

STUDENT CONGRESS -- FORENSICALLY COMPLETE

by Sherwin Bennes

We in the forensic community know how eclectic our activity is. In fact, one could plausibly argue that forensics comes closest to being the ultimate humanities curriculum. In terms of content, its involvements range all the way from philosophy to literature to politics, current events, and government. In terms of skills, its participants develop both cognitively and affectively, psychologically and socially. Of all the forensic events, however, one stands out as forensically complete -- student congress. During opening remarks to student legislators at the Fayetteville nationals last June, tournament host Jackie Foote described student congress as showcasing the best of all the forensic events. I would like to discuss some of the reasons why I agree with her assessment.

Student Congress & Cross Examination Debate

Still perhaps the marquee event in forensics, successful cross examination debate requires significant amounts of research. The enormous scope of information and argument compressed into a sixty-minute debate is astounding. Successful teams are those who out research other teams and are consequently able to produce a larger quantity of argument and have more options for using their research in original ways. A common criticism of cx debate, however, is the speed at which many teams present evidence and argument. Finding qualified judges is thus difficult especially for experienced teams. Furthermore, cx speed has transformed it into what many would consider a high megahertz, information processing event, not a communication event. This is not to say that cx debate is without value as most successful cx debaters would argue. But the traditional idea of debate as somehow involving oratorical skill and eloquence tends to be conspicuously absent now.

I submit that student congress at its best contains the strengths of cx debate without its weaknesses. Critics consider "congress prepara-

tion" oxymoronic, and it is true that many student legislators participate, and win, without significant preparation. This can hardly be said of cx debate. What is required to make the demands of congress preparation comparable to the demands of cx preparation? One idea might be to narrow the scope of legislative topics. Such a plan would be not unlike the current L-D practice of changing the resolution every two months. For example, one might host a congress tournament and limit the legislative area to human services. If the topic area were limited in this way, significant speech content would necessitate a good amount of research. In my senate chamber at the national tournament last summer, more than twenty competitors spoke on legislation concerning Nigeria before the question was called, yet these speeches were rich in content and contained no significant redundancy; they also tended to consume the full three minutes of allotted time. Clearly, research had been done.

For many judges and observers, the speed of cx debate not only disqualifies it from being a communications activity but calls into question its educational value. A traditional view is that debate should be more oratorical than cx currently is. Congress features just such oratory. From vocal expressiveness to gesture to the controlling of symbolic space through lateral movement to subtle bits of business like the putting on and taking off of glasses when reading short passages--all become part of a particular speech, of a particular congressional speaking style.

I argue that congress can approach cx debate in terms of research rigor; moreover, its oratorical, communicational qualities qualify it as more of an educational activity than cx debate. It has the advantages without the disadvantages.

Student Congress and Lincoln-Douglas Debate

Probably the most entered forensic event, Lincoln-Douglas (L/D)

debate evidence takes the form not only of specific items of news information but also the philosophic principles and concepts they exemplify. Ideas such as "social contract" and "utilitarianism" and "categorical imperative" are routinely used in L/D arguments to provide foundations for affirming or denying a current resolution. The similarity of congress speeches to L/D constructives and rebuttals is clear. I often hear Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Kant, etc. used to support certain pieces of legislation. In speeches, the facts are there, but the references to political philosophers make the arguments more compelling. To some extent, L/D is unique in high school in that it offers the opportunity not only to explore but apply the ideas and arguments of the great philosophers, and to the extent that congress is similar to L/D, it also can claim to have this uniqueness.

L/D has other important advantages. Unlike CX, where quantity of argument becomes important, L/D delivery rates allow for exploring arguments in greater depth, and expressiveness, gesture, and movement become elements in the total presentation of ideas.

Like CX, however, L/D has the disadvantage of involving a relatively small audience, usually the judges and some observers.

Congress has the advantages of L/D without its important disadvantage. In addition to being oriented to current political and social issues, speeches use the ideas of philosophers to present arguments. From Kant to Mill to Thomas Paine, legislation is argued in terms of philosophy, not only in connection with specific policy or legislative proposals but concerning Constitutional issues. Furthermore, again because of delivery rate, congress speeches can be more expressive and oratorical like L/D speeches often are. One additional feature of congress, however, is the crucial element of **consensus** building. Student speakers must convince judges and, in order to pass or defeat certain legislation, must also become credible enough to build alliances

with peers, alliances which often cut across school affiliations within a given chamber. In fact, Congress is unique in that often the student legislators themselves have a direct voice in who will be named top speakers. At NFL nationals, competitors vote to determine who advances to Super Congress.

