Reconciling Playing the Game with Civic Education in Intercollegiate Academic Debate

Rief, John J.
MSU Denver, Colorado, USA

Schrader, Brian J.
UM Flint, Michigan, USA

Intercollegiate academic debate (IAD) in the U.S. has most often been understood through two primary perspectives: debate as an academic game and as a form of civic education. Instead of viewing these perspectives as somehow at odds, we articulate them as working in creative/productive tension. Indeed, part of our argument is that critiques of debate have sometimes missed the mark, seeking to defame playing the game instead of offering a more robust account of how civic education might be achieved within the contest round. To give life to these issues, we first describe some foundations of the game vs. civic education motif in IAD history before analyzing its ongoing life in contemporary debate practice. Finally, we turn to the Isocratean tradition to offer a perspectival permutation (*debate as a game for critically transforming civic life*) that escapes the dilemmas presented here.

1. INTRODUCTION

U.S. intercollegiate academic debate (IAD) has long operated according to two "terministic screens" (Burke, 1966, pp. 44-62). The first and probably most dominant screen is *debate as an academic game* which tends to view the activity as primarily animated by competition (Baker, 1901; Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014, 2015; Brigham, 2017; Davis, 1916; Keith, 2007; Llano, 2017; Muir, 1993; Snider, 1984). The second views *debate as a form of civic education*, which tends to emphasize the inculcation of practices and skills necessary for participation in professional and civic life (Baker, 1901; Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014; Davis, 1916; Hogan et al., 2017; Keith, 2007, 2010; Llano, 2017; Paroske, 2011). As Burke (1966) noted, such screens are filters offering only partial perspectives on their subjects: "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (p. 45). For IAD, both perspectives shed light upon and also occlude aspects of the other in addition to leaving out important elements that fit neither perspective perfectly (see e.g., Atchison & Panetta, 2009;

Hicks & Greene, 2015).

If taken as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory, these screens frame a creative/productive tension between competition and education, fun and serious self-cultivation, strategy and preparation for civic life that have defined the activity from its origins in the 19th and 20th centuries to today (Atchison & Panetta, 2009; Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014, 2015, 2017; Brigham, 2017; McKown, 2017; Rief, 2018). Unfortunately, these screens have not achieved a pedagogical detente much less a mutually beneficial interaction. As Bartanen and Littlefield (2014) have argued, the civic screen became a kind of "Trojan Horse" (pp. 161, 163, 174) during the early years of IAD, a way of rendering the game screen suspect:

> The attacks on debate practice were rooted in the assumption that the primary purpose of debate was civic training and that the failure of the activity to achieve a narrowly defined set of standards rendered it unjustifiable and thus unworthy of support. (p. 163)

We agree with Bartanen & Littlefield's (2014) view that, used in this way, the civic screen

undermines key aspects of the activity, most notably the competitive dimensions that have always to some degree inspired students to join debating organizations (see also, Davis, 1915). However, we also feel they are a bit too fast in rescuing the game from the civic rejoinder. Indeed, the civic screen may be useful in reinventing elements of the game screen in order to proffer more powerful pedagogical opportunities for our students. This very sentiment seems to be at the heart of many criticisms of contemporary tournament debating (Llano, n. d, 2017, 2018.; Mitchell, 1998; Rief, 2018). In other words, the civic screen can act as a mediating force capable of ameliorating some of the excesses of the game screen. In this way debaters might avoid "be[ing] unfitted by being fit in an unfit fitness" (Burke, 1984, p. 10).

However, before embracing the civic screen as a means to moderate the *unfitness* that may come from the excesses of competition, we must first understand what it can and should endeavor to promote. First, debate practitioners should think critically about the sorts of practices, habits, and ways of being democratic their activity currently offers. Secondly, questions must be posed about the varieties of civic life students should be pursuing. Should debate practitioners try to replicate the democratic theory and practice already in place in "'actually existing democracy'" (Fraser, 1990, p. 56)? Or should they, as Fraser suggests (1990), instead be involved in:

> expos[ing] the limits of the specific form of democracy we enjoy in contemporary capitalist societies . . . to push back those limits, while also cautioning people in other parts of the world against heeding the call to install them. (p. 77)

