

Kyushu Debate Workshops: A Rationale for Policy Debate Training

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Since 1958, argument scholars all over the world have defined argument in alignment with Stephen Toulmin's description in his groundbreaking book, *The Uses of Argument*. Toulmin claimed that the three core ingredients of an argument include a claim, a warrant, and data. Perhaps no other exercise better trains students in the construction, defense, and rebuttal of argument than competitive debate. It can be argued given its emphasis on research, policy debate fosters the best training for all three of the core elements of argument (whereas other debate formats focus on only claims and warrants). While policy debate still thrives in the United States, it is nearly absent elsewhere in the world, falling prey to the hegemony of parliamentary debate. In this paper, however, I describe one last bastion of policy debate pedagogy outside of the U.S. – Kyushu University in Japan. During the many Kyushu debate workshops, students are introduced to, and then trained in, policy debate. While most of the debaters go on to compete in parliamentary tournaments, their training in policy debate helps them research current topics and critically question the types of evidence (or absence of evidence) presented by their opponents. As such, this paper argues that the Kyushu policy workshop is not only unique as an example of policy debate outside the United States, but it also serves as an exemplar for debate workshops around the globe for producing well-rounded practitioners of *argument* – and all of its key components.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In post-truth world filled with misinformation, fake news, and politicians winning elections based on affect rather than reason, it has become imperative that citizens learn how to identify weak arguments and be able to defend political positions of their own with evidence and solid reasoning. Indeed, we live in a conjunctural moment filled with uncertainty and an inability to think critically when it concerns arguments. For many, the political process is daunting, thereby fostering a sense of inadequacy and confusion. For others, while the Internet promised available information at our fingertips, it instead has created information overload, where citizens are bombarded with information 24/7, and much of that information is conflicting. The idea of being a critically-informed citizen can be overwhelming, and for the majority of citizens around the globe, they simply rely on what others say who have theoretically processed the information, or they simply try to ignore the social, economic, and political world around them as if they play no part in its operations.

The problem, of course, is that if we believe that democracy has value and offers hope for a better future, then it requires citizen involvement. Furthermore, people who rely on the information processing of others open themselves up to receiving inaccurate, even dangerous, information. What is needed is a concerted pedagogical effort at teaching citizens how to identify arguments, then critique them, and then offer a reasoned defense of their own positions; in short, people need to be taught how to think. Many scholars have lamented the current state of affairs, but they have found a glimmer of hope in debate training and competition, arguing that debate fosters critical thinking skills and the type of advocacy skills necessary for a functioning democracy.

To complicate matters, there are a variety of debate formats, and each one has its proponents who often criticize and demean the other options. Unfortunately, the one area of education that could possibly make the world a better place is riddled with squabbles, which provides critics of debate ammunition for their rebukes. While I believe that all debate is valuable, I will be arguing in this paper that policy debate offers a

unique format that best trains individuals how to think critically by defending and countering arguments. As such, I will focus on a specific case study of a policy debate training workshop where international students learn the process and application of policy debate. I end this project by examining the effectiveness of training policy debate in general, and the value of the workshop in particular. Ultimately, even if readers do not share my perspective about policy debate, I hope they will join me in advocating for debate pedagogy as a means to improve the quality of arguments in political discourse.

2.0 ARGUMENT IN CONTEXT

Since 1958, argument scholars all over the world have defined argument in alignment with Stephen Toulmin's description in his groundbreaking book, *The Uses of Argument*. Toulmin claimed that the three core ingredients of an argument include a claim, a warrant, and data. Perhaps no other exercise better trains students in the construction, defense, and rebuttal of argument than competitive debate. It can be argued given its emphasis on research, policy debate fosters the best training for all three of the core elements of argument (whereas other debate formats focus on only claims and warrants).

