

Debate - A way of Training for Success

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*I hate solitude, but I'm afraid of intimacy.
The substance of my life is a private conversation with myself, which, to
turn into a dialogue, would be equivalent to self-destruction.*

— Iris Murdoch: *Under the Net*

Who would not readily recognize in the confession above a reflection of their own worrying thoughts? In present-day Romanian society, human interaction is hardly a cooperative enterprise in which participants engage in a process of negotiation as to who will speak, what will be discussed, and how the discussion will proceed. More and more apathetically, and thus inefficiently, do speakers and listeners negotiate meaning by conferring and collaborating to check on the comprehensibility of the exchanges - and make conversation adjustments if required, to ensure that messages are communicated. The power of words is often not respected or simply neglected. The capacity to express is taken for granted. We tend to assume that if people have a well-developed grammar and vocabulary, then they will be able to deliver an intelligent speech automatically.

School curricula in Romania often lack the inclusion of oral expression. Public speaking, therefore, is stressful to many. The discussion of controversial topics is even more so. Some would be reluctant to take a stand on their views, while others might become over-bearing and lack respect for the opinions of their partners or audience.

There are numerous linguistic, intellectual, and social skills involved in the ability to negotiate and argue successfully. If our students are to turn into effective communicators, we must provide them with ample opportunities to develop the types of interactive skills that most closely approximate communication in the "real world."

The most natural way to favor these skills is through activities that promote conversation and discussion abilities. The former can be accomplished through learner-learner interviews, information-gap activities, and similar exercises. The latter can be accomplished through debate or group discussion. Yet only group discussion closely mirrors authentic communication. Such communication, according to Dakin, "is essentially personal - the expression of personal needs, feelings, experiences, and knowledge in situations that are never quite the same."

Unfortunately, initiating, and sustaining effective discussion is no easy task, in spite of our students' eager insistence that they be provided with more opportunities to talk. If we aim to assist them in improving their discussion skills, we need to devise activities that maximize the possibilities of interaction. Those activities need to enable learners to be more relaxed and at the same time prepared to accept roles as *initiators*, as well as *responders*. They need to be increasingly ready to give and accept feedback. We should be motivated to devise these activities as long as we are aware that the core of any instruction should be a) comprehensive input in a low-anxiety atmosphere and b) speech production with a great deal of emphasis on putting one's message across in situations modeling real-life communication.

Debate with its long-standing traditions in English-speaking countries has turned out to be a feasible solution. Debate is a framework for the structured discussion of various topics. Two teams put forward their arguments and counter-arguments. They make an effort to convince the adjudicator of their point of view - and of their rhetorical expertise. Learning the techniques of debating, therefore, provides an excellent opportunity for the students to acquire sophisticated language and communicative skills.

We think there is no better preparation for a successful career in nowadays' society than competitive debate. In fact, in some ways, debate is a training superior to what is offered in most schools at present.

Let me be more specific.

1) Debaters are committed to a contest of ideas. We understand that in order to communicate and persuade it is critical to grasp in a nuanced way what our opponent is saying, and to have a clear representation of the strongest argument of our partner in discussion. So this builds in a person a capacity for active listening.

As Professor Rivers has pointed out, "*hearing*" and "*comprehending*" are two different things: "one is possible without the other." Accordingly, listening "is not a passive skill, nor even, as has been traditionally believed, a receptive skill. Listening is a creative skill. In order to comprehend the sounds falling on our ears, we take the raw material of words, the arrangements of words, and the rise and fall of the voice, and from this material we create a significance. There is *meaning in the linguistic arrangement the speaker has produced* - the speaker's meaning - but *significance in the mind of the listener*." (Rivers, Wilga M., "Hearing and Comprehending," *English Teaching Forum*, XVII/4, 1980).

The process of comprehension, being a part of learning, is invisible: All we can observe is evidence that it has or has not taken place. In many circumstances such evidence is easy to fake: for example, in the classroom it is particularly easy for students who have not understood to copy it from others who have, or to work out what they are supposed to do from the general context. In fact, only when they are faced with situations such as debate, where a great deal depends on *accurate comprehension*, do they realize that it is not easy at all. Smiling confidently, nodding occasionally and looking over-attentive to cover up errors of comprehension or even a complete failure to understand what the opponents are saying would definitely prove insubstantial, ludicrous too, in a debate round.

