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The Debate Team as a Culture: Entry Barriers to Newcomers in Intercollegiate Debate

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Introduction

Intercollegiate debate is an extremely challenging activity for two reasons. First, it entails rigorous critical thinking, communication, and research skills from all participants. Second, intercollegiate debate has a very different culture from anything previously experienced by participants. This second reason can become a serious barrier to newcomers who must not only learn and master the skills required to benefit from intercollegiate debate, but they must at the same time face the uncertainties and stress associated with entering a new culture.

Various problems within intercollegiate debate have been studied. Debaters need to learn more effective communication (Bennett 286). There is a lack of focus on rational arguments (Kruger 233-240). Minority students in CEDA have a different experience with involvement, success, and barriers than Euroamericans (Logue; Loge). And finally, the issue of sexual harassment in CEDA debate has been studied (Stepp, Logue, and Simerly 36-40). However, the culture of the debate team has not yet been studied.

Retention rates of debaters in CEDA have been surveyed. In 1992, approximately 47% of debaters had one year of debate experience, 27% had two years, 16% had three years, and 12% had four years of experience (Gartin 1992). This represents an obvious loss of participants as experience with the debate culture increases.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this analysis is an ethnographic approach that utilizes participant observation. While there are several intercollegiate debate organizations, this analysis focuses on only the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA).

In four years of participant observation (from 1992-1996), both two and four year institutions were surveyed, over twenty formal interviews and hundreds of informal interviews were conducted. Particular attention was paid to newcomers and their perceptions of the activity.

CULTURE

What Culture Is

Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior; that is, the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or, more briefly, one's behavior through social learning. All cultures are equally valid. There are no subcultures or co-cultures because there are no subordinate cultures and all cultures must exist together (Koester and Lustig, 48). A distillation of the literature asserts that culture is information that is shared among members and must be learned by new members.

The Debate Team As A Culture

All participants in intercollegiate debate experience enculturation. Newcomers must cultivate behaviors that will allow

them to interact effectively with more experienced members of the debate culture. Newcomers learn these behaviors from interacting with more experienced members who, in turn, share their understanding of the culture's norms with the newcomers. Cultural barriers to newcomers include learning new language, rules, and rituals (Schein 1-10). Intercollegiate debate has a very unique language that is spoken and understood only by its participants. The rules of intercollegiate debate go beyond the structured speeches to include issues of achieved status. And the rituals of intercollegiate debate include issues of territoriality in dealing with research, partners, and squad.

CULTURAL ELEMENTS OF A DEBATE TEAM

Language Of The Debate Culture - Folkspeech

The language or folkspeech used by members of the debate culture is always shortened to save time in both oral and written usage (seconds are precious in the timed debate format). The words in this language have been adopted into debate from other activities or are the abbreviated terms for the structure of the debate.

FOLKSPEECH VOCABULARY:

Res: the resolution or issue that the debate will focus on

Round: the debate match

Flow: the written record each debater keeps of what is said in a debate round, usually in a type of shorthand unique to each individual

Ev or Cards: evidence or research that shows that an expert supports your argument

Spread: when debaters speak very quickly in order to express more arguments before their speaking time ends

Positions: prepared blocks of evidence that uphold an argument

Briefs: another term for positions

Turns: when one team shows how their opponents lose the round by using their opponents own evidence against them

Cross Apply: when an argument made earlier in the round is also valid in another argument, one can Cross Apply the argument

Cross X: cross examine, just as lawyers do in court

Judge: the person from whom the decision is sought

Neg: the team arguing against the resolution

Aff: the team arguing for the resolution

Tub/Box: the large storage container that holds each team's evidence, usually sorted into manila and hanging file folders; A debate team can have as many as twelve tubs at a tournament depending on how much evidence they have

The written form of the debate culture language, "flowing," is practiced so that each line of argumentation in a round can be responded to. This is because nothing is irrelevant in a debate competition. In this culture, silence means a competitor consents to his/her opponent's argument. Thus all arguments become opportunities for winning or losing (Koester and Lustig 230). This places incredible stress on debaters to record and respond to as many issues as possible within each debate round. Flowing takes years to perfect as "spread" debaters can often speak at a rate of 500 words per minute. Although judges vary in their own

ability and inclination towards "spread" debate, successful debaters will be able to adapt to their judge's preferred rate of delivery.

