

oodles AND UDLs OF NEW COACHES

by
Chris Baron

Most people are fortunate if they have had one teacher who inspired and engaged them. Paulo Freire, education philosopher, advanced a powerful critique of traditional education practices that rely on the “banking” of knowledge—learning is measured by the ability of students to store data (given by the teacher) so that it can be accessed later. These practices also foster a contradiction between student and teacher, discouraging constructive relationships and ultimately, learning. For Freire, only a “problem-posing” educator can challenge this system:

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lesson in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object . . . The problem-posing method does not dichotomize the activity of the teacher-student; she is not “cognitive” at one point and “narrative” at another. She is always “cognitive,” whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard cognize objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly reforms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. (p. 61-2)

It is no coincidence that many debaters cite their coaches as important sources of inspiration. Debate is a powerful model for implementing Freire’s method. This model is now being applied across the country in hundreds of schools that have become part of the urban debate league movement.

The emerging communities of new coaches are likely to have a profound effect on the world of debate. The urban debate league movement will make important contributions to the traditions of policy debate, bringing both new ideas and perspectives

while reinforcing the best of what debate has always been. One important way that urban debate leagues will affect the nature of debate knowledge is their sudden growth. Changes in debate generally have been gradual in part because turnover in teachers and students is generally gradual. Each year, roughly the same numbers of students join debate as graduate. New schools join local leagues, but usually enter a community that allows them to “learn by doing.” Teachers network with veteran coaches, and pick up the jargon as they go along. With the sudden growth in urban debate leagues, however, entire communities have sprung up composed almost entirely of new coaches. Since these programs are aimed at fostering competitive policy debate programs, teachers want to learn the ropes as quickly as possible.

These new coaches are recruited mainly from the *classroom teachers* currently working in urban schools. The primary qualifications are that these teachers be interested in *teaching* and seek ways to nourish their most idealistic aspirations for education. It is rare that such teachers have prior debate experience. When our league began in Baltimore in 1999, for example, we had 16 teachers, and only two were familiar with team policy debate. Once exposed to the idiosyncrasies of the activity (the jargon, the complex theory, the strategies and tactics), teachers often have feelings similar to their students’. They are anxious to learn. They also bring a great deal to the table. Classroom teachers work with students on a daily basis. They are closest to the motivations, learning styles, and needs of potential debaters. Many high school debate coaches are classroom teachers, but never before have so many joined the debate world at once.

The Open Society Institute recognizes the need to train both teachers and students in the intricacies of debate. Summer institutes, most notably the Emory National Debate Institute and the World Debate Institute in Vermont, are opportunities for new teachers to be transformed. They must learn a new format (speech orders, judging, tournament structure, etc.) as well as new content (the year’s resolution, de-

bate jargon, stock issues, etc.) The teacher institute is intensive: teachers learn how to coach debate while at the same time learning how to do debate. A crucial component of this training is the end-of-camp debate tournament—in which the *teachers* compete against each other! This tournament is the cause of much excitement. Novice coaches often gain empathy for their new students, voicing concerns about not having their cases ready, needing more time to do research, etc. Others become very competitive and stay up all night to finish case specific disads to opposing affirmatives. But like most debaters after their first tournament, they come away energized about debate and what they can do. Camps like Emory and WDI also provide teachers with an opportunity to network on a national level. Teaching tools are shared, helping to satisfy teachers’ insatiable thirst for more instructional materials.

The urban debate league model promotes the spread of fresh ideas. The colleges and high schools that are part of the “pre-existing” debate world have numerous opportunities to learn from this new community. College debaters frequently become coaches at urban debate league schools. These college students often have extensive debate experience that they can share, but frequently have little experience with teaching. In working with the new teacher/coach, these college “debate assistants” can learn a quite a bit about how to transmit debate knowledge. The fresh perspective that the new teacher brings also provides the experienced college debater a chance to reconsider traditional debate practices. This produces a mutually educational exchange.

Teachers are central to the success of the urban debate league movement for a number of reasons. Their hard work and enthusiasm are core requirements for building and sustaining strong teams. Having teachers as coaches also increases the commitment from the school system. The idea that debate coaches’ hard work should be rewarded in at least the same way as a football coach, for example, is something that is often heard but much less frequently brought to fruition. Programs with success-

ful teachers who are recognized as professionals are much less vulnerable when budgets are tight. It is this notion that has inspired many college debate coaches to seek PhDs. When administrators evaluate the budget and ask, “why are we spending all this travel money on your program?” having faculty members who can articulate their roles is often crucial. In Baltimore, for example, the Baltimore City School system committed to funding stipends for debate coaches based in part on testimony given by teachers about the benefits debate brought to their school within their teams first semester of competition. One of our teachers testified that

Debate brings teachers into conversations with kids that are hard to get. I was able to have a discussion with Billy, whose life has always centered on football, about Paulo Friere’s *Pedegogy of Poverty* with Billy. Another student, Heather, has gone from being a quiet mouse to being a loud mouse. She is still a mouse, but is finding her voice with debate. Debate allows teachers to realize the high standards that teachers come to the profession hoping to have for students.

