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## Cerebral Gymnastics 101: Why Do Debaters Debate?

KEVIN T. JONES

Numerous studies have attempted to identify various debater characteristics. Research has examined debater intelligence (Thompson; Hargis; Bradley), debater character (Williams and Webb; Williams, Webb and Clark; Dowling), debater personality traits (Thayer; Douglas; Hetlinger and Hilbreth; Anderson; Burgoon and Montgomery; Wilson), and debater image (Tucker, Koehler and Mlady; King and Phifer; Stewart and Merchant). While these studies provided insight into the characteristics of the type of person who might participate in debate, the question of "why do debaters debate?" has received only modest attention. Hill (1982) was the first to address this question. Using questionnaires, Hill asked debaters to list "in order of importance as many reasons as you can that accurately describe your *motivation* for being involved in debate" (80). Hill obtained responses which were coded into six categories: educational, social, competitive, career preparation, miscellaneous and financial. Since Hill's categories were achieved from truncated, non-developed answers, he identified the surface reasons debaters debate but did not identify specific reasons for the motivation behind debater behavior. For example, when Hill identifies debater responses such as "improve communication skills" or "intellectual stimulation" as components of the "educational needs" category (83), no explanation is provided as to why the debater values improved communication skills or intellectual stimulation.

Wood and Rowland-Morin replicated Hill's study using a five-point Likert-type scale for each item presented on the questionnaire (85). In addition to replicating the Hill study, Wood and Rowland-Morin also tested to see if motivational influences shifted over time (they did not), if there was a difference in motivation reported by novice versus varsity debaters (very few), and if there was a difference between NDT and CEDA debaters (CEDA debaters appeared to value education and learning more highly than did NDT debaters) (90-94).

However, as with the Hill study, the Wood and Rowland-Morin study was restricted by the methodology. While a Likert scale can be beneficial for indicating one preferred motivation over another, the method does not allow for an in-depth response by the debater indicating why a particular motivation was important to her. Furthermore, the authors claimed that "the conclusion of the study needed to be confirmed or modified over time" and

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that the "study suggested methodological refinements" (95). Because of these concerns, a study replication is in order.

The value of study replications and methodological refinements regarding debater motivation are crucial in the justification of debate as a worthwhile activity. Preliminary studies have questioned the value of debate. Lane initiated dialogue regarding the criticism of debate by noting that "we are working under two ideals: one to win, and the other to educate" (14). Haiman and Gow extended Lane's concern by arguing that the primary motivation influencing debaters was winning. Ehrlich argued that communication skills often are sacrificed in order to win. If winning is the sole motivating force behind debate, then the justification of the pedagogical benefits of debate become suspect to budget-conscious administrators.

In defense of the pedagogical contributions of debate, Colbert and Biggers provided three reasons why debate should be supported for its educational benefits: 1) debate improves communication skills; 2) debate provides an educational experience which is very unique; and 3) debate offers excellent pre-professional training (237). Furthermore, Colbert noted the contribution debate provided in developing critical-thinking skills (200). Recently, however, Hill (1993) has presented arguments which question the ability of debate to truly teach critical-thinking skills (18).

If debaters are being pressured to win at the expense of any pedagogical benefits of the activity, why do students who are not continually winning maintain involvement in the activity? Since not all debaters can win, some sort of additional motivation to debate must exist.

Exchange theory identifies motivation behind human behavior. Homans argued that "the more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action" (25). As long as the rewards from an activity outweigh the costs of engaging in that same activity, an individual will continue to participate in the activity. Since few debaters actually receive an award at a tournament, debate must motivate the debater to participate in the activity. Additional studies similar to the Hill and the Wood and Rowland-Morin studies are justified in order to identify the pedagogical benefits of debate, should those benefits exist. This study is designed to identify debater motivation beyond answers found on a questionnaire by engaging in qualitative research. An interview-based study allows for probing interviews, which provide more in-depth answers than provided on a questionnaire. Field observations further enrich the data and contribute to the results of a debate study designed to discover "Why do debaters debate?"

