



Debate: What Is A Debate?

For years many scholars around the world have argued that debate is very critical throughout human history. Debate is a way to bring out the truth in all of us and expose ourselves to public scrutiny specially for those who wish to hold public office.

Let's look at the debate and what debate teaches.

In 1908, Edwin Shurter wrote that "Perhaps no study equals debate in the acquirement of the power of logical thinking combined with clear expression". More recently, the first national conference on forensics noted that debate is first and foremost an educational endeavor:

Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. An argumentative perspective on communication involves the study of reason giving by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values. From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences.

The long honored position of debate in academia has been built around its functional purposes. Competitive debate teaches valuable skills. None of these benefits need be taken on faith. There is strong empirical evidence for the proposition that debate teaches crucial skills. After reviewing the research most literatures suggest that debaters benefit in at least three areas. First, forensic competition improves the students' communication skills. Second, forensics provides a unique educational experience because of the way it promotes depth of study, complex analysis and focused critical thinking. Third, forensics offers excellent pre-professional preparation. Thus it led to the critical thinking and how it helps individuals prepare for future endeavors.

Critical Thinking

The degree to which the debate program enhances the critical thinking ability of its participants is a crucial criteria against which to weigh the debate program. Across the United States, high schools, colleges and universities have placed increasing emphasis on the attainment of critical thinking skills. The issue has been the subject of nationally funded reports, graduation requirements and the subject of countless scholarly and educational journals.



Almost every institution of education has, as a part of its mission, the preparation of articulate and critical thinking individuals who are able to speak intelligently about the issues of the day. Forensics, or competitive speech activities, clearly fit within this mission of the institution, and, indeed, may have a more integral relationship with the educational mission than many other activities.

One of the most renowned professors of debate in the United States, concurs on one of his treatise: Competency in critical thinking is rightly viewed as a requisite intellectual skill for self-realization as an effective participant in human affairs, for the pursuit of higher education, and for successful participation in the highly competitive world of business and the professions. Debate is today, as it has been since classical times, one of the best methods of learning and applying the principles of critical thinking. Many authors note that leadership in a changing world requires students to learn to critically analyze and evaluate ideas (Adler; Dressel & Mayhew; Young). Besides being an obvious and important goal of any educational institution, forensics directors have rated developing critical thinking ability as the highest educational goal of the activity. Debaters themselves have suggested that it should be considered the most important goal. A healthy ability to think critically about information is especially critical in a world overflowing with data. An old debater research adage holds that "you can prove anything if you look long enough." The shuddering growth in information and access to it has changed this sarcastic notion into a virtual truism. The ability and willingness to critically examine information is a highly prized skill among employees, managers and executives, lawyers, doctors and other professions. Society desperately needs training devices that can help people manage information in a trenchant fashion.

The empirical evidence demonstrating a connection between participation in debate and learning the skills of critical thinking is quite extensive. In a recent review of research on the subject, most researchers noted that "50 years of research correlates debate training with critical thinking skills". The research concluded that, "many researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience". The most recent study concluded not only that participation in competitive debate enhances critical thinking skills, but that compared to academic pursuits of a similar time length, "competitive forensics demonstrates the largest gain in critical thinking skills". The kind of oppositional thinking encouraged by debate clearly contributes to critical thinking skills for a variety of reasons. There is strong empirical evidence, for example, that utilizing devils advocacy helps improve the understanding of strategic problems. In fact, devils advocacy has been used successfully by a number of companies for this exact purpose (Schwenk, 1988). Such research mirrors what debate coaches have known for decades. Debaters learn much more about critical thinking than the old adage "there are two sides to every coin." They learn how to spot errors in reasoning and proof. They gain a greater respect for the complexity of ideas and they



learn how to criticize in a productive way based on facts and logic. Many former debaters have testified that participation in debate exposed them to complex ways of thinking which prepared them for what they would face in graduate school and their professional lives. James Greenwood, Chairperson in Communications at the University of Findlay noted that a debate was more important to my career than any single course on the undergraduate and graduate level. Debate develops skills in organization, clarity and depth of analysis that most students do not encounter until the master's thesis@.