While we do not engage in the precise lines of analysis Fraser envisions here, we do share her impulse to question the status quo practices of democracy in order to open up new avenues of civic, public, and political organization. In this paper, we pose the question: how can a critical notion of the civic screen be embedded within the horizon of the game space of debate? This question is important not only for specific debating communities but also in terms of debate as an increasingly globalized phenomenon. Given IAD practices are being emulated around the world, it is necessary to evaluate its designs, pedagogical motivations, and practical consequences in light of the goals its practitioners

hope to achieve (Greene & Hicks, 2005; Hicks & Greene, 2010).

The rest of our essay unfolds in three parts. First, we turn to history to reveal some of the foundations of the civic screen in IAD pedagogy. As we do so, we show how, despite early efforts in the U.S. to articulate debate through the lens of civic education, the nature of this education was often framed by the taken-for-granted activities of American democracy rather than a reflective and constantly critical engagement with it. Second, we move into the contemporary moment and look at how one form of IAD, traditional policy debate, relies on a civic conceit as justification for its design without proffering a coherent understanding of democratic culture to back it up. In fact, the policy model, while often having recourse to the notion of better public advocacy and deliberation as one of its educational outcomes (Harrigan, 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2010; Muir, 1993), is, in its adversarial design, more like a court of law, a space of contesting ideas taking disagreement to its limits and potentially undermining effective and ethical modes of decision making. Third, we turn to an ancient tradition of rhetorical pedagogy initiated by Isocrates that points the way to a critical perspective on civic education embedded within a game space (Walker, 2011), thus resolving the tensions outlined throughout our paper.

2. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE GAME VS. CIVIC EDUCATION MOTIF IN IAD

Why did civic education emerge as a counterpoint to playing the game in the early years of IAD? At the time, Progressive Era pedagogues were invested in the question of how to prepare citizens for democratic life. Higher education was increasingly concerned with creating pipelines from the classroom into professional and civic vocations. The teacher-philosopher, John Dewey, was busy developing a pedagogical platform with the ability to craft communities able to benefit from and even cultivate the future life of American politics and culture. In short, at this time there was a deeply shared sense education was the linchpin to an active, engaged, and productive citizenry. Many IAD practitioners hoped to capitalize on this moment, seeking to articulate the role debate might have in shaping America's destiny as a

bastion of democratic activity (Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014, 2015; Hogan & Kurr, 2017; Keith, 2007, 2010; McKown, 2017, Rief, 2018).

This perhaps explains why some early IAD pedagogues took issue with the game screen, seeing it as a threat to the larger Progressive Era agenda. For them, politics and culture were not games. They were serious business. For example, George Pierce Baker (1901) argued that, despite his commitment to teaching debate at Harvard University, he felt it was much less crucial to the pursuit of civic education than the wider subject of "public discourse" (p. 104; see also McKown, 2017). This is not to say Baker rejected debate. He saw it as a valuable practice that could inspire further engagement with civic and public life (Baker, 1901; Bordelon, 2006; McKown, 2017). But he was careful to put debate in its proper context. Baker (1901) suggested faculty should "leave to interested graduates and undergraduates, themselves, probably, old debaters, the coaching of the men for the particular contest" (pp. 116-117) and that "debating should be placed on the footing of an intellectual sport" (p. 117). As such a *sport*, Baker saw it as a way to inspire participation in the larger project of learning many methods of public engagement and advocacy rather than *the* linchpin to civic education (Baker, 1901; McKown, 2017).

