

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Promoting Interscholastic Debate Among Tallahassee Secondary Schools



Introduction

It is difficult to believe that Florida's capital lacks a comprehensive program designed to promote and further interscholastic debate among its youth, but it is true. Although there have been Tallahassee high school debate programs in the past, presently none of the ten institutions responsible for educating high school students, nor the eight responsible for educating middle school students, support, in any capacity, a competitive debate team. While interscholastic debate continues to flourish in neighboring Florida cities such as Jacksonville, Tampa, and Orlando, Tallahassee remains sedentary. This apathy toward interscholastic debate cannot continue, as academic debate represents a necessary co-curricular activity designed to develop and hone a variety of skills: organizational, research, oral presentation, and critical thinking. In fact, developing these skills has been identified as essential in responsible education, as Stewart, an associate professor of education, stated in an article entitled, "Secondary School Imperatives for the '90s - Strategies to Achieve Reform,"

Today's society makes the ability to analyze, reason, draw conclusions, and formulate intelligent decisions more important than ever. Critical thinking and decision making are essential for enhancing and perpetuating a democratic society, dealing with the ever-increasing complexity of societal issues and problems, processing the tremendous proliferation of information, and functioning in a highly technological age (Steward 1990: 72).

To rectify this glaring oversight by local administrators and teachers, members of the coaching staff of the Florida State Debate Team are prepared to launch a communication campaign designed to introduce competitive debate to Leon County. The purpose of this paper is to describe the elements of that campaign.

1. Description of the status quo

As stated earlier, presently there are no competitive debate teams among the Tallahassee schools, public or private. That is not to say, however, that to these schools 'debate' is a foreign concept. In fact, many of the secondary schools currently employ teachers and/or administrators who were at one time debaters. Unfortunately, these life experiences have not been enough to establish any type of long-term commitment to interscholastic competition.

In April 1996 contacts were established at each of the following secondary education institutions. Surprisingly, each person who was contacted was enthusiastic about beginning a debate program. While this does not guarantee 100 percent adoption, it does mean that the diffusion campaign can address issues other than the benefits of debate as those are already understood.

2. Goals of diffusion campaign

As with any co-curricular reform, comprehensive changes take time, especially when one is targeting multiple sites. It would be unreasonable for us to expect that each of the above-mentioned schools will begin a debate program immediately. Therefore, we offer several incremental goals of this campaign. This tactic is supported by Stanley Pogrow:

While paradigm shifts are important in the evolution of knowledge, they are extremely rare. Most fields do not have even one per century. Moreover, they are seldom involved in the creation of breakthrough products. Indeed, most lucrative patents and products are incremental refinements of existing technologies (Pogrow 1996: 659).

We have no definitive time frame, though we expect a 'paradigm shift' to take several years.

First, we must establish a debate program at the individual secondary education schools in the Tallahassee area. Though most likely the initial diffusion will primarily target the high schools, it is our intention to involve the middle schools as soon as possible. While middle school participation is not essential to the survivability of high school programs, naturally it will be beneficial to establish 'feeder' debate programs for the high schools. Moreover, middle school students do have the mental capabilities to be involved. In fact, some of the most successful intercollegiate debaters began their careers in middle school.

Second, we must develop a local debate league wherein students have the opportunity to engage in interscholastic competition. The purpose of the league is to provide low-intensity competition for beginning programs as an alternative to the weekend invitational tournaments already available for more experienced

debaters and/or established debate programs.

Third, we must provide local teachers with the necessary skills to successfully continue the league under their own administration. While initially the administration of league competition will be handled by the coaching staff of the Florida State University Debate Program, it would be a tremendous strain on our resources should we need to continue such direct involvement. Therefore, the sooner the local schools can take over the administration the better. Finally, we must provide teachers with the necessary information to be able enter their debaters in state and national competition.

