DEVELOPING FUNCTIONAL STANDARDS AS A MEANS TO GREATER ACCESSIBILITY IN NFA-LD

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A consistent theme of debate league innovation and alternatives has been the attempt at an increased focus on "substantive" argument along with increased accessibility to the activity. The National Forensic Association's Lincoln-Douglas Debate (NFA-LD) is one of the more recent responses to the desire for an event which promotes topic specific argumentation, at a reasonable rate of delivery, which is accessible to students with no formal debate experience. NFA-LD's approach provides a reference point for examining the interaction of the league and event structure in the context of the desire for less speed, more substance, and, more accessibility.

The argument I will pursue is, first, defining a specific paradigm for judging was an excellent first step toward the above mentioned goals. And, second, there is still a need for a league-wide forum to specify and disseminate this paradigm. This development, in the specific situation of NFA-LD as well as debate leagues in general, shifts paradigmatic argumentation to the organizational level, at which it belongs. The pressure to "speed" is reduced. And, finally, accessibility is increased as both debaters and judges are not required to argue procedural, or paradigmatic, theory in rounds. I will trace this progression through three scenarios--a "no-holds-barred" format, the NFA-LD model and a modified version of NFA-LD, incorporating a league-wide forum on procedural/paradigmatic definition. At each step, paradigmatic argumentation is moved further away from individual rounds and closer to league-wide consideration.

The No-Holds-Barred Format

I am defining this form of debate league by its incorporation of the ideal of the tabula rasa judge, or the freedom for the judge to adopt any judging paradigm at the judge's discretion. I believe there is little argument that this demands a thorough knowledge of argumentation and debate theory on the part of competitors and judges. Important for my argument is the fact that this argumentation addresses validity issues revolving about the structure, application, and, implications, of generic forms of arguments. Some examples include judging paradigm arguments (which are valid or appropriate), types of case structure arguments (hypo-testing, parametric cases, whole resolution arguments, etc.), or arguments over appropriate procedure for categories of arguments (whether/how topicality should figure into the judge's decision). In these, and other issues relating to whole categories of argument, the first assumption, or ideal, must be that the participants recognize the differences and implications of various forms, or categories, of argument. Second, we must assume that participants have criteria for selecting among forms of argument.

The first assumption contributes greatly to the speed of rounds, the decreased focus on the resolution at hand, and the lack of accessibility in these types of leagues. To illustrate by the least extreme example, we can take the debater who wants to eschew speed in favor of strategy, and focus on the resolution. To make one strategic response to a whole-resolution argument, the debater must still understand (have the general argumentation experience or theory background) regarding both the possible alternative types of cases, and an understanding of which criteria are available for choosing among those possibilities. These are requisite even to make one response about why the original argument is irrelevant to the round. Even in this minimum situation, much more so in the case of the debater who wishes to cover all the bases at all the levels, speed is increased and accessibility is decreased through the necessity of addressing and selecting among arguments about types of arguments.

The second assumption, the understanding and application of criteria, has a more subtle, but, I believe, more profound effect on both the round and the league. Regarding speed, substance, and accessibility, the lack of a. defined reference, or criteria, opens the door to an ever more removed value argument addressing the question of which criteria should be employed. The argument is no longer about a category of argument in particular, but what should we look for in any category of argument. This happens, for example, when the argument turns from whether or not a case represents the whole resolution to whether or not it should be required to represent the whole resolution. Any justification is subject to the claim that the basis of the justification misconstrues what debate should

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be. At this point a new set of criteria is invoked. In my experience, this path devolves to a debate over what is "best" debate, or what is best for debate as an activity. The regression along the criteria defining what is considered "good" or "best" compounds the necessity for speed and background.

There is another implication of allowing the value debate over what is best for debate to be played out on a round-by-round basis. Placing this debate in rounds, rather than at the league level, subverts any league-wide standards. What can we say about debaters, which win different rounds different tournaments? The basis for comparison is no longer situated with the league, it remains in the round. The league is reduced to some generalizations about debaters having a good arsenal, good strategy, and good coverage, without ever being able to comment on their competing in the arena of the topic. Metaphorically, the league ceases to become the arena of competition in favor of a slew of arenas (rounds), each with their own standards of judgment. This is the functional equivalent of allowing individual referees to decide who wins a basketball game using either score, or stamina, or ball-handling, or rebounds, etc. My argument here, despite the prejudicial nature of the metaphors, is not that this is an unworthy approach. I want to draw attention to the difference between the comparisons (competitions) which leagues claim to legitimate, and the comparisons that are justified by the league structure. This is particularly important in a political climate which stress accessibility, both generally and according to the ideals held by most forensic programs.

In summary, it is tempting to hold a "no-holds-barred" league as the ultimate in freedom for debaters and judges, a "true test" of ability in the face of the widest range of possibilities. It is, however, a particular form of freedom, which restrains the league from advocating ideals as a group. It is a freedom, which shifts, rather than broadens, the possibilities to a clash over what makes the best debate. It is a freedom, which demands argument over what makes good debate rounds, rather than stressing the enactment of group ideals for what makes a good debate round.

The NFA-LD Model

NFA-LD moves away from the "no-holds-barred" model by specifying a judging criteria. Specifically, the rules call for adherence to a stock issue

paradigm in which the participants are required to follow a motivation-cause-solution logic to justify a policy change. This logic of justification is delineated by the requirement that the affirmative prove stock issues-- proof of harm or need in the current system (motivation), proof that the motivation is inherent to the current policy system (cause), and proof that the proposed change will satisfy the motivation, or yield advantages, by counteracting the cause (solution).