The use of certain language is not accepted in this culture. Most, if not all, of the participants in the CEDA culture have been exposed to the argument that Sapir and Whorf make: that language helps to shape our perceptions of reality (Porter and Samovar 194). For this reason, and because of the political correctness movement, sexist or racist language is not tolerated. There have even been discussions about changing an author's originally sexist language to make it politically correct in the debate round. Additionally, most CEDA judges and directors will not permit ad hominem, or personal attack, on any debaters.

The debate culture places a great emphasis on the importance of research and collecting quoted material. If all that was said in debate rounds was personal opinion from each team, there would be no way to determine objectively a winner. Debate requires that the competitor make the claim, use a piece of evidence, usually a quote from a published author, and then using her/his own analysis they apply it to the opposition's argument.

The judge votes for the team that has presented solid argumentation that is supported with evidence or that has either gone unresponded to by the opponent. Many debaters claim that the key to great debating is having up-to-date evidence and analysis to prove why an argument is the strongest one before the judge.

Members of the debate culture use their unique language for

more than debate. Several team members tell stories of arguing with friends against whom the debaters used the incriminating questioning techniques used in cross examination debate. The non-debate culture members request that debaters "stop doing that debate stuff on me!" Once enculturated, debaters are so thoroughly trained in such a structured pattern of thought and speech that using that pattern is often inescapable. Members of the debate culture who date each other often use the folkspeech vocabulary to clarify their arguments with each other even outside of the team atmosphere. A young novice debater said while watching this phenomena, "It's funny to watch lovers argue in formal structure and technical language, but I have to admit that no matter how clear you think, you still have inevitable conflicts."

Folkspeech language development is inevitable in any situation that places constraints on time and demands quick thinking. Members of the debate culture cannot escape their activity's language even when they are outside the activity.

Rules Of The Debate Culture - Achieved Status

All cultures have unspoken rules or norms that are learned and followed by members. Achieved status is the rule that allows a different set of behaviors from proven debaters than the culture allows from its newer members. The achieved status of competitors is communicated to debaters through artifacts such as dress, the number of tubs used to store files, and communication

patterns. Although it varies some regionally, the more experienced debaters tend to dress neatly but informally. This sends a nonverbal signal that they no longer need to dress professionally to be credible with the judge.

These more experienced debaters tend to carry approximately six tubs of evidence transported on a cart or dolly, showing their competitors that they have done their research and that they do not carry more than what is necessary. This is also a more manageable number for the frequent flying of most competitive debaters. When a debate team enters a competition room without a single tub, members of the debate culture know that these people are new to the activity.

Finally, a competitor's communication patterns are another nonverbal clue as to their experience level. In a formal interview, an assistant coach described how experienced and competitive debaters, "will not usually be found just hanging out, they will be working and preparing for their next competition. When they do hang out, the better debaters tend to talk to each other." Other debaters and coaches seek them out, and everyone in the debate culture refers to the best teams by their first names such as Sue and Steve even if they do not know them personally. Usually debate teams not known personally would be referred to as Smith and Thompson.

Rituals Of The Debate Culture - Territoriality

The majority of collegiate CEDA squads practice team debate,

or two-on-two style competition. There exists an important working relationship between squad members, but especially between debate partners. A form of territoriality exists between partners for each other and for their collective or individual tubs. Territoriality is the act of laying claim to and defending a territory (Koester and Lustig 198). For debaters this is very strong. The research that each team carries represents both their own efforts and the ability of their squad to research both current issues and new arguments relating to the debate topic. Each team shares a set of research or "ev" that is placed in large Rubbermaid tubs or cardboard banker's boxes which are all simply called "tubs."

There is a strict rule that outlines appropriate behavior when handling someone else's evidence. It is usually taboo to take research from another teams's tub unless permission has been given. All borrowed evidence must be returned and in the correct order it was taken in. There is a great deal of squad pressure placed on individual members not only to complete their research assignments on time but in the correct format as well. A large amount of research is produced by a squad. If that research is not organized systematically within the individual team tubs, it will be harder to find and therefore waste precious time and be less useful.

The territoriality about one's partner is very strong. Ultimately the partners are decided by the director although personal preference is considered. Many of my debate informants

have compared being partners with, "being married. With one box between two debaters if there is a divorce, the assets will have to be split." Of course, evidence can be photocopied but only with great expense and effort.

It is more than the evidence though. Partners become very close after working for so long together that it is like losing a life-long mate. When you get a new partner you have to learn their strengths and weaknesses, how they think, and what kind of arguments you both think should be made. These things are no longer a given when you have a new partner.

