

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The World Schools Debate Championship And Intercultural Argumentation



*"It's only in debates you can express yourself. It's only in debates you can tell somebody something and the person does not think you are arguing, so it gives you that freedom of speech."* – Mayambala, from Uganda.

Although money is pouring in for international debate training and tournaments, little attention has been paid to the student participants. Even less attention is paid to the students who do not win. This study asked twelve student debaters from Uganda, Mongolia, Estonia, Russia, and Malaysia, countries that are not usually in the final rounds of this tournament, to reflect upon their participation at the 2010 World School Debate Championship (WSDC) in Doha, Qatar. This investigation addresses the argumentation formats, skills, and linguistic shifts employed by English-language learners. I am interested in students' motivation to participate in an international tournament where their chances of winning are exceptionally slim.

This essay argues that international debating events explicitly encourage students from non-native English speaking nations to make their arguments utilizing examples and research exclusively from the West. Further, due to their focus on international competition over domestic debates, students emerge from their training with skills to debate on the international circuit but with diminished experience or expertise for debating within their home nations. Yet, despite these downfalls, students are eager to participate in these debates, facing a plethora of competitors and expressing opinions not commonly voiced in their native countries.

This is not the first study to address students' motivations to participate in debate. Indeed, in the United States there is a wealth of discourse about national

debate formats, student participation, approach to topics, and the effect of those debates on their future lives. Yet, even the most in-depth studies such as Gary Fine's *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*, Joe Miller's *Cross-X*, and Robert Littlefield's "High School Student Perceptions of the Efficacy of Debate Participation" investigate only American debate culture. There are also non-U.S. studies, such as Narahiko Inoue's dissertation "Ways of Debating in Japan", Takeshi Suzuki's "Bakhtin's Theory of Argumentative Performance: Critical Thinking Education in Japan", and Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst's "Teaching Argumentation Analysis and Critical Thinking in the Netherlands". While these studies investigate a diversity of debate styles, each does so only within one nation.

The entire November 2009 issue of *Argumentation* focused on comparative studies of debate, yet those only focused on schools from England and Scandinavia. Those articles, just like Van Eemeren and de Glopper's 1995 article, focused on cross-cultural textual analysis of student class work. These studies, while important to understanding the status of argumentation, leave little space for student voices.

I have not been able to find any previous analysis of international participation in debate tournaments by students. My study addresses this perceived gap in two ways. First, it addresses student debaters from a diversity of countries who are typically excluded from educational argumentation and debate analysis. Second, instead of basing my analysis on written texts or survey forms, I have engaged each of the students in oral history interviews that encourage them to narrate their individual histories of participation in debate.

This essay makes three arguments. First, the topic selections and research expectations at the WSDC are biased against non-western debaters, but the same non-western students often appreciate the WSDC debate format over their own local formats. Second, non-western students perceive a lack of understanding of their own nation among competitors and find themselves acting as cultural ambassadors. Finally, despite the fact that they are unlikely to win the tournament, students from non-western states appreciate the chance to participate in the cultural exchange created by the WSDC. A brief description of this study's methodology and the WSDC will be presented to foreground a three part of the debater's narratives: team and debate format, debating, and competitive success.

## *1. Methodology*

All oral history interviews for this project were conducted at the 2010 WSDC championship held in Doha, Qatar from February 9 to 19. The tournament was attended by 57 nations and approximately 450 participants. It would have required an army of oral historians to record the stories of every participant at the tournament. This however, was not my intention. I was interested in the stories of student debaters from developing nations who do not have a strong chance of reaching the elimination rounds, let alone winning the tournament. This essay should not be read as a representative sample of the entire tournament.