Part of the debate experience is to be able to travel, meet people from different areas of the state and country, and participate in well-attended tournaments. Local programs should compete against the more experienced programs as soon as possible. That is the only way to learn. Therefore, teachers must be made aware of tournament schedules, most notably those in Florida and Southern Georgia.

3. Analysis of the target audience

At first glance one might assume that as long as the teachers want a debate program, or students want to compete, that would be enough. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Introducing and developing interscholastic debate among secondary schools in Tallahassee involves the consideration of several sub-populations: school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Each of these sub-populations will have different reasons for adopting the innovation, and different perceptions related to cost of the innovation.

Campaigns should be designed with regard for audience characteristics, including capacity variables such as age, education, and intelligence; demographic variables such as gender and ethnicity; and personality, life-style, and psychographics variables (McGuire 1989: 47).

The next section will isolate the various sub-populations of the target audience, assess their individual needs, and consider the possible quantitative and qualitative costs to each sub-population. While some characteristics are 'homophilous' (Rogers 1995: 19), they are worth noting separately.

School Administrators

The adoption of new programs in Tallahassee schools is largely based upon a 'site-based' decision-making process. That is to say, for the public schools of Leon County, as well as the private schools, curricular and co-curricular decisions are

largely left up to the Principal and/or the Assistant Principal for Curriculum. Most likely, administrators will choose to support a debate program in order to provide an enriched academic environment for their students. If, however, this does not become a motivation, it could be that once several schools in the district adopt a program, administrators might choose to adopt out of some sort of 'peer pressure' (Rogers 1995: 265). That is to say, administrators will want representation of their school at a local interscholastic competition.

Administrators will primarily be concerned with whether the innovation is compatible with the stated 'vision' of their school. "An innovation can be compatible or incompatible (1) with sociocultural values and beliefs, (2) with previously introduced ideas, or (3) with client needs for the innovation" (Rogers 1995: 224).

In a restructured environment, it is the school's responsibility to make sure the necessary alignments between curriculum and accountability are in place, that people's roles and responsibilities are designed to serve the school's mission, and that people at appropriate decision points are empowered to do what is best for students (Jenkins and Houlihan 1991: 194). Therefore, a successful diffusion campaign must consider the unique needs and characteristics of each individual school.

Once this has been established, administrators will immediately consider the projected costs. Administrators are going to have two major concerns: time and money. Naturally, a debate program requires the time of both teachers and students. Additionally, a message is sent to a teacher that he/she will have more duties. Administrators must be prepared to compensate the teacher, in some way, for taking on more duties. " . . . schools that are succeeding with SBM [School Based Management] frequently reward individuals and groups on progress they make toward school goals" (Odden and Wohlstetter 1995: 36). This compensation usually takes the form of money, release time (i.e. an extra 'preparation' hour), a teacher's aide, or the assistance of a student teacher. While there are certainly existent debate programs where no such arrangement is possible, administrators have more success enlisting and maintaining the support of teachers when compensation is offered.

Administrators will also be concerned with the financial burden placed on the school. Nothing is free, and the schools of Leon County are especially aware of this. Initially, schools will not have a "debate budget." If we are to be successful, it is important that we provide inexpensive opportunities for competition. We can

also make administrators and teachers aware of alternative possibilities for funding, such as corporate sponsors and bake sales.

Teachers

In creating a debate program, support from the Administration is only the beginning. Now, the support of teachers must be enlisted. Teachers and their organizations will assume an increasingly central role in shaping educational policy and implementing and operating school programs. Where this process has already occurred, the optimism, energy, and commitment released by the promise of teacher-defined educational reform have enabled schools to make great strides in important areas. Teachers have gained more respect from students because students know that teachers are trying to make education more relevant. Carefully planned teacher action can be the cornerstone of effective schools (Futrell 1988: 379-80).

Teachers are most likely to adopt this innovation to provide academic opportunity for their students: Teachers' implementation practices . . . [are] strongly influenced by their beliefs about students, as well as by their perceptions of student changes that result [ed] from their use of the innovation. As teachers gain[ed] new insights into their students' potential and the curriculum's effects on students, they . . . [are] willing to make further changes in their practice (Englert, Tarrant and Rozendal 1993: 457). Visible signs of academic improvement, or increased self-confidence among the students, will reaffirm a teacher's decision to adopt.