2.1 Educational Institutions

Although there are very few criticisms of debate as an educational process, one will be hard pressed to find debate in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Many school districts provide public speaking classes that are either compulsory or electives. While public speaking is extremely valuable, its focus is on presentation and delivery, with only a cursory and superficial glance at the use of argument in persuasive speaking – and that is if it is included at all. Some schools offer debate as an extra-curricular activity, but rarely is debate presented as a class. Even in the unusual instance when debate classes exist, they are electives, meaning that only students who are already predisposed to thinking critically will likely enroll in the course. The students who really need the class are typically never exposed to its subject matter.

This phenomenon is not specific to the United States. Although, in most parts of the world, debate courses are even more scarce. The United States has a long history of teaching debate, focused primarily on training students for

academic competitions, but also as an extension of public speaking. In fact, nowhere else in the world does debate exist in this sort of context. Where debate does exist, it almost always viewed as an extra-curricular activity. Additionally, in some countries, like the United Kingdom, debate is not affiliated with schools at all. It exists because clubs have been formed simply due to the interest young people may have in arguing.

Furthermore, not only do our educational institutions not teach debate, but they also generally do not teach argument or critical thinking either. Many school districts, particularly in the U.S., morph classes to appear as if they teach critical thinking, but they either do not actually teach it, or they define critical thinking so broadly that it operationally could encompass almost any subject. In either case, the value of actual argument training is diluted, and students do not learn how to effectively – or usefully – argue or think critically. Some readers may contest my pessimistic view of our primary and secondary school systems. Of course, there are exceptions. And even in the case where critical thinking and argument are taught in non-debate situations, such classes rarely focus or emphasize the development and critique of argument, nor do they make critical thinking the focus of the course. Additionally, adding debate courses to teach this material would only supplement any current efforts, rather than supplant them. As is frequently the case with education, repetition and applying concepts in different contexts will yield better learning and retention.

2.2 Our Post-Truth World

As if the state of affairs of our educational systems was not bad enough, we also are living in a so-called “post-truth” world. Various definitions of post-truth exist, but generally it refers to a culture where truth is no longer important, valued, or necessary when communicating. While the obvious reaction to this perspective is that without truth we have no bearings on how to evaluate competing claims or even a barometer to gauge the validity of statements, proponents of the post-truth era respond with a position premised on *pathos*. Affect, or emotional appeals, govern our reasoning now, so their argument goes, which means there is no longer any need to use or view *logos* appeals. And, if our response and adherence to statements are affective in nature, then we no longer need to concern ourselves with

things such as facts, logic, or truth because our new truth is formed based on how the statement makes us feel.

A post-truth society also fosters a climate where fake news runs rampant. While American president Donald Trump frequently invokes the term “fake news” to refer to any news with which he disagrees, the concept of fake news can also actually mean “fake” news, i.e., news that is untrue, fabricated, or embellished to the point of constituting virtually no resemblance to the truth. Webpages that mimic legitimate news sources publish concocted stories that have no basis in reality. The user-generated nature of the Internet permits average people to blog about their opinions with no evidentiary support. Self-proclaimed journalists who are actually entertainers or pundits who polarize for profit fabricate statistics or examples to legitimize their stories or justify their claims. And, despite his attacks against what he calls “fake news,” Donald Trump engages in his own fake news by utilizing hyperbole or outright lying. Regardless of the manner of fake news, it is almost omnipresent as it festers and spreads virally in social media, online news platforms, and then legitimized when reported by mainstream news media.

I mention the post-truth phenomenon and fake news because they alarmingly demonstrate the crucial need for citizens to think critically and understand how arguments function. But, we cannot solely count on our education systems, with their habits that are difficult to break, mammoth bureaucracies, and territorial funding disputes. So where can we find adequate argument training? The answer can be found in the age-old practice of debating.

3.0 THE VALUE OF DEBATE

At the core of any style of debate lies an issue of controversy with at least two sides contesting each other’s positions. In competitive debate, a judge or panel of judges chooses a winner at the conclusion of the debate round. If there are more than two teams competing in a round, then the judge or judges rank the teams in terms of most effective to least effective, again, depending on the style of debate. Some styles emphasize the persuasive presentation of arguments, whereas others stress the argument content, and still others combine both perspectives. Regardless of the format, debaters are trained in constructing arguments, responding to opposition arguments, and thinking critically about the entire round by

means of carefully evaluating the relative strengths and weaknesses of positions advocated during the debate.