I obtained permission from both the WSDC Board of Directors and the Qatar Foundation to conduct interviews at the tournament. However, because of the difficulty in contacting team coaches before the tournament, the WSDC suggested that I wait until arrival in Qatar on February 9, 2010 to begin meeting with coaches and selecting students to participate in oral history interviews. The only exception was the Mongolian Team, for which I am the coach and was able to arrange permissions before the tournament began. Upon arrival in Qatar I met with coaches and provided them with a packet of information concerning my project that included example release forms, a written introduction to oral history, an explanation of the open-ended questioning format that I would use in the interviews, and a sheet of example topics for the interviews. Initially I contacted twenty teams. However, as the parameters of my project required that students be of the age of majority in their home country and accompanied by a coach or team manager during the interview, I found that I would not be able to interview teams from nations such as Nepal, Somalia, the Sudan, and Japan. Despite this restriction, I was able to interview students representing Mongolia, Uganda, Russia, Estonia, and Malaysia.

The interviews were undoubtedly impacted by the presence of the student's coach, yet the students and I felt more comfortable having a familiar adult attending the interview. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, emailed to the students. Limited editing was done to remove "ums" and "likes" from the student's narrations, but the words, grammar, and ideas are entirely their own.

## *2. History of the WSDC*

The World Schools Debate Championship began in 1988 with teams from Australia, Canada, England, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and the United States. It is

important to note that these were all native English-speaking teams from British Colonies that shared cultural similarities. Since then the tournament has expanded to fifty-seven countries from six continents, pressing the tournament to adapt to English language learners and a plethora of cultural norms. All debates are in English using the “world schools” debate style that places two teams of three members against each other in a structured format that contains three constructive speeches and a reply speech. Students are able to give points of information, known as POI’s, during the constructive speeches. The debate is judged by a panel of three adjudicators from a diversity of nations and trained by the tournament.

The WSDC is attended by teams of 5 students who debate eight preliminary rounds, each on a different topic. Four of the topics are announced a month before the tournament, giving students time to prepare, while the others are announced only one hour before the debate. Because the students are not informed which side they will be assigned to for the preliminary rounds, they must prepare for both the proposition and opposition sides of each topic. This training for multiple angles of an argument, regardless of a student’s personal opinion is designed to “serve as a bulwark against fundamentalism of all stripes”(English et al. 2007, p. 224). As such, the topics are designed to encourage students to deal with issues on politics, economics, culture, and the environment.

The 2010 topics ranged from “This house supports military intervention in Somalia” to “This house would legalize the use of performance enhancing drugs”. Students are expected to research the topics before the tournament and to support their arguments with a variety of examples derived from mass-media publications, government reports, and legal studies. The topics for this tournament are hard- hitting and preformed before a local audience of students and community members. This is a political event, from the selection of a national team, to speeches on the public stage. Politicization is inherent to debate, as Gordon Mitchell states “Debate has always been a political activity, and no amount of academic insulation will ever be able to shield it completely from the political currents that swirl outside the august halls of contest round competition” (Mitchell, 1998, p.12). Indeed, the tournament does not try to shield the students from political topics, but rather provides a public forum for them to work through the complexities of political argumentation before a panel of judges

who have been trained in international debate pedagogy.

### *3. Team and Debate Format*

Student debaters at the WSDC have been trained in their home countries in a variety of debate formats, each having different standards for speech length, evidence, and questioning. In my experience as coach of the Mongolian team, debaters are often frustrated that their best arguments are misunderstood or misrepresented by their opponents. Sometimes this misrepresentation is strategic, but often it is symptomatic of a clash between debate styles. While the WSDC claims to use a unique format, the format closely resembles the British Parliamentary Debates and students trained in Karl Popper or national formats have difficulties adjusting.

Although all students interviewed for this study were accustomed to debating on local issues, each student was trained in a different format of debate. Their records at the tournament indicate a higher win ratio on topics that could be localized to their communities, such as “we should require physical education in all schools” than on specific topics such as “we should support military intervention in Somalia”. Mayambala (Uganda) and Aruka (Mongolia) both discussed the difficulty they had preparing for debates on western topics such as “terrorist suspects should have the right to a trial in civilian courts.” Yet, not all teams faced these difficulties. To best understand how the students navigate the space between their home debate styles and the WSDC style, I will address them by nation and then indicate instances where their narratives coalesce.