Teachers are most likely to continue the use of an innovation if their students demonstrate early success: Teachers take large risks when they depart from the instructional routines that are familiar to themselves and their students - routines that have predictable short- and long-term effects. When an innovation is implemented and their students make strong early progress, teachers are more likely to continue using the innovation. In turn, this affects their willingness to take further risks. On the other hand, if student progress is too slow or too long-term to gauge, teachers are less comfortable in taking serious risks (Englert et al. 1993: 458).

Therefore, a successful campaign will provide ample opportunity for students to succeed (i.e. local, low-intensity league competition), and reward beginning students for their efforts (i.e. with plaques and certificates).

Teachers might also choose to adopt based upon his/her desire to broaden

professional horizons, and/or lend support to colleagues. Undoubtedly, the ability to train debaters and/or administer a debate team increases the marketability of a teacher. There are also possibilities for earning CEUs, or Continuing Education Units, by attending workshops or lectures related to debate. Leon County Schools, for instance, has identified several objectives which can be met by attending a debate workshop (i.e. interpersonal/group communication and language arts instruction).

Finally, there are the 'lesser involved' teachers, or those who are not directly involved but whose support is vital. Other teachers in the school must be supportive to guarantee the survivability of the program. Oftentimes the Director of Debate relies on the judgment of his/her colleagues to recruit potential debaters (students who exhibit certain skills). Additionally, debaters frequently need to miss classes in order to compete, and it is essential that 'uninvolved' teachers recognize the importance of debate and competition. Traditionally, debate tournaments are considered 'school functions' warranting excused absences. Therefore, a successful campaign will either reach, in some way, those teachers as well, or at least make involved teachers aware of their colleagues' importance in the process.

In terms of cost, teachers are likely to be concerned with the following: acquiring knowledge about debate and administering a program, and strain on personal resources. Some teachers might really want to have a debate team, but might feel intimidated due to lack of knowledge, or discouraged due to projected strain on personal resources. A successful campaign will offer a variety of alternatives so as to not discourage an interested teacher.

In terms of acquiring the knowledge, a successful campaign will cater to several levels of experience, providing plenty of 'hands on' suggestions. "... a successful reform needs an effective pedagogical approach and intensive training for teachers in these pedagogical techniques" (Pogrow 1995: 21). In this particular target population some teachers were at one time involved in competition (either in high school or college), some were at one time directors of a debate and/or forensics program, but some have had no experience whatsoever. Therefore, as we lend assistance to these teachers, we need to adjust the level and amount of our assistance to the capabilities of the teacher.

We do not want a teacher to be offended because we are offering remedial assistance, nor do we want to risk resistance or 'discontinuance' (Rogers 1995: 21) because we are offering assistance which is too complex (Rogers 1995: 242).

. . . abstract theoretical principles cannot take concrete form without reference to specific classroom practice and activities. Successful change efforts require the provision of specific, concrete, and usable remedies to educational problems. In fact, . . . teachers [do] little concrete development of the curriculum when they [are] given only abstract principles upon which to base their actions. . . . Research must be translated into a comprehensible set of teaching strategies that can guide teachers in the day-to-day details of classroom instruction (Englert et al. 1993: 447-8). As we introduce debate to the various schools, we must also make necessary teaching materials available, such as textbooks, worksheets, handouts, and classroom exercises.

In terms of the strain on personal resources, teachers are most likely going to be concerned about their time. Even when some sort of compensation is offered, this activity can require a great deal of time and energy. Teachers will want to be able to balance these demands with other commitments, both personal and professional. Spending time with debaters detracts from other classroom preparation, grading, as well as personal time with one's friends and family. Therefore, a successful campaign will provide teacher's with various strategies, namely life experiences of experienced debate coaches, to achieve that balance.