Debate is a form of structured argumentation - a great deal of emphasis is placed on the structure of individual arguments, cases, counter plans and other types of persuasive techniques. The skills of organizing arguments are transferable to nearly all other types of communication. In addition to nearly all types of oral communication, research has suggested that debate is beneficial in teaching writing skills. The notion of structuring arguments is relevant throughout the lives of all students. They utilize these skills when answering and posing questions, writing letters and essays, in court, in committees and other small groups, for evaluations, to sell or in a myriad of other ways. Communication itself is heavily steeped in the notion of argument. In large part the centrality of argument in our lives was one of the reasons why the study of rhetoric became the center of the Western Intellectual Tradition. Debate teaches students a great deal more about organization and arrangement than merely to have an introduction, body and conclusion. Debate teaches them how to construct arguments in a sophisticated manner, examining both the micro and macro perspective of argumentation theory. Hence, the conclusion to reach the end of the rope and that is does debate really helps our future leaders to debate themselves to the top of public offices or any other positions he or she might wish to attain in the coming years.

Leadership: Does competitive debate serve to educate future leaders?

Debate and argumentation are at the center of nearly all American political, social and economic decision-making. In many ways, it was a faith in debate itself that was at the root of the formation of American democracy and capitalism. The construction of our democratic institutions was founded on the notion that decision makers presented with a diversity of ideas, freely advocated and freely defended, could rationally choose different courses of action based upon the facts and arguments at hand. It would not be surprising if those trained in the principles of debate were most capable of succeeding within such institutions. Evidence for this proposition begins with the very origins of the nation, as our founding fathers were trained in the great traditions of argument and rhetoric:

Forensics disputations came through the Western Intellectual Tradition, from Greece and Rome, through the Catholic Church, through Great Britain and its schools, to the United States. Disputations were an



essential part of the basic education at such universities as Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, and the University of Virginia from their earliest days. Seniors did not write a thesis, rather they gave a senior speech. Besides formal work in classes on rhetoric, students formed literary and debating societies. The Spy Club at Harvard and the Linonian Society at Yale, among others, debated issues, studied controversial current events, and invited speakers to their activities. This kind of education was essential in developing the minds of American Founding Fathers like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton. The kind of thinking and rhetorical skills this type of education produced can be seen in the expressions of the Federalist papers, The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Here are comments from those who have been there and proclaimed that debate has helped them throughout their professional lives.

Comments from noted leaders about Competitive Debate:

Gardner Ackly, former presidential advisor

"The skills I developed in debate were of inestimable value in my later graduate education, in my training and research, in my government service: learning to think on my feet, or organize ideas, to take and use notes, to marshal evidence, to use my voice effectively. But the more important lessons were not these more technical ones. I was fortunate to have a debate coach who also taught that intellectual effort can be exciting; that ideas are more important than things; that pursuit of the truth is more important than winning contests; that intellectual honesty and integrity are among the virtues most to be cherished; that one need never be ashamed of idealism and strong convictions..." (Klopf, p7-8).

Jerry M. Anderson, President of Ball State University

"My speech and debate experience and training at Pennsylvania State was the most important single educational experience of my life....Dialectical and communicative competencies and insights are the major educational values which result from participating extensively in forensics and debate. From my experience as a participant, coach and teacher, I believe those competencies and insights are better developed through forensic and debate experiences than any other educational experience" (Hunt, p15).

Sam Becker, former president, Speech Communication Association of America

"Years of observing high school and college students in forensics have convinced me that this is one of the major contributions we in speech communication can make to the education of youngsters. It is our various forensics activities, more than in any other of our programs, that most of what we believe in and study can be brought together and passed on to each generation of students. It is in our various forensics activities that we can most effectively communicate the values that form the base of speech communication. And it is

these activities that can best help our students to develop their capacities for leadership. It is no accident that such a large percentage of the outstanding leaders in our country have been high school or college debaters" (Hunt, p15).

Representative Charles E. Bennet of Florida

"Debate not only improves one's ability to speak publicly but improves the thinking process of the debater" (Huseman and Goodman, p226).

Senator David Boren of Oklahoma

"As a Senator, my principal responsibilities are threefold: First, a Senator must do his best to reach logical policy conclusions about issues with which our nation is confronted. Second, a Senator should be able to effectively translate technical aspects of a position into language that will clearly communicate it to the public. Third, to be effective, a Senator must have the ability to persuade others to accept his policy conclusions. No aspect of my education was more useful in preparing me to meet these responsibilities than my training in speech and debate" (Hunt, p14).

Erwin Canham, editor of the Christian Science Monitor

"My debate experience at Bates was helpful in my post graduate study at Oxford. At all times the necessity of organizing ideas and presenting them vigorously has been pertinent to newspaper writing, asking questions at press conferences or interviewing statesmen was aided by my public speaking experience" (Hunt, p14).