While in their native country, the Estonian team primarily debates about local topics in a way that Paul says makes it “easier to talk about these things locally and because we encourage people to participate and jump in.” When comparing English debate to that in Estonian he said: “In Estonian it is harder, or at least it is easier for me to express my ideas in English and talk about public discourse. Whereas in Estonian I don’t even know what public discourse would mean. So the terms that you use normally in English are just not comparable in Estonian.” His teammate Karmen agreed: “Many of the ideals that you study in English for example everything philosophical you read about them in English so it is easier to transmit them to others in English.” As such, the Estonian team was well prepared to use English language resources in their research, and their preference for local topics may be seen as just that, a preference based on fare comparison.

While Paul and Karmen had experience debating in the World Schools Format, the majority of the teams expressed a lack of preparation for debate and a lack of cohesion concerning the research training within their own nations. For example, Liz (Uganda) described her early training in what she labeled the “Ugandan Format. It is between schools and we each have six to seven speakers on a side and you have first speakers and then Points of Information come from the audience and the speakers use their time to answer all of the questions. And then there are all these other points...it just looks like a big painting.” Comparing the formats that they use at home to the WSDC, Liz’s teammate Mayambala indicated that he likes the WSDC format better than both the domestic Ugandan formats and the Karl Popper format because it allows the speaker to revise and perfect their arguments as the debate progresses. The existence of POIs is critical to this difference. He said: “though Karl Popper is good, I think that World Schools is a better format. Because in World Schools you choose when to take POI’s and so you can even get a chance to correct the mistakes you made as you are speaking. When a POI comes you can even build your case immediately. But in Karl Popper it’s like someone has put you in a dock in a courtroom and is really beating you, asking you questions and you must answer them. If you explain they say ‘no, I want yes or no [answer]”. This capability to revise arguments became critical when the Ugandan team debated Australia and was tested on knowledge that they were not prepared for. The capability to ask questions during the debate allowed them to find the answers they needed to prepare better speeches.

Beyond the format changes, the Ugandan team also remarked on the novelty of the international topics at the WSDC tournament. Liz said at home “we don’t really base the topics on terrorism; it’s more like topics that affect the schools. Like if single sex schools should be abolished because the government is thinking about abolishing them”. The immediacy of these local topics is similar to that of the Estonian team’s and works well in a national context because it draws students into the decision making process of their own school.

The Mongolian team was not capable of making such comparisons between their native debate styles and the WSDC’s because they were all new to debate. The debaters began training in October 2009. Mongolian-language debate tournaments do exist in Mongolia, but these students attend a private school that does not participate in the requisite organizations that would allow them to gain access to those trainings. As such, the students were on their own to prepare and

they designed a public debate tour that would both give them training and raise money for their flights to the WSDC. The student's favorite debate was on a Mongolian uranium mining law. Namu reflected on it: "It was cool... we said that we should not dig out the uranium of Mongolia in front of a huge audience and we just talked for an hour or longer." Granted, a topic specific to Mongolia would not work well during an international tournament. Yet, the Mongolian team's preference is indicative of the student's experiences and knowledge. They are not opposed to debating fine tuned policy debate topics. Their preference is similar to Elizabeth's (Uganda) to focus on topics and ideas that relate to their lives and their nations.

#### *4. Debating*

When they discussed their preparations for the WSDC, the Estonian, Ugandan, and Mongolian teams focused on the Somalia topic (The other topics included "that every country should have the right to possess nuclear weapons", "doctors should report evidence of marital abuse to the police," and "terrorist suspects should have the right to a trial in civilian courts".) Paul (Estonia) said "I found it interesting to look at what the situation is there and if intervention would actually be a good idea in real life as well as in the debate world, which is kind of different." The capability to look at both the debate world and the real world policymaking indicates a heightened level of research and analysis. Paul and Karmen were not simply looking for any evidence they could find, but systematically sifting through documents to put together a complex strategy for their debate rounds. While they were most at home discussing European examples, they indicated that they had used advanced search engines such as Lexis/Nexis to acquire their information on international subjects.