## Method

Ninety-eight debaters were observed and interviewed at six intercollegiate debate tournaments. Five of the tournaments were held in the South Central region, and the sixth tournament was the Novice National Tournament. Each interview was audiotaped. Each

debater was asked for general demographic information followed by the primary question, "Why do you debate?" Follow-up questions were based upon initial answers to the original question. For example, when a debater responded that she debated because "I like the competition," follow-up questions included: "What is it about competition that you like?" or "Why is it important to you to be in a competitive situation?"

Each interview was transcribed and the content was analyzed. Answers were coded according to primary (Why do you debate?) and secondary (Follow-up) responses. Five primary categories emerged: cerebral, competition, heuristic, social, and miscellaneous. Secondary responses were operationally coded corresponding to the primary responses, and one category emerged: intellectual reinforcement. In addition to interviews, debater behavior was observed for additional data. Observations included such things as casual conversations between debaters between rounds of competition, listening to comments made while reading judges ballots, comments regarding rounds of competition, and post-tournament discussion of debate rounds. The emphasis upon observation was to watch and listen for behavior which would support or refute the secondary response taxonomy.

### **Analysis**

Of the five primary categories, three were similar to Hill's: social, competitive, and miscellaneous. Heuristic encompassed statements which referred to learning, and cerebral included statements directly related to mental activity. The most frequent category of response was cerebral, followed by competition, heuristic, social, and miscellaneous.

(Answers rank ordered.)

1. **Cerebral**

- |                                  |                                    |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a. Logical skills                | f. Pick apart what people say      |
| b. Enjoy arguing                 | g. Intellectual stimulation        |
| c. I like to make good arguments | h. Debaters are intelligent people |
| d. I like analysis               | i. I like to think on my feet      |
| e. Prove I have a brain          |                                    |

2. **Competition**

- |                                   |                       |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. Allows me to be in competition | c. It's a challenge   |
| b. I enjoy winning                | d. I like being right |

3. **Heuristic**

- |                     |                                     |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. It's educational | c. Increase my communication skills |
| b. I love research  | d. Learning experience              |

4. **Social**

- |                     |               |
|---------------------|---------------|
| a. It's fun         | c. I enjoy it |
| b. The team concept | d. Travel     |

5. Misc.

- |                     |  |                        |
|---------------------|--|------------------------|
| a. I like the power |  | c. Prep for law school |
| b. It's fulfilling  |  |                        |

Secondary responses were not as easily coded since they were usually more elaborate than primary responses. Secondary responses were identified operationally to correspond with the primary responses as shown below.

(Sample of responses. Volume of data prohibits provision of entire data collected)

SOCIAL

## Primary

1. It's fun. How?
2. I enjoy it. Why?

## Secondary

1. I get to use my mind and see how much I know.
2. Reinforces that I'm intelligent.

CEREBRAL

## Primary

1. I enjoy argumentation. Why?
2. Use of logic. Why important?

## Secondary

1. Ego/gratification. If I make a better argument than you, it tells me I'm smarter than you.
2. Sharpens my mental skills, gives me an edge on others.

COMPETITION

## Primary

1. It's a challenge. How?
2. I like to win. Why?

## Secondary

1. Makes me think, reinforces that I am smart.
2. Personal achievement. Justifies the fact that I am intelligent.

HEURISTIC

## Primary

1. I love research. Why?
2. It's educational. How?

## Secondary

1. I learn a lot. Learning gives me an edge, gives me power over others who aren't as smart.
2. Teaches me how to think and its important to be able to think.

Multiple responses were coded as singular secondary answers. Once coded, either a rationale or a means-end semantic relationship could be identified. These semantic relationships provided the most significant findings in the study.

### Discussion

Once coded, a consistent semantic relationship emerged. Secondary answers expressed either a means-end relationship or a rationale relationship. A means-end relationship response explained how to execute the primary answer given. For example, a debater whose primary answer was, "I debate because I love to research" would respond to a "why" question with, "Because when you research you learn a lot." Research was not the end but merely the means to get to the end, which was learning.

