwell's Fast Talkers for Christ*, THE WASHINGTON POST, A1, Feb. 16, 2004 available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2004/02/16/AR2005040309446.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ FINE, *supra* note 2, at 28.

⁷ *Id.*

are practicing speed and clarity. Proponents of speed debate say these skills are necessary for several reasons. First, the purpose of debate is to process information. If you can increase your rate of processing information, you can process more quickly than your opponent, and you will be the superior debater. Second, speed allows for more arguments which leads to debaters presenting more ideas in the round. The more ideas that are presented in the round leads to more analysis and evaluating of arguments. Third, speed increases memory and comprehension. Debaters gain the ability to think quickly on their feet. Fourth, there can be more complexity in the round.⁸

Critics of speed debate argue that speed destroys the debate and education for several reasons. First, speed allows for poor arguments to be made. Debaters are focused on the number of arguments being made, and not on the depth of the argument. Traditional debate focuses on few arguments and focusing on depth of the argument. Second, speed debate rewards the fastest team, not necessarily the best debaters. The judges ballot asks which team did the best debating in the round, not who spoke the fastest. Speed puts slower teams in a bind. They cannot possibly answer every single argument that was spread because they don't have the speed to answer every argument on the spread. By default, the slow team would lose. The only strategy for spreading is to speak faster than your opponent and run more arguments than your opponent and you will win. The arguments made in a round with spreading are thin since the debaters have so much ground to cover. Lastly, with spreading there is almost no rhetoric. In some debates, debaters will slow down their tag lines and use rhetoric to get the judge to understand the argument. But the substance of the argument is hidden in the spread evidence. The judge might pick up a few key words, but most of the material is a blur. The debate comes down to a battle of which team had the better written tag lines.

Criticisms of policy debate extend beyond spreading. "Critics argue that the traditional form of college debate in this country [policy speed debate] is inaccessible to the public, specialized, expensive and focused solely on winning. Worst, they fear that it creates cynics who believe in nothing."⁹ This criticism arises from a lack of understanding of what the competitors are saying. If you can't comprehend the debate, your ability to learn from the debate is severely impaired. Policy debate requires competitors to debate both sides of the issue. Even though the debate is focused on winning, the sides are balanced, and each student can develop a belief system that is best suited for the student. Further, kritiks allow students to explore moral issues *a priori* the policy analysis. However, other critics believe that kritiks are just as bad as speed in the round.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

PHILOSOPHY & FRAMEWORK DEBATE

The standard framework is to affirm or negate the resolution. The framers of the resolution frame the debate with the wording of the resolution. For example: “Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement with the People’s Republic of China.”¹⁰ Most affirmatives assume that their role and the role of the ballot is to arrive at a decision as to whether a proposed policy action is preferable to the status quo.¹¹ The word “should” in the resolution enables the judge to act as the United States federal government and decide whether to implement a policy proposal.¹² Second, the word “Resolved” is defined as “to decide or express by formal vote.”¹³ “Resolved: The United States Federal Government should” frames the debate about who the actor in the round is, and clarifies the role of the judge as a policy decider. From these derivations, the framework for debate under all the above stated assumptions is Policy Making. In sum, a policy making framework assumes the role of the ballot, and the role of the judge is to make a decision as to what policy proposal to implement, if any, or to stick to the status quo.

Kritiks change the framework and ask the judge to vote on a moral issue a priori to the policy arguments in the round. If the judge decides to vote for the team running the kritik, then all policy arguments are often null and void. Generally, a kritik is a philosophical objection that the negative makes regarding some component of the first affirmative constructive. For instance, a team is running a case that the United States and China should substantially increase their diplomatic engagement by coming up with a cyber security plan to secure critical infrastructure. The negative team kritiks that the affirmative is framing China as a threat and that this characterization of China will lead to war. The gaps of logic in the previous sentence are intentional. These gaps in logic appear in debate rounds as kritiks do not have strong links and debaters struggle to explain why the policy debate should shift and be a framework debate instead. The policy making framework should not be changed by the kritik because the framework upholds intellectual honesty.¹⁴ The

¹⁰ National Speech and Debate Association, *Current Debate Topics*, <https://www.speechanddebate.org/topics>

¹¹ Tristan Morales, *Frameworks for Evaluation in Debate*, WEST COAST THEORY HANDBOOK VOLUME 4: PERFORMANCE THEORY, at 5.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY (2000), available at www.bartleby.com/61.