Senator Frank Church of Idaho

"As a former debater I know of the tremendous benefits which can be derived from the process of educating oneself to take part in discussions of vital national issues (Huseman and Gordon, 226)."

Senator Dick Clark of Iowa

"The principal value of debate lies in the development of logical thought processes, and the ability to articulate your positions publicly" (Huseman and Goodman, p226).

Frank G. Clement, Governor of Tennessee

"I cannot think of any one in the country who owes more to his participation in the National Forensic League events than I do" (Freely, 1960, p121).

Admiral William Crowe, Four Star Admiral, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Ambassador to England

"Debate was the single most important activity I participated in at the Naval Academy" (Lundquist).

Samuel B. Gould, President, Antioch College

"If I were to choose any single activity in college which has contributed most to my career, I would certainly choose debating" (Hunt, p16).

Senator Howard Heflin of Alabama

"Debating is one of the most valuable academic exercises in which I have ever engaged. It taught me to speak on my feet, to organize my thoughts, and to defend and refute a point. All of these abilities have

stood me in good stead during my career as an attorney, as judge and now, as a U.S. Senator" (Hunt, p14).

David B. Henry, President of the University Illinois

"The group developed fellowship and team camaraderie which had important by-products for personal growth. The visits to other schools, and travel experience, the living and working together - all under the high expectations of the 'Coach' and his most gently administered but ever firm supervision - made for an individual development which has remained for me a high point in my educational experience. The meaning of scholarship, the 'feel' for the handling of ideas, the fellowship of professional service were for me but some of the outcomes of my debate experience" (Hunt, 16).

Thomas F. Hozduk, Los Angeles Attorney

"The wisest advice I can give to persons considering debate as an activity is: 'participate.' In my opinion, hour for hour, the reward for time spent debating is greater than any other activity available to the typical student... In addition to the "academic" benefits, potential participants should be alerted to the life long friendships they will develop, the opportunity to associate with competitive, creative and bright young people, as well as the favorable view of the activity taken by potential employers" (Matlon and Keele, p201).

Lee Iacocca, CEO of Chrysler

"...I joined the debating team, which was sponsored by Mr. Virgil Parks, our Latin teacher. That's where I developed my speaking skills and learned to think on my feet. At first I was scared to death. I had butterflies in my stomach - and to this day I still get a little nervous before giving a speech. But the experience of being on the debating team was crucial. You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your brains won't get you anywhere" (Iacocca, 16).

Representative Paul E. Kanjoriski of Pennsylvania

"It was my experience with debating and public speaking in both high school and college that led me to become a lawyer, and ultimately, a member of Congress" (Williams).

President John F. Kennedy

"I think debating in high school and college a most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business, or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of Women Voters. A good debater must not only study material in support of his own case, but he must also, of course, thoroughly analyze the expected arguments of his opponent....The give and take of debating, the testing of ideas, is essential to democracy. I wish we had a good deal more debating in our institutions than we do now" (Freedom and Union, 7).

Raoul D. Kennedy, noted San Francisco attorney

"I truly believe I would have been as prepared for law school had I simply debated and not attended college at all. I have found that the practice of law - and I assume this is true of a large number jobs - consists basically of trying to solve problems in an organized manner...Debate placed a premium on the factors that I believe are essential to effective problem solving, including---breaking an argument down into its smallest components and then marshaling the factual data...for each element;...talking a problem through with others over a period of time that a contention or issue becomes fully perceivable;...verbally articulating ideas rather than just having a mental conception to appreciate the stresses and rewards of competition"

(Matlon and Keele, 197).

Gerald Kogan, Circuit Court Judge

"I consider [debate] the most rewarding activity that I engaged in during my school years. Quite frankly, I considered it more important in preparing me for my life as a trial attorney than any of the academic courses that were required in order for me to get both my undergraduate and law degrees" (Matlon and Keele, p197).

James Luck, Executive Director, Batelle Memorial Institute Foundation

"Forensics has influenced my personal and professional development more than any other activity or experience. Those who have participated in forensics often share this view. A survey of Governors, Senators, and other leaders across the country conducted by the Bicentennial Youth Debates found a high level of agreement about this key role of debate and speech activities. Debate teaches so many things - the complexity of issues, the importance of research, techniques of gathering and organizing information, analytic and verbal skills, respect for opposing views, the interaction of evidence and values, and a variety of frameworks for evaluating arguments and reaching decisions. At the heart of this is something crucial to our society - the open testing of ideas (Hunt, 15)."