Student Congress & Individual Events

In addition to expressiveness and clarity of thought and argument, extemporaneous speaking has a relevant connection to real world issues and ways of thinking. A chain of cause-effect reasoning which results in nuclear destruction or chemical-biological catastrophe, a common disadvantage strategy by CX negatives, would be untenable in an extemporaneous argument whose purpose is credibility and plausibility. The best extemporaneous speakers I have heard do not take extreme positions; they qualify their arguments, conforming to real world ambiguities and uncertainties.

Again, congress has the advantages of extemporaneous speaking without the disadvantage of a relatively small audience. Speakers have the opportunity to express their views on important current issues and to have those views take the form of specific legislative or policy proposals around which to build personal credibility and peer consensus. Congress is among the best forums for leaders to demonstrate leadership skills.

I have often thought that an English curriculum for an entire year could be developed just for the purpose of teaching the event which we call original oratory. It requires original research and the development of a significant thesis with convincing support. It requires clear and coherent organization. It requires original ways of introducing and expressing ideas. It requires rhetorical quality in diction, sentence structure, and style. And the dimension of speech delivery incorporates vocal, facial, and body expressiveness with gesture and movement.

But again, the best congressional speakers use the full array of skills that oratory requires, and they do so before a relatively larger audience. This summer, one of the outstanding speakers in my senate

chamber presented what was essentially an oration of each of her theses and then proceed to specifically and congenially support her position; she used effective diction and sentence style along with strategic gesture and movement. I was not surprised when she was selected for super congress by virtue of the vote of her peers. Expository speaking adds the dimension of visual aids, but I have seen visual aids effectively used in congress speeches as well.

The interpretation events would seem most unrelated to congressional speaking. In local tournaments, we have included an event called storytelling, the narrative version of impromptu. But as I have just mentioned, some of the best congress speakers effectively use relevant stories and anecdotes to introduce their ideas and arguments, building suspense and interest as they do so. Additionally, the drama or humor of the HI, DI, or Duo performer sometimes does find its way into the effective presentational styles of many congress speakers I have heard. And, congress speakers, when reading from John Stuart Mill in support of an argument, have been as interpretively eloquent as some of the best prose competitors.

Conclusion & Suggestions

I believe that no event comes closer than student congress to being the ultimate competitive speaking event. It combines the best skills of all other events without the major disadvantages. It provides a context within which speakers are judged not only by adults but directly and indirectly by their peers.

Ironically and unfortunately, student congress often gets little respect. Many believe it to be an impromptu event or, depending on procedures at a given tournament, a consolation event. Both coaches and competitors must therefore take significant steps to elevate its stature. Having only been involved with forensics for about five years, my experience is admittedly limited, but some ideas for improvement do occur to me, and I would be interested in knowing what other coaches and competitors think.

Certain tournament entry policies should be consistently followed. Locally, we have made student congress mutually exclusive

with debate, and since a competitor cannot enter both events, some have developed their own "congress crates." Having such a crate suggests a desirable mentality about the event. There is merit to the idea that congress speakers would become specialists in the same general sense and degree that CX debaters are specialists. Congress summer camps already exist.

Policies regarding legislation are also important in elevating the stature of congress. Congress can approach the research intensity of cx cases. First, legislation must be well written, significant, and debatable, and the task of writing a quality piece of legislation requires significant prior research. Coaches must insist on high standards of construction for both bills and resolutions from structure and format correctness to the quality and clarity of the language and diction used. Further, since most legislation I have seen is in the form of resolutions, it might be beneficial to spend more time writing high quality bills which require an author to consider funding and enforcement of provisions. Second, legislation must be available to competitors as far in advance of competition as possible. If it is available the day of the congress, it really does become an "impromptu" event. Third, as previously mentioned, congress competitions could narrow the range of topic areas so that individual pieces of congress legislation are of narrower scope; this would require speakers to research in greater depth, giving new life to often over-worked topics.

Given the diversity of a forensic curriculum, the variety of different events, different competitors, different levels of experience, the impulse to simplify becomes strong. One interesting question a coach might ask is this: If I could teach only one event, which should it be? My argument has been that student congress comes closest to being a viable answer to this question. Jackie Foote has said student congress showcases the best of forensics. I have seen the best of student congress, and I agree.

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