

The Oral Tradition:
The Importance of Narrative in
Debate Coaching

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“Teachers’ thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and experience are all aspects of teachers’ culture which we need to know about and be aware of as a key factor in education, especially in times of change. Yet this crucial aspect of education is probably undervalued and certainly underresearched. Educational investigations, in general, have paid too little attention to teachers’ voices” (Cortazzi 1993, p. 1).

After many years of involvement in debate, we have noticed that debate coaches share three basic kinds of narratives. We call these three categories: enabling stories, cautionary tales, and instructional reports. The purpose of this paper is to describe and give examples of each category and then argue that more sharing of narratives, especially between teachers, should be encouraged.

Branigan argues:

“When people tell stories, anecdotes, and other kinds of narratives, they engage in a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience” (Branigan 1992, p. 3).

In preparation for debate competitions, debate coaches often tell their students stories in an effort to help explain what may often seem like a very strange experience. They also share stories with their coaching colleagues. Our observation has been that the enabling story is the most common.

The enabling story is a story that helps a debater understand a new or difficult concept. Sometimes it is used to reinforce or stress a point that the coach thinks is important for the debater to reflect on at a particular moment. The best enabling stories will spark rays of self-confidence in the student. Common enabling stories include narratives about, researching, persevering, and overcoming adversity.

In regards to the latter point, a story many coaches tell deals with the novice debater that loses every debate at a tournament. The novice debater redoubles her efforts and eventually becomes a champion debater. The teller will often make the story personal, as they likely had to face such adversity in the beginning of their own debate career.

The message of the story is clear: “Don’t give up. You can do it.” The best enabling stories are not necessarily about competitors mercilessly crushing weaker opponents or winning high-pressure debates. We prefer the stories about the dedicated researcher who, after long hours in the library, finds the one argument or piece of evidence that gives her or her team the competitive edge. Stories about “thinking and debating outside the box” are our favorite stories to hear and tell.

Often we tell our students of the time that Professor Bill Shanahan, of Fort Hayes State University, gave a student arguing a civil rights topic almost a perfect rating even though the student remained silent for eight minutes and 55 seconds of a nine-minute speech. The student, an African-American, looked intensely into the eyes of the judge and his opponents before blurting out, “The oppressed have no voice!” in the final second of the speech. Shanahan commented later that he would have given the debater a perfect score had he remained silent the entire speech and just let the judge and his opponents figure out the argument on their own. This story teaches new debaters that orthodoxy is not always rewarded in competitive debate.

Cautionary tales are narratives of warning. They tell a story of debaters and debates gone wrong. Inappropriate personal behavior during the debate is often the theme of such tales. We tell our students of the time two debaters that we coached were in the final round of their first novice debate tournament. The second negative rebuttalist had just sat down and looked at his partner for positive confirmation and support. In a stage voice whisper, loud enough for the 75 audience members to hear clearly, she said: “You are a moron.” The message of this story is that supporting your partner with sensitivity and caring is the superior option.

Cautionary tales are also told by coaches to their colleagues. One of our favorites involved a colleague of ours in the Northeast. He had told two new debaters a story of his debating days in which a negative team had put forth a counter-plan advocating anarchy. The coach told how as a debater on the affirmative team he responded by demonstrating how he thought a world without law would look like. He began to simulate chaos by tossing desks and paper and dancing wildly around the room singing slogans he thought anarchists would embrace. He concluded the story by explaining how the judge called him “brilliant” and he won the tournament.

Subsequently, the debaters repeated the strategy their coach had described. The result was disaster. The judge in the round awarded the team the loss and zero speaker points, reporting that he was extremely frightened during the round and feared to take action lest he be attacked by the wild debaters. The message of this tale is be careful of the narratives you choose to tell to new debaters. It is important for the narrative not to stifle potential creativity, but rather provide the students guidance regarding the nuances of when it is appropriate to employ certain arguments and strategies.

Our favorite cautionary tale

has taken on the status of urban legend. We have heard it told involving so many different teams and individuals that we doubt it ever really happened. This may point to a common tendency among many cautionary and enabling narratives: they have often not actually occurred, but are still useful in passing on insights and instruction about the culture of policy debate. The story usually starts with two teams debating a health care topic. The affirmative starts by introducing a plan to ship cadavers to the U.S. for research purposes because of a cadaver shortage to U.S. hospitals. The negative does not know what the word “cadaver” means, but, not wanting to look ignorant, they surmise it is some kind of medical expert. They counter-plan by contending it is a better policy to train U.S. medical doctors to be cadavers. They make statements like, “U.S. doctors have the necessary skills to become cadavers.” The point of this cautionary tale is don’t be afraid to ask what terms mean in a debate.

Instructional reports are stories told by coaches of drills and exercises that work in teaching students important debating skills. Professor Alfred Snider of the University of Vermont is especially clever at devising these drills and spreading them to others through a variety of forums. The “redo” is done, as the name suggests, when a student repeats a debate speech with the goal of improving it over the first time it was given. At a recent debate tournament, Professor Snider was telling a tale of how a debater from his school was channeling her frustration associated with not doing well into the positive act of “redoing” speeches between debate rounds.

Balloon debating is another drill that coaches learn about through these informal instructional reports. This is especially useful for brand new debaters. Debaters are told to imagine they are thousands of feet in the air in an air balloon that has a leak. They can choose to be any person, fiction or non-fiction, living

or dead. They are then asked to argue why they should be spared from being tossed from the balloon, which can only sustain the weight of one person to avoid crashing. Debaters often find it easy to discuss the merits of sparing the life of an admired person. The concept of clash is easily introduced by this “game.” We have also heard of reward-based rather than punishment-based versions of this exercise.

Cortazzi argues that:

“In narrative, teachers not only recall and report experience, they repeat and recreate it. Through narrative, the meaning of experience is reorganized and reconstructed, both for tellers and audiences. In telling their narratives, teachers are rehearsing, redefining, and regenerating their personal and professional selves, since self is what we believe ourselves to be, our self-narrative” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 139).

This being the case, it would logically follow that those organizations and individuals interested in fostering debate education should spend significant effort promoting, telling, and listening to narratives of all types from a diverse group of debate educators. Not only will these stories enrich the lives of those who will hear them, but also there will be a multiplier effect with each subsequent telling as the story hearer becomes to story teller and incorporates her own unique insights and perspectives.

Perhaps narratives will be told about the effort to arrange and organize this narrative session. They could be enabling stories with the point of encouraging others to arrange their own forums where stories are swapped by groups of debate educators. Some, no doubt, will be cautionary tales retold to ameliorate the hazard of pitfalls and mistakes. At the very least, instructional reports would seem to have an immediate and practical impact for those actually practicing debate education. Regardless, we ignore the possibilities

created by the power of the story telling only at the peril of advancing our own knowledge of debate.

Lyotard put it best when he argued:

“And in fact we are always under the influence of some narrative, things have always been told us already, and we ourselves have already been told” (Lyotard 1977).