The aspect of territoriality is relevant because when a debater makes a claim and then reaches into their tub for the evidence that will support their argument and that evidence is not there, they have probably lost that argument, and maybe the round as well. Like police partners, debate partners depend on each other to perform to a certain standard. They know how the other thinks, and they have to rely on the other being there. The strict rules regarding tubs are due in part to the hard work each team must spend updating and maintaining the elaborate filing system in order to have that perfect piece of evidence accessible when it is needed. A debater could go crazy thinking about all the evidence that is out there in the world, so instead they concentrate on what is in their box, and what they and their partner can do.

The debate squad has been compared by all of my informants to being in a family. Squad members meet on a daily basis to practice or research together and during tournament weekends they travel

long distances in cramped vans and live together in hotels. Some squads actually live together in one house year-round. As mentioned before, research assignments and duties to the team must be taken very seriously because as on many other teams, the whole is stronger than the sum of its parts. A failure by any member is to let the entire squad down.

HOW CULTURAL ELEMENTS FROM ENTRY BARRIERS TO NEWCOMERS

The three elements of the debate culture described above form strong barriers against the recruitment and retention of newcomers. An outsider to the debate culture is immediately faced with a new language that they cannot understand even though it is a form of English. Status is confusing because squad members who dress professionally are given fewer responsibilities, unlike the American business world. And newcomers are suddenly expected to follow the appropriate rituals that protect personal territories while feeling excluded from the "squad." All of these new expectations are made more difficult for the newcomer to understand because they are often assumed to be understandable by squad members and the director. The time pressure to research, practice, travel, and attend classes frequently overcomes their ability to guide newcomers through the enculturation process. This culture gains new members in a "trial by fire" process that only the most persistent survive.

SOLUTIONS FOR DIRECTORS TO HELP NEWCOMERS OVER ENTRY BARRIERS

By becoming aware that their activity is indeed its own culture, directors can establish the understanding necessary to help newcomers over these cultural entry barriers. Directors must recognize that newcomers will be confused not only by the new skills they are required to master, but by the very activity itself. Intercollegiate debate is much more than competitive argumentation. The debate culture requires that newcomers quickly learn a new language, rule system, and rituals.

To ease the enculturation process for newcomers, directors can help newcomers by providing video tapes of debate rounds. Many activities, such as sports, can be practiced throughout one's life. Competitive debate, however, can only be practiced at the high school level and beyond. Viewing tapes and discussing the issues, language, and techniques used by the participants, will help newcomers to learn their new culture.

Directors should not only provide newcomers with a foundation of argumentation theory, but they should also teach newcomers a basic understanding of arguments that apply to many debates. For example, the causes and effects of over population have been argued on almost every CEDA resolution. Most experienced debaters have a working knowledge of the arguments about over population and their understanding is reflected in their use of the debate culture's language. Without a familiarity of the issues in debate as opposed to the theoretical proceedings within a debate, newcomers will be unable to decode the language of the debate culture.

Many squads practice mastering CEDA's language as a group with speaking drills. By practicing with the entire squad, newcomers feel included and motivated to match their squadmates' speed and articulation. The speaking drills practice three skills at once: a faster rate of speech, increases familiarity with issues, and familiarizes the newcomer with the proper format for research.

Directors can help newcomers to understand the debate culture's rule system by explicitly explaining that CEDA has an achieved status system. Newcomers will have to prove themselves in order to gain respect within this culture. Status not associated with the debate culture becomes irrelevant. The culture minimizes outside achievements.

Providing newcomers with a mentor, such as a more experienced debater or an assistant coach, who can explain the rule system as the newcomer experiences it, will greatly decrease the stress of enculturation. Mentors can further newcomers' understanding of issues in rounds. They can also further the newcomers understanding of the social dynamics that occur between rounds.

Directors best aid newcomers in their understanding of the debate culture's rituals with explicit information on how issues of territoriality will be dealt with. A team meeting and written policy statement will instruct newcomers on the proper handling of squad evidence. Informal gatherings can be sponsored to include newcomers in the squad "family." Rotating group research assignments that seek to include newcomers will introduce them to their squadmates and to commonly held values in the debate culture.

CONCLUSION

Intercollegiate debate requires newcomers to master both the skills of argumentation and language, rule system, and rituals of a new culture. Directors focus on teaching theory to newcomers, assuming that they will learn the culture of the activity on their own. Unfortunately, this often results in low recruitment and retention rates. These barriers can be overcome with proactive planning by directors. If directors make use of the solutions outlined in this analysis, the enculturation process of newcomers will become less uncertain and much less stressful for both newcomers and directors.

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