Former Harvard debater and teacher at Bowdoin College, William Hawley Davis (1916), would take Baker's concerns about the game screen to new heights when he declared:

> One thing is certain: that, frankly accepted as a game, debating becomes a monstrous affair. A game is engaged in for fun; practices clearly improper in dealing with serious affairs, actual conditions, become permissible and even important in the realm of sport; they are "part of the game." (p. 175; on this passage, see also Brigham, 2017, p. 78; Llano, n.d., pp. 8-9)

As an alternative, Davis (1916) would advance his famous notion of debate "as a counterfeit presentment of a practical, efficient, necessary, and familiar method of dealing with pressing and important affairs" (p. 177). For him, debate was to become a platform for preparation in democratic activities beyond the contest, nothing less than a laboratory for practicing a "counterfeit" of citizenly deliberation (Brigham, 2017; Keith, 2007; Llano, 2017). At its core, Davis' critique revealed one of the central dilemmas faced by

early debate practitioners hoping to use IAD as a mechanism for civic education: Can a sport, even one reimagined as "a royal sport" (Davis, 1916, p. 177), really deliver on its promise to prepare students for something beyond winning? Davis felt it could. Though he is easily read as a critic of competition, his concerns were more about competition overwhelming other more important goals. In fact, Davis (1915) expounded on the benefits of a competitive ethos in advancing the cause of the activity (p. 107; see also Llano, n. d., Rief, 2018). The trick was to be sure the overriding concern with civic education controlled for the excesses.

Both Baker and Davis raised important concerns about the status and consequences of IAD when viewed exclusively through the game screen. However, their critiques also demonstrate a key problem in how many early IAD practitioners managed the gulf between the game and civic preparation. Both fail to see that inventive engagement in a variety of game-based practices might offer opportunities to innovate rather than simply "counterfeit" civic life (Brigham, 2017). This is not to say that they were both merely thoughtless purveyors of the world in which they existed. For example, Baker was known for his creative reworking of concepts and pedagogical methods on the boundary of argumentation and theater that have been deemed feminist (Bordelon, 2006; on the theater connection here, see also Errera & Rief, in press). In addition, as Llano (2017) has noted, Davis' approach to debate was empowering for students, who, "in the counterfeit presentment, develop their own agency in solving problems" (p. 100).

But, Davis in particular seems to have been less innovative in his thinking than he might at first seem. Davis intended to "counterfeit" deliberative strategies without necessarily questioning whether they represented *good* democratic practices to begin with. Indeed, one of his central criteria for the value of a "counterfeit" practice was "*verisimilitude*" (Davis, 1915, p. 106). Aside from some experimentation with judging strategies to address concerns he had with audience voting (Llano, 2017; Rief, 2018) and some basic critiques of the attributes of the public square he felt his method could resolve offered near the end of his most famous essay (Davis, 1916, pp. 178-179), Davis was a product of his time. Davis' failure in this regard was deeper than most scholars have noted to date. A bit later in his career, Davis (1926) would give details about the

"parliamentary procedure" (p. 12) he felt was so crucial to democratic deliberation. While outlining it, he reified racist and sexist assumptions regarding the types of individuals he deemed qualified to adequately engage in public deliberations. For these individuals, he argued, "there can be no successful application of Parliamentary Procedure" (Davis, 1926, p. 14). Instead of questioning widely circulating assumptions about the inferiority of some human beings and/or critically questioning the accessibility, applicability, and value of his notion of "procedure," Davis instead counterfeited it. In this case, the "counterfeit" became a copy rather than an opportunity to reimagine democratic life in early 20th century America. Responding to Llano's (2017) suggestion that Davis' theory might provide opportunities for civic innovation, Brigham (2017) argued:

> there seems to be a real risk that, should a democratic culture be flawed, debate as counterfeit may be too focused on reproduction of what is already present rather than offering viable counterfactuals of what could become a better civic space. (p. 85)

This risk within Davis' approach was not isolated to him alone. For example, as Bartanen and Littlefield (2014) have shown, the history of American debate is replete with exclusionary practices that were both racist and sexist (see especially, pp. 241-288; see also Atchison & Panetta, 2009; Rief, 2018) indicating that many practitioners have over time been willing to accept highly damaging norms and ways of life.

In sum, as Bartanen and Littlefield (2014) have argued, debating allows participants to "merge the stimulation of play with the simulation of civic preparation" (p. 216) primarily by enacting elements of debate that "closely paralleled the rules of courts and legislative debates" (p. 217; on this see also Keith, 2010, pp. 15-16). In this way, debate has offered methods for entry into civic life as Davis and others claimed throughout its history. However, this emphasis on *replication* has left the possibility of debate as a space for developing *alternatives to actual practices* largely unexplored. While Baker seems to have been critical of at least some elements of the exclusionary practices of his time, both he and Davis appear to have missed this more radical potential of their shared game. This

failure to explore and even problematize the nature of civic and democratic culture within the "simulation" of the debate space has continued to be a problem in contemporary IAD, a topic we take up in our next section.