2) Debaters learn about the abstractness of language. A crucial element of abstractness involves the malleability of words. One of the maturing processes that goes on for a competitive debater is maturing out of the "sophomoric" explanation of a defeat in a round, i.e., the judge made a mistake, into an understanding that the judge comes into a round as *tabula rasa*, upon which the speakers write. In order to do so, the speakers have to communicate their ideas into the judge's mind. In the process of communication, the sophisticated communicator has to understand that words are malleable and the combination of words in a sentence or a combination of sentences in a paragraph has a kaleidoscopic quality to them and they have to be constantly aware of their listener - in the context of competitive debate, the judge. Debaters have to be conscious, not only of the way they mean their words, but also of the way that their words can be perceived by others who may have different vantage points. The consciousness of the audience in the communicative process is something that is highly sophisticated and is taught at the best levels of competitive debate.

We could cite a cornucopia of examples to illustrate this delicate reality — all based on our first-hand experience as debate coaches and judges. However, two stand out as particularly memorable. One goes back to the very beginnings of debate in Romania, in a south-eastern city by the name of Ploiesti in October 1994. The resolution was: "That adolescence is a happy age" and the negative team happened to win. The audience was made up of 16-17 year-old students, a few teachers, and the school principal. Unpleasantly surprised, if not sadly shocked, by the outcome of the debate, the principal took the floor and expressed her bewilderment: "How can you possibly think and feel this way about adolescence — the most beautiful period of your life, of anyone's life? I am deeply disappointed in you."

The other especially telling example is related to the proposition: "That imagination is more important than knowledge," which was being debated within the context of the International Conference of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, held in Bucharest, in December 1995. The

audience consisted of English teachers and professors from Romania and abroad, as well as high school students aged 17 (11th graders). When the round was over, the vote went to the affirmative. Upon this, Professor Aurel Preda (now-deceased), an expert in John Keats (1795-1821, English poet and principal figure of the Romantic movement), stood up and expressed his profound disagreement based on scientific literary evidence. He made detailed references to the famous poetic creed of the Romantics, which is considered to be the preface to the collection entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, put together by William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). In the final analysis, Professor Preda contended that it was "creative imagination" and not mere "imagination" that was more important than "knowledge," which was clearly irrefutable from where he stood as a literary expert of the Romantic point of view.

Both the school principal and Professor Preda, untrained in debate, were unaware that a good debate audience, the judge included, is expected to be unbiased while watching a round. This means leaving all prior knowledge on the issue being debated at the door or, at least, striving to do so, to be fair and equidistant from the two teams engaged in the game. For example, if the affirmatives are arguing that "it is raining outside", while there is no sign of it whatsoever (i.e. it is a gorgeous sunny day), and the negative does not refute that claim at all, the judge should give his or her vote to the former, irrespective of what they believe or know for a fact. In other words, they should "act" like *tabula rasa*.

Consequently, not sharing the code of debate as being a contest of ideas structured as a game, in which no conclusion can ever be definitive (either side of the issue can be proved to be right on the basis of arguments and reasoning), both the school principal and Professor Preda found themselves enthralled by their own life or professional experience in the matter: the former, as a mature individual still feeling nostalgic about adolescence, and the latter, as a literary expert in the topic field.

The precise meaning of the word is often a point of debate itself. If the affirmative team relinquishes its right to define the terms, the other team will surely take advantage of the situation to ease their own burden and eventually win the game. Consider the example below, while thinking about how definitions affect the practical and strategic aspects of the debate.

Suppose the word "control," in a gun-control topic, is defined as that which is necessary for the effective use of an object (the controlled use of an automobile). Such definition, put in the context of weapons, means that "to control" the gun is to aim it more effectively. The debate on "gun" control now will be concerned with ways to render weapons more effective in hitting their targets, instead of looking at ways to restrict the

availability of guns. The result? Confusion among the Opposition, hindering communication and therefore minimizing the chances of participating in a good debate, to say nothing about the slim chances of winning it at all.

3) Debaters learn to develop their line of argumentation on multiple levels. While in everyday life most discussion of ideas is held superficially, through debate we access further what is commonly known as "extending the argument." Debaters are well aware that conversations about ideas have to go into several levels of extension and layers of interpretations.

Such heuristic developments are simply unavoidable. They are directly required by the very structure of debate cases: two or more contentions generally include two or more arguments. Furthermore, a well-built contention will contain arguments which provides examples illustrating the truth of the proposition, combine original reasoning with appropriate quotations from recognized experts in the topic field as well as relate its claim back to the resolution.

4) Debaters learn the skills of close textual reading and critical thinking. At the highest level of debating, reasoning will frequently require almost talmudic reading of the documentation texts, more often than not under time constraints. Despite this, reasoning can go on in a considerably nuanced manner. We believe, based on first-hand experience as instructors, that outside the debate room the debaters are extraordinarily more attentive to the reading of text than are ordinary people. More and more we are coming to realize that debate is good preparation, not just for school-education purposes, but for any profession or business.