3.1 Debate Teaches Argument

Of course, in the process of building, presenting, and refuting positions of advocacy, debaters craft arguments to support such positions. In fact, debate is the name given to a competitive process of argument delivery. In some formats, debaters may have some of their speeches, or portions thereof, prepared. Most debate speeches, however, are extemporaneous, although argument briefs may be constructed before a tournament and then used in part of a debater’s speech. When preparing these briefs or prepared speeches, debaters carefully consider the language used for their claims, the best evidence that supports those claims, and the examples or line of reasoning that connects the evidence to their overall position. In this way, debaters prepare their positions in conjunction with Toulmin’s famous model of an argument, which has as its three basic components, a claim that is the sum of evidence (data) and reasoning (warrants).

Because most of a debate round is extemporaneous, including periods of cross-examination or points of information, participants must practice argument development with speed and accuracy under stressful conditions. They often train feverishly in simulated debate rounds so that when they enter competition, their deployment of arguments occurs almost as second nature.

3.2 Debate Teaches Critical Thinking

Just as debaters practice constructing and refuting arguments, they also train to think critically in similar ways. In simulated practice debates, participants use different arguments that opponents may use in order to process the relationships between positions and ideas. In this way, they also practice evaluating the merits and drawbacks of advocacy positions. This process specifically helps the last speakers who need to synthesize and assess the round as they try to persuade the judge or judges to vote for their side.

3.3 Debate Fosters Political Engagement

Because debate teaches argument and critical thinking, it makes sense that it is a suitable teaching tool for civics and political involvement. Many scholars have discussed the relationship between debate experience and political

engagement, and almost all are in agreement that debate helps promote political and civic participation (Zompetti & Williams, 2007, 2008). As a result, I do not need to rehash all of those points here, except to state the obvious for purposes of clarity: when students learn about advocacy, refuting oppositional arguments, and how to thoroughly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of ideas, then they develop the necessary skill sets to be engaged citizens.

4.0 POLICY DEBATE IN CONTEXT

As I said at the outset, all debate is good debate. However, different debate styles have different strengths and drawbacks. Typically, members of one style will defend their way of debating as supreme and characterize other styles as inferior. But the reality is that no style is perfect, and each have value. There are two dominant formats, although a variety exist. The two primary formats are parliamentary style and policy debating, and each has variations (e.g., there is Asian parli, American parli, British parli, etc.). Essentially, despite the minor differences with specific styles, parliamentary debate is extemporaneous, with multiple teams in a specific round, and each round has a different topic motion. The types of motions debated can range from fact, value, or policy in their orientation. Since the subject matter changes from round-to-round, prepared research is minimized, and debaters focus on the presentation of general arguments that are primarily based on common knowledge and commonly understood examples.

Policy debate, on the other hand, usually involves one topic for a full year or for half a year, which permits and necessitates in-depth research. Topics are policy-oriented, which means that a course of action is proposed for an agent of change to theoretically pursue (e.g., “That the government should reduce fossil fuel consumption”). During competition, teams are paired to debate each other in preliminary rounds as they switch sides from round to round. The best teams during the preliminary competition advance to elimination rounds until, finally, an overall winner is decided. Given the “switch-side” nature of the activity and that the topic is debated for many months, there is an expectation that the participants have researched the issues thoroughly. As the year progresses, the individual arguments become more advanced and in-depth. Creative teams will find ways of “linking” other

issue areas to the overarching topic. By the end of the season, an individual debater could have easily amassed enough research – by themselves – that rivals lengthy Ph.D. dissertations.

