

STUDENT VIEWS

NATIONAL CERTIFICATION FOR CROSS EXAMINATION DEBATE JUDGES: A COMPETITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by Mary Rose Scherschel

Although cross examination debate should be an art of persuasion and effective communication, the technicalities of the activity cannot be avoided. Cross examination debate is filled with rules that must be understood and followed and each speaker has very specific guidelines which s/he must meet. The activity is so complex, as a matter of fact, that students spend millions of dollars each summer on debate workshops to refine principles of argumentation which they already know and to constantly expand on new concepts. Yet, when most of these students return home to debate, they find some of this new-found knowledge to be irrelevant because many judges are not trained equally well. Although judging certification is available to each state, it is in no way mandatory. In order for certification to be effective and serve its true purpose, revisions must be made. Because of the intricate structure of cross examination debate, it is only reasonable that a national judging certification program be available and rigidly pursued by all the supporters of the debate program.

"The uncertified judge" will refer to those judges who are not only uncertified according to state regulations, but are equally unfamiliar with the activity which they are judging. A judge such as this is the one whom Roy Wood, in his book, *Strategic Debate*, tries to justify as the "better job of debating" judge.

The "better job of debating" judge does not weigh the arguments to determine which team was more effective in the round, he bases his decision solely on which team did the better job of debating. His decision may be totally subjective or even impressionistic, but it is more likely that he used specific criteria.

In this case, however, the "specific criteria" is still most likely subjective. For this judge, debate is decided on *how* the participants speak rather than on *what* the participants say when they speak. Granted, debaters should work on persuasion, but such a skill comes only with time. A novice debater following the rules and presenting legitimate arguments, should not have to lose to an experienced debater, who, through

speaking style alone and not legitimate argumentation, may be able to ignore key arguments and shift the focus of the debate to peripheral points. Debate issues must come first, then speaking style.

Furthermore, Wood justifies the lack of taking detailed notes of the debate (flowing).

Many debaters are disturbed if some of their judges do not take detailed notes during the debate. In truth, some judges just sit back and listen to the round, without seeming to care about the specific arguments and evidence the debaters use. This type of judge is not incompetent; he is using a different standard for judging the debate.

In such a case, the debater has every right to be upset, especially during a close and competitive round. In such a round, when communication skills are equal on both sides, the debate will have to be decided on what was said under each stock issue (Topicality, Harms/Significance, Inherency, and Solvency) and the Affirmative responses to the Workability arguments and Disadvantages of the Negative. It is impossible for a "non-flowing" judge to follow every argument, under every stock issue, and at the end of the debate know if any arguments were dropped, and then effectively make a decision. An uncertified judge would have to guess in such a round, while a certified judge, who flowed the round, has every argument in front of him, can weigh the issues, and can therefore, make a justified decision.

Therefore, an emphasis on judging certification must be made and should be made nationally. After all, students competing for the National Forensic League should have judges certified by that same league. The first step to nation-wide certification should give the judges an understanding of cross examination debate regulations and argumentation. Although this step may seem redundant, knowing that certification in any state requires some sort of standardized test of cross examination debate skills, a national test will at least be consistent so that debaters will know that all their judges are familiar with the same concepts. Austin

Freely, in *Argumentation and Debate: Rational Decision Making*, clarifies the importance

In any debate, an almost infinite range of possible problems may come before the judge for his decision. He must be able to bring to bear a comprehensive knowledge of the principles of argumentation and debate to evaluate these problems and render the decision.

The second step, yearly certification of judges, however, is not a part of many state procedures. Judges in Colorado, for example, are guaranteed certification over a three-year period. The yearly certification would not necessarily have to cover the same material as the first step. Renewal times for that certification can remain the same. Instead, judges should be made familiar with the topic area of debate each year. The reason for this is that the cross examination resolution changes each year.

The resolution usually alternates domestic issues one year, to international issues the next year. After debating the same topic intensely all year long, the debaters will have a very good understanding of most of the topics under that one resolution. Consequently, the judge also needs some education in the area being discussed.

The educator is defined within this context as a trained individual whose special knowledge of argumentation and debate qualify him as an expert in this field of education. He is also a well-informed layman on the subject matter of the proposition of debate. Only such a person is competent to perform the function of a judge, since only he has the knowledge necessary to evaluate the educational process of debate and the ability to render an educationally valuable decision.

Testing is not necessary in this area since issues under the resolution will change as the year goes by. Mandatory workshops for certification, however, can at least inform judges of possible cases they can expect to hear and of current U.S. policies in relation to the resolution. From this point onward, it is the judge's responsibility to keep himself/herself informed on relevant issues.

Another important area of debate is "flowing," as was pointed out in the "better job of debating" judge and is now emphasized by Freely.

Experienced educators who have judged thousands of debaters are known for the care with which they take notes during a debate. All judges would do well to develop a comprehensive note-taking system, so that they can record all of the significant developments during the debate in order to evaluate the debate effectively

Most debaters agree that if they do not have a good flow, it is difficult to argue all points. Understandably, then, a judge will also have a hard time remembering everything that is said and weighing all this issues if s/he does not write them down. Although flowing varies slightly in form from the normal note-taking a student would do in a classroom, some instruction and practice in flowing can make the difference between a muddled and a clear round. With effective flowing, the judge will know where to apply each argument and can be confident of a justified decision. It would be difficult to require any judge to flow, but if a judge truly wants to make a fair decision, he will most likely take advantage of this handy tool once he is taught how to use it.

The results of national certification would contribute greatly to the educational process of debate. Debate is offered as a class in many schools and is sometimes given an honors credit. Therefore, compet-

ing should be a learning experience and Freely agrees

The decision, as part of the educational process of debate, must be reported in a manner that will contribute to the further educational attainment of the students.

When the judge is asked for the reason for his decision on the ballot, a comment such as "the affirmative seemed to be more familiar with the case" will not help either team in future debates. A reason for the decision which covers the stock issues, tells which team won which issues and why, will tell the debaters where they are weak and where they are strong.

The judge may properly draw on his special knowledge of the subject in a critique to suggest ways in which the debaters may improve their arguments. He takes cognizance of the strength or weakness of the subject matter knowledge of the debaters and reflects his findings in the quality-rating points on the ballot.

A ballot from which debaters can learn and improve themselves will never come from an uncertified judge if s/he is not capable of the suggested certification criteria.

Furthermore, the role which subjectivity plays in decision making would be drastically reduced with national certification. Knowing the burdens of each speaker and understanding the principles of argumentation, the judge will naturally concentrate on *what* is said during the round. This keeps the debaters from having to debate the judge and allows them to debate accord-

ing to theory. This is not to say that the persuasion and communication skills of debate are unnecessary; rather they should not be a judge's sole reason for his/her decision.

The consistency of national certification would also be beneficial. Debate is an interstate activity that does not end after the State Tournament. The National Forensic League hosts an annual tournament for first-ranked competitors from NFL district tournaments across the country. Debaters should not have to alter their debate style from a round judged by a Californian to a round judged by someone from New York. Instead, the debaters should be confident that no matter who is judging, the person has at least the same qualifications and meets the same criteria the judges for whom s/he debated all year.

Granted, national certification will not make everyone an ideal judge. No matter how they are certified, judges will sometimes be in bad moods, bored or uninterested, and may have a hard time directing their attention to the debate. Nevertheless, it is a step in the right direction. Judges may even find debate more interesting once they are more familiar with the structure and topic area. If nothing else, it should be the right of the competitors to have competent criticism.

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