Mayambala's (Uganda) narration was quite different. He was switching not only formats but also from continental to international examples. "During the training we'd use [examples] from Africa. But from the training we learned that actually those examples may work, but its better when you use examples from different places. And I think it's a good idea because it opens you to research and getting information." And yet, when I asked him where that research was coming from both Mayambala and Liz indicated that they primarily used Google to search for evidence. They just made sure that they included non-African examples in the search.

The Mongolian team expressed greater difficulty preparing for the debate, both

because of their research skills and their opponents' unfamiliarity with Eurasian geography. Aruka discussed his approach to research as "For example, on the topic about Somalia. I would not know exactly when the BBC would know something about Somalia, so I would have to watch all of the BBC, and I became interested in the news and what was happening."

It is frustrating when your team uses television as their primary research tool. Yet, my attempts to secure access to Internet search engines for the Mongolian team proves an interesting lens into international debate preparation. These students lag behind not because they do not have access to the Internet, but because they do not have the tools to properly use that access to acquire research for their debates. In the case of Mongolia, an access account to Lexis/Nexis only provided more confusion and frustration. The most successful option was for me to arrive in Qatar, days before the tournament with suitcase full of printouts to help the students prepare for their debates. This method allowed the team to appear prepared, and indeed they did learn from the articles that I selected, but they also missed out the research portion, a critical element of debate training.

On a cursory level, the difference made by this lack of skills is clear. When the topic is international and announced weeks in advance so as to allow for research, the Mongolian team is likely to lose the debate round. When the topic was impromptu, with only an hour and an almanac or one volume encyclopedia to prepare, Mongolia has a good chance of winning. The same pattern repeats itself with other non-western teams. They have a much greater chance of winning if their research skills are not a deciding factor in the debate round.

Yet, this analysis is one done by a coach, after the tournament has finished and the team's record can be compared to previous tournaments. I wanted to learn if the students perceived the difference between topics, or their research skills. When the students narrated their experience against a diversity of teams they focused on the opponent's knowledge of their nation and culture. The Mongolian team was frustrated by the lack of geographic knowledge among their competitors. "A lot of teams did not know where Mongolia was, and they were surprised we are between Russia and China... They are really surprised there are kids that can speak English like this. They expect if they have never heard of a country that it will be very rural and not developed country." This lack of knowledge about Mongolia prevented the team from using Mongolian-centric examples, yet, it also indicates the extra level of work that the team had to do to



become recognized and viewed as full participants at the tournament.

The Malaysian team faced a completely different problem. I sat with the team through several elimination rounds, including one on paying retributions to those who have been harmed in the past. The team was obviously rigid as Malaysia's race problems became the focus of the debate. Although they agreed "it's in Wikipedia, so we cannot deny that Malaysia has some racism problems", the debaters were concerned that an example from Malaysia had taken over the entire debate. Ahamad, the oldest Malaysian debater felt that the debaters could have done better, and not used Malaysia "as the only example, of this problem because then the students from other places will think we are the problem, but they are problems in their own countries too". Ahamad's reflections are interesting because he found it acceptable for his own team to use Malaysia as an example in the debates, but wanted to make sure that other teams did not use his country as the mainstay of their arguments.

The diversity of problems experienced by my narrators, ranging from other teams' lack of geographical knowledge to their highlighting embarrassing national problems, put the narrators in a unique space as both cultural ambassadors and competitors. To be accepted by the judges and win rounds the students were pressed to use more western examples. After a round between Mongolia and Nepal on "performance enhancing drugs" one judge remarked "we thought it was a debate that we would have expected teenagers to know quite a lot about... it is true with American football and cycling and all kinds of things that drugs is a significant issue". Neither Nepal nor Mongolia are known fans of American football, and cycling in either of those nations would get you killed either by altitude or traffic. And yet, this is the standard set for the students by their judges. Competitors for the WSDC are encouraged to watch past rounds of debate, a practice that only entrenches the expectation that students will be familiar and conversant with topics of particular importance to Western Europe and North America.