This approach displaces arguments over classes of arguments, which refer to how debate rounds, in general, should be run or decided. The most obvious example is the decision as to which form of case should be considered. In a "no-holds-barred" setting, the choice of which logic is acceptable for justifying a proposed resolution is an open issue. Further, at no point must a debater refer to a specific resolution or case to carry out arguments on this issue. It would suffice to argue, for example, that the motivation-cause-solution logic can downplay an examination of the wider social implications of goals, or values, which underlay the identification of a harm, i.e. we are willing to accept that unemployment is undesirable without further thought, and the case structure promotes this type of assumption. On this basis, we could claim that any case, which follows this structure, is unacceptable for consideration. This argument, in this form, is irrelevant to NFA-LD based on the league rules requiring the case structure.

Having already noted the implication of allowing the generic argument in rounds, I will use the above example to point out how NFA-LD displaces, but does not eliminate the argument. Further, defining acceptable types of arguments decreases the pressure for speed, while increasing accessibility. Finally, the displacement of paradigmatic arguments still rewards a command of theory, without sacrificing accessibility.

I refer to the league-wide decisions on paradigmatic argument, the stock issue paradigm in our example, as displacement in two senses, or two directions. First, the decision as to what generic form makes a good case is displaced to the league, or the league policymakers. Second, the argument that this logic downplays an element important to deciding the round can still be made, but it is displaced to the context of the topic of the resolution. A case, which claims the motivation as a need to reduce unemployment, may be met with the argument that reducing

unemployment would not be beneficial. The paradigmatic argument against motivation-cause-solution logic may guide the negative to the "unemployment is not bad" response. However, the volume of argument is substantially reduced from choices about logical forms in general to a single claim specific to case content. Second, the theory grounding of the debaters becomes an advantage, but not a requirement. A debater does not need to be able to recite and apply the generic arguments and philosophy regarding the appropriateness of various forms of cases. These generic arguments involving criteria for which form of case to choose are displaced to a specific impact with reference to a specified issue--has unemployment been proven to be a harm. Thus, while rewarding theory knowledge for its guidance in making specific arguments, the event becomes more accessible by not requiring judges and/or new debaters to be able to verbalize the paradigmatic argument, nor to justify the rules of the event. The reference point of the concrete argument with respect to a defined stock issue reduces the pressure for speed, as it opens the debate to a wider audience.

Including a League-wide Forum on Paradigm and Definition

Though I introduced these three scenarios as a progression, I am not construing these as linear steps. I suggest this third scenario as a move toward "homing in" on the goals of accessible debate leagues--accessible in terms of delivery to an audience at a reasonable rate, and accessible to audiences, judges and students who may not have four years of experience, or be able to articulate the nuances of argumentation theory. In this sense, the progression involves what we decide is worth promoting, and how to carry out this promotion, from the previous scenarios. In this context, I suggest we follow the lead of NFA-LD, while incorporating a forum, outside of rounds, for debating paradigmatic issues.

The pragmatics of this suggestion are fairly straightforward. I envision an opportunity for an ongoing argument over just such issues as what case structure to require, what constitutes a violation of topicality, what proves inherency, etc. Given the availability of e-mail, conference calls, etc., communication shouldn't be a problem. Any league could designate a procedure for topics to consider, time-frames and procedures for getting input, rendering decisions, and implementing rule changes.

The heart of this third scenario lies in the identification of issues, which require league-wide consensus. In a general sense, I cannot identify what these issues are because they depend on the goals of particular leagues. I have taken the goals of accessibility, substantive argument, and speed reduction as the reference points thus far. For this last scenario, I will focus, briefly, on the goal of substantive argument.

The previous scenarios point out the interaction of criteria and judgment in the definition of substance. This is most evident (in the previous discussion) in the way the stock issues paradigm of NFA-LD forces the generic "forms of cases" argument to be re-cast as substantive argument. The difference between the scenarios is not the argumentation theory, the judges, or the debaters, but what criteria are defined and which are left to be selected in the round. This is the decision, which defines the substance of the rounds. Taking away the value component of the argument--the possibility to compare, generically, the motivation-cause-solution logic to other logics, in the context of better or worse--forces the argument to be made in terms of what the affirmative's claims do or do not accomplish in the context of the purpose of the round. So, the goodness or badness of the rules is not questioned. The question becomes *does the argument accomplish the goals by way of the rules?*

If the goal is rounds where the argumentation is expressed in terms of the case or the resolution, then it is the league's responsibility to decide the criteria for proving or disproving a case. In short, the league should make the value decisions about what constitutes proof, forcing rounds to concentrate on whether the substance of the arguments meet those criteria. Asking whether the argument accomplishes the goals by way of the rules, leaves the league to decide what makes good goals and what makes good rules. This leaves the debaters to argue their arguments, not debate theory.

From an argumentation theory standpoint, I believe there is much more to be had from the distinction between argument, which must conform to standards defined by accomplishment, versus standards defined by character, or value. Within the scope of this paper, the scenarios point out a direction for league development which allows the league to promote substantive argumentation at a reasonable rate of delivery which is accessible to those without an expertise in argumentation or debate theory.

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Interestingly, rules, which address the issue of speed or theory directly, do little to remove these pressures. One direction for development rests in first identifying the desirable substance of rounds--the function theory seeks, then deciding the criteria for these at the league level. Making evaluation at the league level, such as which case logics are best and/or which legitimate an affirmative position, forces the debate to the substance of the topic. Second, this approach allows for better comparison among rounds--we have a better sense of what debaters had to accomplish. Third, the scenarios presented give some indication of how these decisions can influence the character of rounds in areas such as speed. Finally, a league-wide forum on function-oriented standards allows all participants to learn and apply the specifics of debate theory, without that expertise becoming a device of discouragement and exclusion.