A rationale relationship provides justification for doing what the primary statement proclaimed. For example, a primary response such as, "I debate because I like to win" might be followed by a secondary response such as, "Because winning reinforces that I'm intelligent." The debater does not debate specifically to win but seeks to win debate rounds because winning provides a rationale for being intelligent (I win, therefore I am smart). In both relationships, the debaters are acting in accordance with exchange theory.

Debaters initially responded to "Why do you debate?" with answers from one or more of the five categories. To the debater, the activity was fun, provided competition, allowed for the practice of critical-thinking skills, or created a learning environment which was pleasurable. While all these answers were good reasons for debating, none fully explained *motivation*. The debater never stated what made debating fun, what type of pleasure was obtained from practicing critical-thinking skills, or why learning environments were pleasurable to them. As Homans and other exchange theorists would argue (Blau; Foa and Foa), debate must provide some type of reward to offset the cost to the debater to engage in the activity. Cost to the debaters includes such things as sacrificing personal time, study time, or time for part-time jobs or risking failure each time they compete. Debate tournaments are structured so that only a few competitors receive any type of tangible award. Frequently, only one award is given to a debate team and that award often is placed in a school trophy case. As a result, the reward obtained to motivate debaters must involve more than trophies.

Secondary answers revealed the motivation. When a debater was pressed to elaborate on a primary answer, a consistent response emerged. Debate provided an atmosphere which reinforced the debaters need to know that he or she is intelligent. Of the secondary responses provided, 80% of the respondents made some sort of reference to intellectual motivation. Of the 80%, 38% *directly* referred to the need for intellectual reinforcement. Statements such as, "It reinforces to me that I'm intelligent," or, "It allows me to show that I am smart" illustrate this claim. The remaining 42% of the responses indirectly reflected this opinion. Indirect comments which reflected the need for intellectual reinforcement can be identified in the following conversation samples:

**Sample 1:**

Debater 1: Debate is fun.

Interviewer: How so?

D: Because most people view debaters as smart.

I: Why is that important to you?

D: Because I like being placed in that category.

**Sample 2:**

Debater 2: I like to research.

Interviewer: Why?

D: Because research provides knowledge.

I: Why is knowledge important?

D: Because knowledge provides power.

I: What type of power?

D: Intellectual power.

I: Why do you want intellectual power.

D: Because it is a type of power I can have over other people.

**Sample 3:**

Debater 3: Debate provides me a standard of measurement.

Interviewer: What type of measurement?

D: If I have respect for someone as a debater, or perceive them to be smart, then if I can pit my intellectual skills against their intellectual skills, I can get a good picture of where I stand.

I: Stand in respect to what?

D: Intelligence!

Debate either directly or indirectly communicated to the debaters that they were intelligent and possessed the cerebral skills needed to excel in the activity.

The debaters interviewed possessed better than average G.P.A.'s and college entrance test scores. The debaters interviewed were found to support previous research regarding debater intelligence. The sample had an average G.P.A. of 3.305, S.A.T. of 1282, and A.C.T. of 26.6. With such indicators of intellectual prowess as well as various avenues of intellectual reinforcement available to them (the classroom, grades, papers, and so on), the question remains, why do debaters seek out debate to reinforce intellect? Apparently few other activities provide the debater the opportunity to engage in the "cerebral gymnastics"<sup>1</sup> which debate requires. By participating in the cerebral-gymnastic process, debaters receive the rewards necessary to encourage them to continue in the activity. When a debater analyzes an opponent's arguments, identifies flaws in another person's logic, or creates and executes good arguments, her intellect is reinforced. The five primary response categories revealed only the processes involved in achieving intellectual reinforcement. When debaters claimed that debate was fun or educational, those taxonomies were merely a means, not an end. Debate was fun (primary) to the debaters because they were able to use their mind and make good arguments. Making good arguments was fun because the debater must display a certain level of cerebral proficiency to make those arguments. By making a good argument, the debater excelled intellectually, since only intelligent people can make good arguments. When the debater excelled intellectually, he received confirmation that he was smart, and this confirmation of intelligence was equated with fun. Once this level of fun has been achieved, the exchange theorists' "reward" is present.