### *5. Competitive Success*

I presented a version of this paper focusing only on the Mongolian team at the 2010 Mongolian Society Annual Meeting, and the most frequent question I received was, if you know these students have no chance of winning the competition why would you go through the financial expense and heartache of sending them to an international competition? Indeed, these students are

champion debaters in their home nations. Ahmad's school has won the Malaysian Prime Minister's Cup ten times. Paul and Karmen were selected to represent Estonia through a rigorous elimination process; and yet, on the international circuit they are not winning debates. Even still, the students were not lamenting their losses or planning to boycott the tournament in future years.

Several advantages to this type of diverse competition have been identified by argumentation scholars. As Steve Llano writes "since audiences can be vastly different, with polarities one has never thought of, debate training encourages increased respect for other people as more than targets. They are sources of inspiration and information. They help one overcome difficulties in phrasing and developing arguments" (Llano, 2010). The students in this study did experience quite a bit of difficulty phrasing and expressing their arguments in a way that their opponents and judges would understand. And yet, even though we know that the students might not win, and that the judges might be exceptionally biased, it is imperative that they continue to represent their nations and communities in the continual development of public debate.

These students gain from both the participation and the wins. Aruka (Mongolia) was proud of the improvement he and his teammates had made at the tournament: "it's obvious that we are getting better and better at debate and you see it in the fact that first we losing on everything, then we are taken when we lose by split decision. And then the next one we win by a split and then the next one we win unanimously." Beyond his record, he was interested in debating against students from different nations instead of just his own. "Nationality matters a lot. Especially the fact that you are a native English speaking country does give you a lot of advantage ...[and] would say it makes a lot of difference in the debating. But outside of debating, they seem to act differently... I mean...I debated the Nepali team and they were really friendly... I just hugged the coach, which is normal for me but I doubt you would hug the coach from Sweden." Varvara from Russia echoed that even though her team had lost all of their rounds, this was a rare opportunity to meet students from other countries and they were pleased to have had the opportunity to participate.

And yet, some students are in it simply for the game. As Paul put it, "These skills allow you to manipulate people. That's always a great skill to have in this very competitive and dog eat dog world." Perhaps they also help students to recognize and resist manipulation. Students are interacting with each other in an event that

transcends international power hierarchies. For example, Mayambala (Uganda) described the thrill of “meeting Australia. That was a wake-up call... our points were really well organized, but the way they kept on bringing in examples and ideas that really gave us a hard time and we had to think ... things we had not even thought about...it opened up our reason.” He concluded that the Australian team was not innately better, “they were good, and very well prepared, but next time we will beat them.”

Mayambala’s determination to participate in the tournament again signifies both his interest in and acceptance of the format, despite its differences from how he debates and researches in Uganda. The other students echoed his response. They all wanted to attend the tournament again and Liz went so far as to tell me that she learned more at the WSDC than she ever did in school.

## 6. Conclusion

The students interviewed for this project were eager to make their mark in academic debate. When they head to college they plan to study Electrical Engineering and Accounting. Only one student was interested in the Humanities. They would like to, but do not expect to, have the opportunity to debate after they finish high school. Debate has crafted the way they think, act, research, and view the rest of the world. It has indicated the inherent differences between their preparations and that of students around the world. For some of them this is only a game, but for those like Mayambala, this is a rare space where they are free to express their political opinions without worrying about the political implications for themselves or their families. Future research projects should continue to track the WSDC, and continue to invite the students to speak for themselves alongside analyzing their essays and speeches. These students are eager to narrate their experiences and are ready to make serious contributions to the study of argumentation.

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