Students

Obviously, a debate program needs debaters. In creating a new debate program, teachers will most likely begin by recruiting students from their classes. There are other avenues as well. A successful diffusion campaign will encourage the possibilities of 'Open Houses' and sign-up sheets to involve as many students as possible. Some teachers might have the misconception that only the "A" students will be good debaters. We need to dispel this stereotype, encouraging teachers to accept every level of student, as long as he/she is willing to work.

Students will have their own reasons for becoming involved. Namely, students will focus on the possibility of academic advancement, the creation of a more respectable vitae for college, the thrill of competition, and the social opportunities of meeting other students. It is our responsibility to make students aware of the inherent and broad scope of benefits of this activity.

In terms of the costs, students are likely to be concerned with the strain on resources, both time and money. Debate is an activity that will 'cut into' time a student can devote to other extra- or co-curricular activities. For instance, students involved with sports teams, band, and other after-school clubs

sometimes find it difficult to attend all weekly meetings and competitions. We must make students aware of the feasibility of integrating this new activity with others to which they are already committed. It can be done.

Money can also be a factor for these students, as traditionally high school students are responsible for various costs, such as xeroxing, office supplies, and perhaps meals at tournaments. Initially, it will be important for us to encourage teachers to provide office supplies for their debaters, and tournaments could be scheduled in such a way as to avoid necessitating the purchase of meals.

Parents

Given that this innovation involves the support of minors, parents must not be overlooked. Because debate represents a 'new' activity, parents will be interested in how this activity can be beneficial to their children. Parents are likely to have similar priorities as their children, such academic achievement and preparation for college.

Parents will also be concerned about the strain on their child's resources (i.e. time away from school, homework, and other co- or extra-curricular activities). Additionally, parents are going to want this activity to be fun and personally rewarding for their child. Parents will also have monetary concerns, as most likely they will be called upon to assist their children in debate-related expenses. A successful campaign will have to address these concerns, encouraging teachers to prioritize parental involvement. This can be done by inviting parents to watch their children compete, asking parents to chaperone debate trips, and providing parents with tangible evidence, such as a trophy showcase or a monthly newsletter.

4. Diffusion strategy

In consideration of the description of the status quo, the goals of the campaign, and the priorities and concerns of the target audience, we propose the following diffusion strategy, to begin the Fall 1996, for developing interscholastic debate in Tallahassee. This section will highlight some of our intentions.

The coaching staff of the Florida State University Debate team will initially be responsible for motivating the previously discussed target population. We are arguably the most appropriate 'diffusion channel' as, we possess a great deal of empathy (Rogers 1995: 342) for new debate coaches. We were all, at one time, a beginning debate coach. We can easily speak from personal experiences and help new debate coaches 'troubleshoot' when there are questions.

Diffusion investigations show that most individuals do not evaluate an innovation on the basis of scientific studies of its consequences Instead, most people depend mainly upon a subjective evaluation of an innovation that is conveyed to them from other individuals like themselves who have previously adopted the innovation (Rogers 1995: 18).

First, we must continue to enlist support from school administrators. Prior contacts have predominantly been over the phone. Beginning in Fall of 1996, however, we will aggressively seek appointments with either principals or assistant principals at the currently uninvolved schools. Administrators will be able to explain their school's vision, and we will be able to offer suggestions for creating a program which will meet the school's needs. This should increase the likelihood of adoption, as Rogers has warned, "Change projects that ignore clients' felt needs often go awry or produce unexpected consequences" (341).

Second, we must create an atmosphere wherein administrators and teachers feel they are not alone. "Teachers need frequent and ongoing opportunities to talk with other members of the teacher-researcher community to continue to enhance their practice" (Englert et al. 1993: 460). To accomplish this, in part, we will create a local debate league, entitled the Greater Leon School Debate, or GLSD. This will help to establish a network among the interested parties. The League will have bi-monthly competitions, to be held on a rotation basis at the various contributing high schools, where there will be ample opportunity for teachers to interact.