Additional evidence that cerebral gymnastics took place can be identified from some of the field observations. At one tournament, while competitors were waiting in the hallways for the next round of competition pairings to be posted, several debaters were gathered in a corner playing a dictionary game. One debater would read the definition of a word to the group from the dictionary, and the group would try to guess the word. When asked why they were playing this game, the conversation went as follows:

Debaters: It is fun.

Interviewer: What makes it fun?

D1: It helps us learn.

D2: It's better than some mindless activity like video games.

D3: When I guess the word I feel smart.

I: Why are those things important to you?

D1,2&3: I don't know, it's just good to use your mind for something productive.

You never know when some word will come in handy to win an argument!

The dictionary game provided intellectual reinforcement. Only "smart" people would know obscure words, and smart people do not do "mindless" activities. By learning these words and avoiding mindless activities, the debaters engaged in an activity requiring cerebral gymnastics, thus reinforcing their intelligence.

A second observed conversation provided further support for debate as mental gymnastics. One debater returned from a round of competition and announced to her coach:

Debater: That was a great round!

Coach: Why?

D: We [both teams] made tons of great arguments. We were going at it head to head, and I understood their case and had great responses to all their arguments.

C: Do you think you won the round?

D: I don't know, but even if we lost, I don't care. I made some good arguments.

The debater seemed willing to place argument development and clash ahead of winning. Whether or not that feeling was upheld once the judge's decision was discovered is not known. Regardless, in the conversation observed, creating good arguments was paramount for the debater and provided a sufficient enough reward.<sup>2</sup>

A final example of cerebral gymnastics can be found in a conversation between a debater and his coach. The debater had entered a round of competition with an assigned judge whom he knew. This debater knew the judge's philosophy of debate and judging criteria. However, the judge's voting criteria consisted of issues contrary to the manner in which this debater liked to debate.<sup>3</sup> During the round, the debater ignored the judge's criteria. The judge was alienated and consequently voted against the debater's team, despite that team's perception that they possessed superior debating skills. After the round, the judge told the debaters' coach that he had voted against them, despite the round being lopsided in regards

to talent and ability, because the team had violated too many of the judge's criteria. The conversation proceeded:

Coach: What happened in the round?

Debater: The other team sucked so we dumped all over them.

C: Dumped what?

D: Procedurals, off-case, stuff like that.

C: Why? You know Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s judging philosophy. He hates that stuff.

D: So, that's how I like to debate.

C: But you risked the round. What if you lost?

D: The other team sucked, we couldn't lose.

C: What if you did?

D: How could we have?

C: Because \_\_\_\_\_ hates that stuff and will drop you out of principle.

D: Fine, let him drop us then. I don't care.

C: Why not?

D: Because I have to debate the way I like. I'm not going to adjust my debating style if that adjustment means lowering myself to primordial debating practices.

C: Then you are going to lose rounds like that one.

D: Fine, I don't care. I'd rather lose a round debating like a good debater than win by acting like a novice.

To this debater, it was more important to debate at a perceived level of proficiency. The desired level of proficiency indicated a certain level of ability which only experienced, intelligent debaters could achieve. The reward of debating at this level was so valuable that the debater was willing to lose in order to obtain that reward. The motivation for the debater was not winning but engaging in cerebral gymnastics.<sup>4</sup>

Since intellectual reinforcement can be obtained through other means such as the classroom or the observed dictionary game, debate must offer debaters something which these activities cannot. A classroom is cerebral and can offer a certain degree of competition, but all class members can potentially "win" in this competition by receiving an "A" in the course. In debate, only one person/team can be the winner. While the dictionary game is both cerebral and competitive, there is little public recognition for the winner. In debate, the winner not only receives a trophy, but public recognition as well.

As a result, the unique combination of the primary categories identified in this study make debate attractive to debaters. Many intelligent individuals drop out of debate or never join because they do not need or want intellectual reinforcement of this type. They are content to find reinforcement through other means. This study indicates that debate attracts individuals who enjoy an academic environment where the pursuit of cerebral activities is possible, while simultaneously offering a social environment which is competitive and offers public recognition for accomplishments.