Debaters stand out from the rest, in and out of their own age-bracket, as easily the best. Accomplished debaters are able at any time to contribute a fresh and profound perspective on any issue being discussed within the classroom context, no matter how philosophical it may be, surprising their teachers with their insight and persuasiveness, which may sometimes place them in a less favorable light, the more so if they dare to hold a different or even opposite view.

5) Debaters have to be creative thinkers. They must use both analytical and synthetic thinking. What good debaters combine is an analysis of intellectual problems, synthesis and organization of material, location of whole arguments, totalities that other people untrained in debate do not see. They are able to spot gaps that other participants in the discussion may miss. They then readily fill in those gaps, which requires covering a broad spectrum of intelligence, vocabulary, and cultural differences in the world of tomorrow as we deal more and more globally.

6) Access to formal debate competition enables youngsters to have the opportunity to excel in a rigorous intellectual activity which positively affects all aspects of their lives.

The preparation and delivery of debate arguments challenge students to think critically, develop their academic research skills, improve their communication abilities, solve problems creatively, thus increasing self-confidence. On the basis of all this, debaters often receive higher grades and are more likely to be admitted into the most ambitious colleges and university departments. For example, law, political sciences, international relations, or journalism are the top choices for higher education with Romanian high school graduates. This explains the limited number of places available and consequently the demanding contests to occupy those places. Believe it or not, our best debaters always counted themselves amongst the winning minority of high-flying candidates. We could cite a host of examples to illustrate this, but we think it would be enough to mention the most sonorous representatives of competitive debate from its very beginning in Romania to this day. Carmen Draghici was the winner of the first place in the International Debate Tournaments held in Hungary in 1995 and in Latvia in 1997, respectively. Liviu Torcatoru was the best speaker of the contest in Bulgaria in 1998. The Romanian team that participated in the competition in Croatia in 1999 succeeded in winning the first place both in the team and individual rankings, and so did the one that highly impressed the multi-national panel of judges in the International Debate Contest that was organized in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in the summer of 2001. All these champions, and many more, if we also consider the national and regional victories, are now brilliant students in the colleges and university departments, as we mentioned before, and they are already seriously engaged on their ascending way to a successful career in today's competitive society.

7) Debaters are able to think in terms of a goal that is distant, to embrace an enormous task, and to develop a plan of intermediate steps to get to it. We are referring here to the planning, the preparing at the highest levels for competitive debate. This quality becomes second nature to all the parties involved, coaches included.

It is in the practice of debate competitions that participants become aware of the following truth: unless they have definite, precise, and clearly set goals, they are not going to realize the maximum potential that lies within them: they'll never make it with a wandering generality; they must be meaningfully specific. They grow to understand and value both long-range and daily goals: without the former, they are likely to be overcome by short-range frustrations, whereas the latter are the best indicators - and the best builders - of character, as this is where dedication, discipline, and determination enter the picture,

8) Related to the setting of goals, debate also teaches students how to put together a complex body of material, and to start going through the different levels of preparation of various debate topics. So in the end they have prepared the entire treatment of a subject. They can answer any thing that comes up in any quadrant of that subject area.

Indeed, by immersing themselves in the research of various debate topics along the years, debaters are likely to turn into reliable sources of information or walking encyclopedias for the people around them, irrespective of their walks of life or age-brackets.

9) Debate teaches students to build bridges of communication - to their peers, to their teachers, to adults in general. Through debate, students and instructors develop their ability to express opinions while meeting to discuss important issues. Furthermore, by educating teachers to coach debate, the debate program has sought to redefine the relationships between students and students, students and teachers, teachers and teachers. Debate has helped to create a forum for discussing controversial issues in a peaceful and reasonable manner, beyond barriers of different kinds - which has consequently become as achievable a goal as ambitious.

10) Debate teaches students to develop a sense of excellence that, in turn, enhances their leadership skills. An aspect of debate is that students feel that the work is never done. One of the main assets they grow to possess is the ability to make the necessary connection - to realize eventually when enough is enough. One has to develop an internal clock for that. It is also a matter of setting one's own standard of excellence and not allowing those standards to come from external gratification.

Such thirst for perfection, for endlessly breaking one's own limits, along with all the special attributes that we have dwelt on so far, will surely prepare the ground and make room for the crowning attribute of any accomplished debater: leadership. Suffice it to say that in Romania, for example, former successful debaters are now in a position to coordinate and manage the entire debate movement nationwide. ARDOR (The Romanian Association of Debate, Oratory, and Rhetoric, based in Bucharest, with regional representatives in Timisoara, Cluj, and Iasi) is a case in point. Its most committed members and directors were once best debaters.

For all these invaluable benefits - just a few were mentioned above - the experience that a student may gain in debate is, and will be, a benefit for the whole of life, an unlimited and many-sided adventure of the mind.