. . . interpersonal channels are more effective in persuading an individual to accept a new idea, especially if the interpersonal channel links two or more individuals who are similar in socioeconomic status, education, or other important ways (Rogers 1995: 18). Additionally, the League will distribute a mailing list to the local teachers, so they can contact one another as the need arises.

Third, we must continue to schedule events which will help facilitate the development of the individual programs. In September of 1996, for instance, we plan on hosting a full-day workshop for interested teachers and students. We will provide researched lectures on the 1996-97 national high school debate topic, a forum for teachers to discuss their concerns, and a demonstration debate performed by members of the Florida State Debate Team. We are also considering a Fall weekend workshop for teachers, offering a repeat of information from Summer 1996, as many teachers might not have wanted to 'give

up' their summer; and we will offer more advanced instruction for the teachers we have already assisted.

Fourth, we must make teachers aware of the possibilities for interscholastic competition. We will begin on October 7, 1996 with the first GLSD competition. We hope to schedule another within three weeks after that. We would like to encourage the beginning programs to prepare students for the annual Florida State High School Debate Tournament, held within two weeks after the first GLSD competition. If, however, new programs do not feel prepared to compete against more experienced debaters from elsewhere in Florida and Georgia, we would like to encourage them to come and watch those debates. Finally, we will provide teachers with the 1996-97 high school tournament schedule (weekend invitationals) for both Florida and Georgia.

Fifth, in the interest in sustaining the individual programs, we are considering the feasibility of assigning each one of our debaters to a particular school in the area. Innovators must provide follow-up support and assistance over a longer period of time to effect significant changes. Researchers, too, may need to address the longitudinal nature of teacher development and learning in planning, evaluating, and explaining their instructional studies (Englert et al.1993: 454). Our debaters would then be responsible for meeting with teachers and students, perhaps twice a month, to assist in coaching. Traditionally, these 'assistant coaches' are monetarily compensated. We are aware, however, that beginning programs might not yet have a budget. Therefore, we would either a) compensate them ourselves (out of previously attained grant moneys from the National Forensic League), or b) simply require our debaters to do this as part of their grade.

Sixth, we are hoping to create, in the next year or two, a commuter summer high school debate institute for both teachers and students. This institute will be held at Florida State, and run for approximately two weeks. During this time, students will be placed in 'labs,' of varying levels of experiences, and teachers will be provided with instruction regarding both the debate topic and directing a debate program.

5. Considerations in projecting rate of adoption

As with the adoption of any innovation, there are several factors which will influence the success of this diffusion campaign. It is important to remember that although the decision to support a debate program is largely based upon the school administrators, we must not overlook the entire "social system" (Rogers 1995: 23).

First, the rate of adoption in Tallahassee cannot, in total, be measured against similar efforts in other communities.

There are also differences in the rate of adoption for the same innovation in different social systems. Many aspects of diffusion cannot be explained by just individual behavior. The system has a direct effect on the diffusion through its norms and other system-level qualities, and also has an indirect influence through its individual members (Rogers 1995: 23). The Tallahassee system presents some unique problems, namely the nonexistence of any form of competition in the status quo. Also, the public schools of Leon County have been required to make a great deal of curricular adjustments over the past few years.

Developing a league 'from scratch' is much more difficult than merely enlarging a league to include the participation of more schools. The three Florida State coaches involved in the diffusion have mostly been involved with 'healthy' high school debate communities. A successful diffusion will have to reach each school equally, providing the necessary information for handling the unique frustrations that new directors and new debaters experience. Second, the amorphous nature of the type of "innovation-decision" (Rogers 1995: 28) will make the diffusion process more complex.