Malcom X

"But I will tell you that, right there in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been. Standing up there, the eyes looking up at me, the things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling right, then I had won the debate - once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating. Whichever side of the selected subject was assigned to me, I'd track down and study everything I could find on it. I'd put myself in my opponent's place and decide how I'd try to win if I had the other side; and then I'd figure a way to knock down those points" (Malcom X, 184).

Senator George McGovern, former democratic candidate for President.

There are few other activities in high school or college that are as important as speech and debate. Regardless of an individual's academic or career goals, the ability to research a complex question, marshal arguments and present them in a persuasive and compelling way, are skills that will serve you well all your life. Both my wife and I debated in high school and college. Before I entered public life, I taught debate and speech at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, S.D. I attribute whatever political success I may have enjoyed, in large part, to the training I received as a participant in debate and speech activities (Hunt, 13)."

Donald F. McHenry, US Representative to the United Nations

"Self expression is truly an art, and its successful development requires steady practice and determination. To articulate one's thoughts in a lucid and expressive manner - to capture and maintain the interest of an audience, whether it be in the classroom or in the United Nations General Assembly Hall - is strongly supported by the skill and knowledge one acquires from a forensic education (Hunt, p1)."

Alexander Meiklejohn, Former President of Amherst College

"As I look back upon my own experiences, when I try to single out from among the long line of college students some one group which shall stand forth as intellectually the best - best in college work and best in promise of future intellectual achievement - I cannot draw the line around my own favorite students of

philosophy, nor the leaders in mathematics, nor those successful in biology; nor could I fairly award the palm to the Phi Beta Kappa men who have excelled in all their subjects. It seems to me that stronger than any other group, tougher in intellectual fiber, keener in intellectual interests, better equipped to battle the coming problems are the college debaters - the students who apart from their regular studies, band together for intellectual controversy with each other and with their friends from other colleges (Hunt, 16)."

Senator Edmund Muskie, former Democratic candidate for Vice President and Secretary of State under Jimmy Carter

"The development of leadership in a democratic society has a very direct relationship to the art of debate. One becomes a leader by molding public opinion to support a given course of action, not by dictating such an action. This involves the ability to pinpoint the critical issues of the day, and the willingness to apply oneself to the task of research in order to assemble all considerations bearing upon those issues. It requires the ability to apply logic, rather than emotion and prejudice, to the assembled data, the courage to accept the decisions thus indicated, and the ability to present the opinions thus developed in such ways as to persuade others to a like point of view (Hunt, 13)."

Jane Pauley, NBC television journalist

"One of the most important decisions in my life was when the student body of Warren Central High School in Indianapolis decided I should not be a varsity cheerleader. It meant my weekends were free. For the next three years, I spent most Saturdays on the road with the largest National Forensic League chapter in the country. While the fifteen-year-old girl inside of me still mourns the lost letter sweater, the adult Jane is grateful to NFL for something much more important a - career" (Hunt, 14).

Representative Claude Pepper of Florida

"Throughout my public life I have been very grateful for my early experience in formal debates. I believe the encounters are a valuable means of developing in our leaders of the future the ability to express themselves clearly and forcefully on the pressing issues of the times (Huseman and Goodman, 226)."

Richard S. Schweiker, former Senator and Representative from Pennsylvania and Secretary of Health and Human Services

"Debate trained me to analyze and articulate the complex national problems that confront our country today. Too, it was a tremendous help in campaign debates for my House and Senate seats...My intercollegiate debate training was the most valuable experience that I had at Penn State. I derived benefits from it far beyond the normal extracurricular activity that it encompassed" (Matlon and Keele, 198).

Helen M. Wise, former President, National Education Association

"No college freshman can project 25 years to decide what he needs to learn - subject matter is easily forgotten and in today's world, the knowledge explosion makes constant learning an inevitability. But all adults today need to be able to communicate with clarity, to articulate ideas, to reason, to separate key facts from the barrage of ideas we all are exposed to every day. No single activity can prepare one better than debating - the ability to think on one's feet, to form conclusions rapidly, to answer questions logically and with clarity, to summarize ideas are all processes which forensics activity develop and develop".

THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN APPROVED BY MR. SOPHEA THON KLKP REPRESENTATIVE