Teachers make the most compelling case for why debate should be supported by the school system.

The influx of new teachers is also a reminder about the empowering effects that debate can have. Debate can light a fire for teachers. Amy Brooks, on of our coaches at Fredrick Douglass high school, gave testimony on her experiences in debate at a recent hearing before the Baltimore City Council:

I joined Fredrick Douglass’ staff last spring and was promptly asked to coach the debate team. I had never done anything with debate before, so I’ve been learning along with our students and its been *so* much fun. I actually think it might be part of the reason I’m still teaching! The reason why I say that is because the foundation of education is built on wanting to learn. You can be in a room and not really learn anything. I feel that when I’m in a room with debaters, there is learning going on, on my part and on their part. Its such an intense environment that anyone who is around wants to be swept up in the excitement, and to understand the issues—because its not fun if you don’t understand the issues. I’ve gotten to work with students in a way that I didn’t think was possible. The regular 8:30 to 3:30 shift is left behind when we have after school debate prac-

tice.

Amy understands how to challenge the student/teacher contradiction that Friere talks about by creating a student-teacher partnership in learning. Other teachers have similar stories. This is one of the reasons debate should play a critical role in the discussion of the future of education reform in the U.S. Many urban areas have a high rate of teacher turnover. This should not be surprising—it is a lot of work for a small salary in poor infrastructure, and there are many frustrations. However, coaching debate, while it may intensify some pressures on teachers (by consuming time and energy) is a way to help retain many new teachers. The rewards in debate are direct and can be numerous. Trophies play an almost trivial role. Teachers become energized by debate because debate is a great way to interest and motivate students. Debate can literally change a young person’s life.

The transformative possibilities that debate brings to education are not lost on students, either. Speaking to a regional meeting of middle school teachers, Joe Smith, a debater at Mergenthaler Vocational High School, stated:

I would like to say one thing about today’s teachers and the impact they have. As a teacher, some students see you as a friend, an ideal, and most importantly, as someone they can trust. As a teacher you hold the power to mold and form tomorrow’s scientist, doctor, lawyer, and possibly president. Without the guidance of my two debate coaches, Emma Cartwright and Patrick Daniels, I would not be where I am. This is why teachers are needed in student’s lives. Without a teacher’s *dedication*, students are left with no *inspiration*.

Joe could have advanced arguments for debate on any number of grounds. The fact that he did so by emphasizing the role of teachers in inspiring their students speaks volumes about how powerful debate can be.

Teachers are great at empowering students to become independent learners. Debate is obviously geared well to do this: students pick their own arguments, make their own strategic decisions, etc. Classroom teachers are less tempted than recent debate graduates may be to teach complex ideas with crash course techniques. It might be easier for a teacher to say “Here are all the terms,” or “Here is an affirmative case” to prepare students for the impending tournament, but avoiding the more difficult “why” questions will not, in the long run, be a successful strategy. Students fre-

quently learn that topicality is a voting issue first, and will figure out the reasons that go along with it later. Teachers tend to be more pedagogically focused than coaches who have gotten into coaching because of their love for debate. They understand the need to prepare for the tournament, but are generally unwilling to take shortcuts that might shortchange learning.

Brent Farrand pointed out that “high school teachers worry about what lessons are being learned and what patterns of thought are being molded. In short they are teachers first and coaches second” (Rostrum, December 2000, p. 16). One of the most important contributions that has already emerged is in the curricular realm. Teachers are always hungry for teaching tools, be they exercises, textbooks, videos, or games. While there is no dearth of materials on debate, most are not oriented toward teaching debate in the classroom. What is the best way to incorporate debate into the classroom? How should topics be spaced across the semester? How can debate be taught in other classes across the curriculum? What about debate as an after school activity? How many sessions should a student attend before competing at their first tournament? Urban debate leagues have been active at both the national and local levels trying to answer these types of questions, sharing and organizing curricular information from high schools and colleges around the country. There is obviously no single correct approach, but the additional focus that UDLs have brought to these issues has been important in organizing and building on the knowledge and materials that are available on debate. Matt Wernsdorfer, one of the coaches at Patterson High School, taught a debate class that focused on the tools of analysis and interaction that debate offers. When teams worked on new affirmatives, they were beginning *their own* research projects. Matt resisted the temptation to give his teams the affirmative he had written and run successfully at the Emory Institute for teachers over the summer. Many of the Patterson affirmatives were not completed until the last tournament of the season, but when they were run, the wins belonged entirely to the students who wrote them. The students learned how to write a powerful case during their novice year. For the teacher, the rewards that came from the many skills and lessoned learned outweighed the potential trophies that the teacher-written case may have helped obtain.