By definition, the introduction of interscholastic debate to Tallahassee is considered an "optional innovation-decision" in which teachers at the individual schools could decide whether they wished to support a debate program (Rogers 1995: 28). Given that it takes more than one program to have interscholastic competition, however, the survivability of a Tallahassee league, or even individual programs for that matter, basically depends upon a "collective innovation-decision" (Rogers 1995: 28). It is incredibly important for us to establish a network among the teachers in order to create some perceived interdependence. Teachers must be prepared in such a way as to feel a sense of responsibility, that if one should decide to 'back out' of the League, that action will affect many other programs.

Third, teachers must view this new role of a debate coach as somewhat voluntary. There have been many teachers who have been 'forced' to take on the added responsibility of directing a debate program. Historically, these teachers make less of an attempt to research the debate topic, and are not as concerned about registering his/her debaters in competitions.

Even when successful innovations are identified, reforms often fall short of intended goals because of the way innovators attempt to put innovations into practice. Often innovators attempt to disseminate research through a

‘transmission model’ by telling teachers how to teach. But this model has failed to make long-lasting changes in teaching practices. . . . An emerging view of professional development recommends the enhancement of current practice by integrating research-based strategies and innovations into the teacher’s classroom repertoire (Englert et al. 1993: 441-2).

Finally, we must encourage the involved teachers to involve their peers. While we are certainly capable of informing local teachers about the benefits and feasibility of a debate program, local teachers are the individuals who must ‘spread the word.’

If individuals are convinced to adopt new ideas by the experience of near-peers with an innovation, then the more interpersonal communication an individual has with such near-peers, the more innovative the individual will be in adopting the new idea (Rogers 1995: 303).

We are debate coaches, but lack the life experiences and accompanying concerns of the secondary educator. Therefore, we can only do so much without their continued efforts to widen the network. Certainly there are other predictors as to the rate of adoption, but the preceding discussion highlights the major considerations we must have as we begin to diffuse the information among secondary educators. What we must do is continue to monitor our communication strategies, and be willing to alter our approaches when necessary.

6. Conclusion

It is a travesty that interscholastic debate does not exist among Tallahassee’s secondary schools. Currently there are interested and enthusiastic teachers in most of these facilities. It is our duty, as those who have benefited both personally and professionally from the activity, to provide local educators with the necessary tools to provide this wonderful academic opportunity for their students. We look forward to doing all we can to guarantee that Tallahassee’s youth has this opportunity in the 1996-97 academic year.

Appendix - 1996 Summer Debate Workshop for Teachers

Dear Teacher,

You are cordially invited to attend the 1996 Debate Workshop for Teachers, sponsored by the FSU Debate Team, June 17 - 19. Sessions on all three days will be 8:00 am - 11:30 am; 1:00 pm -3:00 pm. This Workshop is designed to provide educators with the necessary tools to develop a competitive debate team. Instruction will include, but not be limited to, to following:

- how to begin and maintain a debate program
- how to instruct basic debate theory (instructional materials provided)
- how to involve your school in a nationally recognized educational honor society (National Forensic League)
- how to prepare for the 1996-97 national high school debate topic:

Resolved: That the federal government should establish a program to substantially reduce juvenile crime in the United States.

Presently, there is no competitive debate in the Tallahassee area. This Workshop is designed to change that. You will be a pioneer, but not alone. The goal of this Workshop is to set the groundwork for the youth in this area (7th grade and up) to develop valuable skills while at the same time enjoy the competitive arena. Moreover, this is an ideal way to increase your marketability as an educator. In-service credit is available for teachers.

As you are most likely already aware, debate can provide your students with the necessary skills to achieve both academically and professionally. Your students will polish various skills: organizational, research, oral presentation, and critical thinking. Additionally, debaters develop a keen awareness of current issues, both foreign and domestic. What you might not be aware of, however, is an impressive list of influential individuals who were at one time debaters: Lyndon Johnson, Joan Heggins (former Mayor of Tallahassee), Gerald Kagan (former Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court), Lawrence Tribe (Dean of Harvard Law School), Lee Iacoca (President of Chrysler), Ann Richards (former Governor of Texas), and Mark Fabiani (one of President Clinton's spokespersons), to name of few.

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