4.1 The Case for Policy Debate

As I just described, policy debate involves teams debating a central topic against other teams where they must advocate both sides of the issue. While some formats differ slightly, the teams are usually two-person teams (except in American NFA “Lincoln-Douglas” policy debate, which is one-on-one; or Karl Popper debate that may have a policy topic, which is three-on-three), and each round requires that each debater give at least one speech (usually two), and there are always cross-examination periods. These structural elements are important, as are all structural components for all variations of debate styles. For policy debate, the cross-examination period fosters careful, quick decision-making skills while maintaining consistency with one’s partner. But policy debate advances several other very important skills that are either not found in other styles or are not as prominent.

Perhaps the most obvious skill set learned in policy debate is the ability to conduct thorough, targeted research. I already briefly mentioned the amount of research that occurs in policy debate. As the debate season progresses and participants find new, unique ways of discussing the topic, they must learn how to carefully focus their research skills. With the world moving almost entirely online, the sheer volume of information at our disposal is practically infinite. As a result, in order for debaters to process usable information for evidence in debate rounds, they need to know how to remain focused and not fall victim to online distractions (such as social media or instant messaging) or to websites that seduce users through clickbait. They must also learn how to syphon the valuable from the irrelevant. While students engage in policy debate over the course of a couple of years, their research abilities progressively advance and become important skills they can use in other areas in life.

Another set of proficiencies developed in policy debate are critical thinking skills. Of course, all debate formats can enhance critical thinking, but policy debate is uniquely structured to emphasize the critical thinking process. We already know that policy debate competitions are orchestrated to require participants to “switch sides,” meaning they must defend both sides of a debate motion. Unlike other debate styles where

the motion changes each round, policy debate requires investigation of the same motion for each round during a tournament, so all participants must engage in the topic area by supporting *and* opposing it. This process naturally fosters critical thinking skills since debaters must learn and defend multiple sides of an issue. Additionally, policy debate's inclination for voluminous research suggests that participants are exposed to many perspectives of an issue, rather than the perspective the students already embrace. Learning how others view a controversial issue as well as exposing oneself to a diversity of perspectives cultivates critical thinking and prepares participants for a multicultural and globalized world.

With copious research and a litany of argument possibilities, policy debaters must develop sophisticated organizational techniques. These may range from incorporating a specialized organizational system, color-coded files, computerized file notations, or other mechanisms. Different debaters will no doubt find different processes that fit their personalized style. Nevertheless, the nature of policy debate necessitates a developed system of organization. In this way, policy debate promotes very important organizational skills.

In virtually all debate formats, it behooves participants to listen to their opponents carefully so they may adequately and efficiently respond to particular arguments. This typically involves taking meticulous notes, often called "flowing." Such note taking skills enable the debater to record every argument presented, including – if the student is particularly adept – citations and quotes from pieces of evidence. The ability to craft such notes not only provides the debater a list of key arguments that require attention and response, but it is an ability that also assists the student in a variety of other contexts, not the least of which is when they must register lecture material in their classes.

And, like all debate, policy debate improves listening skills. Obviously, to adequately and persuasively respond to an opponent's argument, the debater needs to carefully listen to the declaration of the argument in the first place. The way an adversary crafts their positions and describes contentions during cross-examination may also reveal important strategic objectives that are not easily discernable unless the student is listening closely. When debaters of different cultures are matched against each other, policy debate can also bolster listening skills since

different accents, idioms, and preferences for argument support vary between cultures (Zompetti, 2006a).

Finally, policy debate promotes useful advocacy skills. Advocacy simply means the characterization and support for a particular position regarding an issue of controversy with the hope of persuading others (Zompetti, 2006b). Advocacy is usually witnessed when attorneys advocate on behalf of their clients in a court room. However, advocacy is also a crucial behavior for citizens who would like to see their society change for some reason. Often referred to as "civic engagement" or "political engagement," citizen advocacy occurs when everyday people argue for social change. When such advocacy happens, citizens typically need to convince other citizens in order to generate a sufficient mass of people who can then inflict political leverage on elites to effect social change. Policy debate, with its requirement of switch-side debate and comprehensive understanding of political controversies, facilitates simulated advocacy – and, hence, teaches the requisite advocacy skills – unlike any other educational activity (Zompetti & Williams, 2007, 2008).