3. PLAYING THE GAME AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

We now turn to contemporary debate in order to show how the game vs. civic education motif has tended to work out in the 21st century. What we see today among some debate practitioners is the tactic of referencing the civic screen as a conceit to defend the game without considering: (1) whether the game actually reflects civic life in any meaningful sense, and (2) whether the activity itself can act as a bulwark against, perhaps even active criticism of, current democratic practices (Fraser, 1990).

For the purposes of this section, we focus on one format of contemporary IAD: National Debate Tournament/Cross Examination Debate Association (NDT/CEDA) policy debate (for a brief primer, see Freeley & Steinberg, 2014, pp. 356-358). Crucially, our focus here is on arguments in favor of the traditional policy-making orientation grounded in the civic screen (Harrigan, 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2010). In the traditional view of this format, students are expected to research and prepare arguments in favor of and in opposition to the annual topic. Over the course of the year, students gather at competitions where they are assigned at random to compete against students from other universities on both sides of the selected topic. This convention of switch-side debating has long been used as a justification both for good gameplay and civic education, the assumption being that arguing both sides of a topic compels students to practice critical thinking and perspective taking (English et al., 2007; Greene & Hicks, 2005; Harrigan, 2008; Muir, 1993; Rief, 2007; Rief & Cummings, 2010).

In addition, the topics for policy debate, as the name suggests, nearly always ask the participants to consider pressing policy questions, generally manifesting in debates about the relative benefits of a hypothetical piece of legislation. The default assumption has been that the affirmative team argues in favor of a specific policy action by outlining its possible benefits and negative teams respond by pointing primarily to its potential

disadvantages. Following this pedagogical design, some have claimed debaters are better equipped to address political crises, approach difficult decisions, and evaluate competing claims and evidence (Harrigan, 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2010). Put differently, role-playing as legislators advancing a particular law or policy is viewed as beneficial because it is a form of civic education.

The issue with this view is that there are other conventions within policy debate that either deemphasize or are at odds with effective, ethical, and collaborative policy making. These include an adversarial mode of engagement much like that used in the court system (on this system and its relationship to debate see Freeley & Steinberg, 2014, p. 9). This mode is fundamentally competitive and undermines the potential of the game to contribute meaningfully to the preparation of students for magnanimous and cooperative citizenship. It also involves the use of a judge who renders a decision about who "wins," thus inviting a winner-takes-all mentality (on an earlier version of these critiques during the "discussion movement," see Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014; Keith, 2007). The conventions noted above, which are derived more from the courtroom than the assembly hall, represent the *forensic tendency* of policy debate (on the many connections between debate and courtroom practices and procedures, see also Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014; Freeley & Steinberg, 2014; Keith, 2007). The problem with this tendency is that the adversarial system sometimes yields poor results because it focuses on standards of proof and procedural tactics that militate against collaborative engagement among interlocutors aimed at deciphering truth (Bakken, 2008). As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2003) noted: "The law, by determining the issues to be discussed, favors this one-sided attitude and the adoption of a definite standpoint by the advocate, who then has merely to press this point steadfastly against his opponent" (p. 38). While there may be reasonable arguments in favor of an adversarial legal system, it seems to us that it represents a less than ideal model of deliberative engagement for debaters to emulate.

In other words, the notion of policy making as civic education breaks down under the forensic tendency because the contest takes on aspects of the courtroom that are a poor fit for democratic decision making. One such convention is the idea that a *one-sided* decision must be made at the end of the debate. In policy debate this rendering of a decision takes the form of a judge deciding who most effectively argued for or against a specific policy proposal. While this practice makes sense in terms of preserving a framework for competitive outcomes, it may not serve the goal of preparing students for effective *and* ethical public advocacy and deliberation.