### **Limitations**

The results of this study have some limitations. Interviews have demand characteristics which surfaced in this study. Interviewees often tried to anticipate what they thought the interviewer was looking for. Debaters often would answer a question by stating, "Is that right?" or, "I'm not sure what you are looking for." Interviewing groups of debaters collectively also proved problematic when debaters' answers began to mirror the answers of the other members of the group who had spoken before them. Additionally, care had to be taken to avoid asking leading questions which might manipulate the data. Whenever any of the aforementioned problematic areas began to emerge during data collection, measures were taken to immediately correct the problem and prevent study contamination.

A further limitation involved the limited sample size. Two-thirds of the respondents were from the five regional tournaments. Only one-third of the respondents were from the national tournament and represented geographical diversity. A larger national sample size might alter results. Further research is justified.

Finally, the study did not account for answer variance based on gender, experience levels, or NDT versus CEDA. Assuming response stability across these factors may be incorrect.

### **Conclusion**

While winning is very much a part of debate, this study indicates that winning is a secondary manifestation of other primary motivational factors. Debate offers individuals a chance to engage in an activity which they perceive as involving critical thinking skills which cannot be found through other avenues.

This study also provides additional support to the arguments that debate does accomplish certain desired pedagogical goals. In *American Forensics in Perspective*, James H. McBath provided several educational benefits provided by forensics to undergraduate students identified at the Second National Conference on Forensics. Among the benefits listed, McBath noted: 1) "Forensics offers students an opportunity to develop skills that are prized by society"; 2) "Forensics is diversified in its scope, appealing to student with different goals and interests"; and 3) "A good forensics program becomes a kind of ongoing honors course for academically talented students" (6). Cerebral gymnastics fosters all of these issues.

While debate may provide something for everybody, perhaps not everybody can debate competitively. However, cerebral gymnastics may provide a common denominator among those who chose to debate. Additionally, cerebral gymnastics requires a certain level of academic proficiency which can serve as an outlet for academically talented students.

A final conclusion regarding this study involves the possible need to rethink present program orientation. Programs required to justify budgets in terms of dollars spent and students serviced may want to explore providing non-competitive cerebral gymnastics opportunities as a means of attracting more students. Not long ago, I watched as two

members of the traveling British debate team "beat up" on a good American open debate team, although the British team members never had competed in an intercollegiate debate competition. They were products of English debating "societies" which meet periodically, usually over a meal, to discuss and debate current events. On-campus activities offering cerebral gymnastics opportunities, without the required travel and competitive environment, might provide greater numbers of program participants for year-end reports.

Debaters debate for a wide variety of reasons. This study suggested that there is a marked difference between reasons for debating and motivation behind those reasons. Primary responses provided the reasons, but secondary responses shed light upon the motivation. Cerebral gymnastics appears to be the motivating force, or reward, behind debaters' willingness to participate in an activity which provides very few tangible rewards. By engaging in cerebral gymnastics, debaters receive reinforcement that they are intelligent and find a great deal of satisfaction in that experience.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Author's term. In order to compete in debate, the debater must possess a great deal of intellectual dexterity, flexibility, and diversity. Debate creates an intellectual challenge where each debater must stretch, adapt, and change with each situation. Debating therefore becomes a "cerebral gymnastic" activity.

<sup>2</sup> In a post-tournament discussion, the student's coach noted that prior to that particular tournament, the debater did not want to attend the tournament and compete. She had felt insecure, did not like debate, and her partner had to force her to attend. However, after the tournament, the debater loved debate, could not wait until the next tournament, and had "millions of research ideas" for her case. The coach felt that the particular round noted played a pivotal role in the changed attitude. However, the team lost that round.

<sup>3</sup> The debater enjoyed doing such things as speaking quickly, spreading evidence, executing several procedurals, and running excessive off-case positions.

<sup>4</sup> The team lost the round due to alienating the judge.

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