4.2 The Kyushu University Debate Workshop

While policy debate teaches these important skills to students, one might wonder where the students learn to participate in policy debate. In the United States, for example, some classes teach policy debate at the middle school, high school, and university levels. The rest of the world generally does not offer such classes because there are no formal teacher education systems that train educators how to teach debate in general, and policy debate in particular. As a result, non-American students (and even some American students depending on their geographical location) rely on "debate camps" to introduce them to, and train them in, debate practices.

Debate camps, also called "workshops," typically transpire in the off-season for students so that they do not conflict with formalized and compulsory school attendance. These workshops have happened all over the world, notably in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, North America, various Asian and African countries, and throughout Europe. However, debate workshops specifically catered for policy debate only exist in the United States and Japan. One such debate camp, called the Kyushu University Debate Workshop, has occurred in slightly different

variations roughly every year since 2009. Hosted and organized by Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan, this debate camp usually offers credit to Kyushu students but also invites debaters from other countries. As such, students from Thailand, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Chile, the UK, the U.S., and of course Japan have participated in this workshop.

Debate in Japan has roughly modeled the debate practices in the United States, although policy debate has encountered both praise and criticism throughout the years, which has culminated in various periods of relative popularity or disdain. The history of educational and competitive debate in Japan is not the focus of this essay, but a brief examination of such history can be found on a blog written by Edmund Zagorin (2013). For our purposes, it is important to note that even when policy debate enjoys considerable popularity, the only sustained debate workshop can be found at Kyushu University.

Established and organized by long-time argument professor at Kyushu University, Dr. Narahiko Inoue, the Kyushu Debate Workshop typically features an invited and noted debate scholar from another university who plans and provides policy debate lectures for the first part of the week-long camp. Since the students attending the workshop arrive with different backgrounds, the lectures are structured to accommodate the unexperienced debater, but the camp has time budgeted to provide one-on-one training for those with some experience. After the fundamentals of policy debate have been taught, different forms of practices and simulations take place, with the camp culminating in a mini-tournament at the very end.

The topic of the workshop usually mimics the current high school Japanese policy debate topic so that inexperienced debaters can have a basis for beginning their research. The invited instructor who delivers the lessons also usually provides a research packet for the students so they will have a guide and frame of reference for argument development along with materials ready at the very beginning for practice sessions.

To facilitate the ease of instruction, all lessons are taught in English, and all debates and research materials occur in English. For some students this poses a unique challenge, but it also creates an opportunity for participants to improve their English language skills – another unique benefit to attending this debate workshop. However, since the camp is populated with

participants from various countries, the workshop also provides the valuable opportunity to improve one's intercultural knowledge. While it is not uncommon for students to encounter peers from other countries during their university experiences, students can – and often do – find ways to stick with their compatriots and avoid students who are different than them. In contrast, the debate workshop facilitates an intense environment where the students must work together and learn from each other.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

In addition to teaching students the process of policy debate and how to engage in the joy of competition, the debate workshop also teaches a unique method of thinking that benefits all sorts of students, including science and engineering students, who would otherwise unlikely encounter the activity. Debate – and policy debate in particular – trains the mind to cognitively process information at high rates of speed, but in a meticulous manner that improves efficiency and accuracy in decision-making. With all of the various skills that accompany debate learning, the activity offers learning opportunities that simply do not exist in any other educational capacity. By emphasizing critical thinking, but also offering a set of additional skills, policy debate and the Kyushu policy debate workshop offer extremely important opportunities for students. Not only will students learn abilities that will help them throughout life, they will also learn crucial skills necessary for democratic, citizen engagement. The educational life of a student will undoubtedly improve as a result of this experience. And, so too might the overall quality of our society as more and more citizens learn and embrace these valuable advocacy skills.

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