In addition, it is not simply the act of forcing a decision that is the problem. It is also how judgements are rendered, a subject that takes us beyond the forensic tendency and into another feature of contemporary policy debate: *Mutual Preference Judging (MPJ)*. As mentioned above, policy debates are adjudicated by at least one "judge," usually a graduate student or coach from another university also attending the competition, who is assigned not at random but rather through a system of preference by the teams competing. This system asks each debate team to rank all of the judges available for the competition. A computer algorithm then assigns judges to each debate based on a combination of preference (how highly each team ranked that judge) and mutuality (how similarly each of the teams ranked that judge). The goal is to give teams some control over who watches their debates.

The practical effect of MPJ is that students tend to debate in front of judges partial to their argument content or style (judges they rank highly) against teams who argue in similar ways. Or, they debate against teams whose argument content and style are very different than their own in front of judges who either have no preference or equally like/dislike both teams' approaches. What is sacrificed here is audience adaptation -- the notion that debaters should be prepared to debate in front of any number of judges with very different points of view (Decker & Morello, 1984). Featuring this sort of adaptation would potentially cultivate in them an ability to overcome the conflictual features of public discourse in the American political landscape of the 21st century. MPJ is, in short, a competitive feature of the activity that fails the test of the civic screen (on this, see Keith, 2010, pp. 23-24) and raises numerous questions about other pedagogical and competitive downsides (Decker & Morello, 1984). It also fails to provide much ground for engaging in reflecting upon and rethinking democracy as currently practiced. If anything, it tends to overemphasize skills related to persuading those that already agree with one's fundamental assumptions rather than a diverse audience that challenges the speaker to consider alternative ways of framing conversations and

crafting solutions (Louden, 2013; Paroske, 2011; Rief, 2007), although as some have pointed out it can also foster the development of new and creative argumentative practices and techniques (Louden, 2013; Rief, 2007).

In this section, we have delivered several examples of the ways in which the game screen can occlude a critical perspective on civic education in contemporary debate practice, especially in the policy debate community. While these are not dispositive and we are sure many would disagree with how we have framed the issues, we are confident in our claim that more work is needed to unpack how and to what extent IAD might use its game space as a means to promote civic education (on this, see also Keith, 2010). What's more, we believe debate practitioners should more seriously consider how contemporary IAD might become a place where civic life is itself brought under the microscope, innovated upon, and ultimately challenged. Of course, critical and transformative strategies in NDT/CEDA and other communities have posed similar questions, thus opening the door for radically rethinking the practices of policy debate (Hicks & Greene, 2015; Reid-Brinkley, 2008). Our main concern here is how the traditional conception of the activity in terms of its basic format, judging, roles, and the like undermines a more critical project of civic education. From our perspective, traditional policy debate has constructed a game space that may not pose the right questions about how civic life is currently constituted and how it may be changed for the better.

4. ISOCRATEAN PAIDEIA

We now develop an alternative to the ways the game and civic education have been managed in IAD history and contemporary practice. Practitioners of contemporary IAD as both a competitive and a public endeavor have often relied on Isocrates' approach to rhetorical education as a model for articulating the value of debate as a mode of civic education (Errera & Rief, in press; Mitchell, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2010). What is missed in some of these accounts is how Isocrates, and the tradition he introduced, offered not only *"mimēsis* (imitation, representation)*"* (Haskins, 2004, p. 6), that is, both encountering and enacting examples of civic discourse, but also critical reflexivity about the actual state of the public square (see e.g.,

Hariman, 2004; Hawhee, 2004; Herrick, 2018; McGee, n.d.; Mitchell, 2011; Walker, 2011). According to Walker (2011), one of the central assumptions of Isocratean *paideia* was that classroom practices of rhetorical instruction and performance could and should reflect a kind of democratic ideal that might not be found in the real world. For much of the period after the intellectual and creative heights of the Athenian democracy, citizen participation and civic engagement were muted by dictatorial regime building. From Alexander the Great's conquests to the apotheosis of Roman influence and beyond, the democratic and rhetorical traditions of the Athenian experience that were so central to Isocrates' pedagogy could only be practiced in what Walker (2011) referred to as the "fictive" (p. 188) world of rhetorical engagement, a world in which "a democratic imaginary" (p. 212) was recreated over and over again in order to retain some palimpsest of the past that might be re-engaged in the public square at some unknown point in the future.