¹⁴ Jeff Parcher, *Kirk’s Post*, E-DEBATE ARCHIVES, Feb. 20, 2001, <http://ndtceda.com/archives/200102/0427.html> (last accessed: May 31, 2003) (“It seems analogous to saying that I would give a student that’s written an ‘A’ paper a ‘C’ because I think it will motivate them to work harder. A good political ‘real world’ result. Intellectual honesty should preclude me from using the grade to achieve

ballot should not be a real-world tool that the judge uses to determine a moral issue in the round. Debate is an educational tool, and the ballot is a test to how debaters can improve. Using the ballot as a real-world tool undermines the intellectual honesty of debate.

The problem with kritiks is that they can be logically fallacious to an unacceptable degree. An obscure philosophy is taken out of context, and applied narrowly to a policy. This application of philosophy is not good for policy debate, and undermines the educational purposes of policy debate.¹⁵ Further, policy debate kritiks are based in postmodern philosophy that seeks to psychoanalyze the actions of the government.¹⁶ Kritiks seek to show how the affirmative makes the stated problem worse. For example, the Securitization or Security Kritik links to the affirmative plan if the affirmative seeks to secure the world. For instance, if the affirmative solved the China threat by engaging with China, the Security Kritik would link. The Security Kritik is based on the book *Politics of Security* by Michael Dillon.¹⁷ The theory is that securitization of the world will lead to war, which is the impact of the kritik. The kritik seeks to avoid the impact with the alternative, which is the action the negative team should take which is often rejecting the affirmative plan. This type of argument does not fit within the existing framework of policy debate. Rejecting a plan simply on the grounds that it violates a philosophical principle is logically fallacious. The kritik exists only within its own framework, and the debate becomes about which framework to adopt. Affirmative teams are ill prepared to handle the infinite number of philosophical violations. Kritiks explode negative ground, and diminish education through fair discourse. The resolution provides a framework for teams to operate under. This policy making framework provides fair ground for each team because the arguments are predictable, and the affirmative can be expected to affirm the resolution while the negative negates the resolution.

A team running a kritik in a policy debate round is analogous to a law student deciding to write a critique of the assignment pointing out why doing the assignment would cause the furtherance of suffering in the world. The professor

political/‘real world’ results. Going down the second road seems to have such obvious problems that I sometimes wonder how anyone could seriously contemplate doing so.”)

¹⁵ Ryan Galloway, *Kritik Killer: Winning Answers to the Critique: China Edition*, at 7 (2016). The philosophy of *Kritik Killer* is that the use of critiques in high school debates undermines the educational purpose of policy debate and could, if it were to catch on, actually endanger the future of interscholastic policy debate

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Michael Dillon, *The Politics of Security*, 1996; accord Jeff Miller, *Don't Be Scared, It's Just a Kritik!!*, available at https://debate.uvm.edu/dcpdf/Miller_introtokritik.pdf

receiving the assignment might be impressed by the creativity of the student, but cannot fairly judge the student. The student has thrown the IRAC method¹⁸ out the window, and critiqued the professor's assignment. In policy debate, instead of IRAC, debaters have stock issues abbreviated as THISAD. These stock issues are topicality, harms, inherency, advantages, and disadvantages. Teams running kritiks claim to trump these stock issues and wipe them from consideration, leaving the affirmative with no ground. If the judge decides to vote for the team running the kritik, then all policy arguments are null and void. The judge has no ground on which to fairly judge the teams, like the law professor has no ground on which to fairly judge the student. Policy making framework preserves the standard arguments which is good for debate.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Debate theory sums up the answer as to whether spreading is good for debate and to whether kritiks are good for debate. It depends on your prospective, and more importantly on the judges' prospective. Debate theory gives debaters room to discuss these issues and talk about the impacts of spreading and kritiks in round. After three years of law school and countless rounds of debate, I subscribe to the theory that debate should stay within the policy-making framework. Kritiks belong in a category of debate designed for moral discussions. Policy debate does not have the structure, nor the time limits designed to allow for a thorough analysis of critics among all the stock issues. One solution for kritik and spreading debate is to have a new category debate designed for spreading and kritiks. Policy debate should focus on the policy making framework outlined by the resolution, and emphasis should be on analysis over quantity of evidence.

¹⁸ The "IRAC method" is a particularized format of legal writing. It stands for "Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion."

¹⁹ BRIAN SIMMONDS ET AL., WEST COAST DEBATE THEORY HANDBOOK VOLUME 4: PERFORMANCE THEORY at 11.