New teachers are also transforming views on competition, not by dismissing its value, but by encouraging new ways of thinking about ‘success’ in debate. For former debaters competitive success is sometimes overvalued, and some coaches are accused of living vicariously through the successes of their students. But for those whose calling is teaching, success is measured more by what is learned. Competition is only a tool for learning. This doesn’t mean teacher don’t value trophies. For many teachers, the excitement generated by competition, along with the thrill of hard work paying off, breathes new life into their teaching careers. The relationships teachers and students have in debate are unlike those formed in most classrooms.

New coaches have helped contribute to a climate that celebrates the wide variety of ways to succeed in debate. Awards assemblies are a good example. I had become accustomed to college and existing-circuit tournaments that featured quiet assemblies. Students calmly walked up to receive their trophies, with moderate applause. The excitement at the UDL tournaments is truly amazing, and gives new meaning to the phrase “raising the roof.” The audience cheers for everyone. Students rush up to receive their awards. They pose for pictures. The room ignites when sweepstakes awards are given out. The announcer has to wait for the excitement to die down so that the next winner’s name can be heard over the din. The sense that the debate world can proudly and loudly celebrate helps to reinforce the idea that accomplishments at all levels can be truly meaningful. People do not wait for the top varsity team to stand up and clap. Awards for 15th Novice speaker produce energetic applause and cheers, too. Teachers understand that communities are important to the development of good learning environments. The UDL awards assembly is proof that such a community exists.

Our league in Baltimore has a traveling trophy called “BUDL Man” (named after the Baltimore Urban Debate League and pronounced BOODLE). BUDL Man is superhero who represents excellence in debate. The trophy is a 14-inch tall action figure whose head has been replaced with a book and who holds a flow pad in his raised fist. He was created by the Patterson High School debate team and is awarded to a squad by the last school to receive him. The award is not given out based strictly on competitive success. The students who present

the award at our assemblies describe the criteria that they think embody a good debate team. Candice Williams, Shawntia Diggs, Tierra Dixon, and Janifer Scott, students at Forest Park High School, presented the BUDL man trophy to Patterson at the end of the season last year, stating:

We are going to give the BUDL man to a team who went through some hardship. They started out with several teams in the beginning of the year, but as time went on the number of teams dwindled. They still have remained confident. They have proved that you don’t have to be tall or loud to be great debaters. They wrote a great Affirmative that says that debate increases academic achievement, and they came up with the whole idea of making a BUDL man, which shows great spirit in debate.

BUDL man thus represents a sporting attitude, good teamwork, hard work, and other values learned through competition. In short, a community.

We need to resist our tendency to own “truth” and to control *whose* ideas are allowed to contribute to the discipline of education. This tendency is strong, even among groups that consider themselves to be progressive, as many in the debate community do. African American feminist scholar bell hooks points out that

Many teachers who do not have difficulty releasing old ideas, embracing new ways of thinking, may still be as resolutely attached to old ways of *practicing teaching* as their more conservative colleagues. That’s a crucial issue. Even those of us who are experimenting with progressive pedagogical practices are afraid to change (p. 143).

For hooks, the difficulty is in finding a model to avoid reinforcing the hierarchies of knowledge created by traditional teaching practices. Debate provides a pedagogical tool to give voice to those frustrated by the educational status quo. Let us be sure that this tool is open to change based on the suggestions of all who can use it. College debate camps, for example, must not employ the “banking” system of knowledge—treating teachers and students new to debate as receptacles of knowledge whose success is measured by their ability to unquestioningly regurgitate terms and concepts.

The effect that the urban debate league movement will have on the pedagogy of debate is likely to be unparalleled in the long history of the activity. Those of us in debate often become wedded to debate’s

“long gray line” of excellence, sometimes at the expense of valuable changes. As we welcome the new teachers to our world, we should be excited about the changes in store. We should resist the temptation to absorb them by assuming that we are the experts. The comfort of debate as we know it will often seem to be the easier road. But the road less traveled is likely to make all the difference.

(Chris Baron is the Program Manager of the Baltimore Urban Debate League and a debate coach at Towson University. He debated for Lawrence High School and the University of Kansas.)

References

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