What did the pedagogical method of Isocrates' progeny look like throughout the Greco-Roman era and Middle Ages? Drawing upon Russell's (2009) notion of "the imaginary city of 'Sophistopolis'" (p. 22) as a context for rhetorical pedagogy, Walker (2011) described an approach he called "Civic Theater," in which "declamation" was practiced in "a theatrical civic space, an idealized image loosely based on Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E." (p. 188; see also, Rief & Errera, in press). Using this approach, students could engage in their development of rhetorical skills:

> *as theater, as game* and in so doing could cultivate their *dunamis* for wise and eloquent speech, thought, and writing in practical situations as well as develop an attachment to a dream paradigm of democratic civic life that would not be realistically possible again until the modern era, but that nevertheless could mitigate the autocratic politics of the Roman Empire. (Walker, 2011, p. 294)

In brief, the tradition of "civic theater" reviewed here involved a central assumption we have been gesturing toward throughout this paper. The game space of debate can itself be a space for reflecting about, critically engaging, even reconstructing civic life. Writing about the use of role-playing in public argument pedagogy,

Mitchell (2000) keyed into a very similar idea: "Students can use the apparent cleavage between simulated and actual public spheres to leverage salient critiques of contemporary practices in public argument" (p. 141). He goes on to suggest role-playing offers "visions of possible public spheres enacted through classroom performance [that] can serve as benchmarks for *re-visions* of prevailing communication norms in wider public spheres outside the academy" (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 141-142).

Moreover, the "civic theater" model indicates a way to forge a perspectival permutation of the game and civic screens that views them as fundamentally essential to one another. Only in a game space can alternative versions of reality be contemplated and tested. What's more, "fictive" models of the civic can and do become critical counterpoints to rather than pure imitations of the problematic features of "'actually existing democracy'" (Fraser, 1990, p. 56). In short, following Walker (2011), we suggest IAD adopt a model beholden neither to the competitive needs of the activity nor the external realities of civic life but to the goal and purpose of promoting better visions of democratic action. We do not assume, as Walker's (2011) pedagogues did, that Athens is an ideal space for us to inhabit in these efforts. Instead, perhaps the goal of the game of debate could become the construction of "fictive" and yet still *feasible* forums that might help all of us achieve the kinds of democratic life we hunger for in the 21st century. This is one way for debate to remain "fit" in the "unfit" realities of our contemporary world.

5. CONCLUSION

We have argued for an approach to debate residing in the tensions between playing the game and the serious pursuit of civic engagement: *debate as a game for critically transforming civic life*.*1 We have done so in order to show how both the game and civic screens that have defined debate praxis for generations can usefully benefit from one another (see also, Bartanen & Littlefield, 2017; Rief, 2018). In our view, debate should remain a game in which the realities of our public square are critically engaged rather than purely imitated or completely ignored. In this, we are in agreement with Brigham (2017) who argued:

> Thus, gaming and play, understood as sites of cultural longing and human community,

of who a people has been and who they could and would like and aspire to be, creates an open space in which questions can be asked and explored that could radically re-make and re-mobilize democratic and civic space. (p. 89)

Ongoing efforts to develop the civic features of the game, including the new turn to *civic debating* which has been lauded as a means to overcome the limitations of traditional formats (see e.g., Civic Debate Conference, n. d.; Keith, 2010; Llano, n.d., 2017; Rief, 2018), should not be focused on mere replication of the public square. Instead, competitive debate should be engaged in the process of developing, testing, innovating, and imparting new and more robust modes of civic and public living than have been imagined previously. We can think of few better times in history for such work to commence.

NOTES

*1. We are aware of emerging research focused on "civic gaming" or the use of video games to assist in civic education (see e.g., Dishon & Kafai, 2019). While we do not have time to address this literature here, we intend to investigate how it might inform our conception of debate as a civically oriented game in a future manuscript, especially in order to address the rapidly accelerating turn to online debating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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