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To cite this article: Andrew Thomas Weaver (1918) Argumentation and debate in high schools, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 4:2, 160-169, DOI: [10.1080/00335631809360664](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335631809360664)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335631809360664>

Published online: 05 Jun 2009.

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ARGUMENTATION AND DEBATE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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THOSE of us who work on the so-called higher levels of the educational process are, of course, always largely dependent upon the quality of the service rendered by those who are the foundation layers. Nowhere are foundations, good and bad, more enduring than they are in speech training. We must look to the high school to awaken an initial interest in debate work. College Argumentation and Debate courses and college debating teams are largely recruited from the number of those who, in high school, have acquired a taste for that sort of work. From this circumstance it follows that unless we can develop enthusiasm and appreciation for forensics in high school, we shall never have a proper proportion of college students active in this field.

The high school should not only awaken interest; it should also give sound fundamental training and it should send out graduates keenly sensible of their defects and eager to supplement their forensic training with that which the college has to offer. Where can one find a more distressingly impossible subject or object for speech training than in the person of John Jones, the school orator of Grassville, who, tutored by one of the local ministers, has met upon the sands of the oratorical arena the select, hand picked contestants of his district and has never yet lowered his voice? Have not the judges in every contest in which he has participated, the judges who were men of the cloth and universally respected, given to him a unanimous verdict over all comers? Need I go further in describing the local Demosthenes? Professor O'Neill did not put the case too strongly when he said that such a boy has been more seriously injured than he would have been had he broken a leg and had it set by a quack who left the injured member six inches shorter than the other. He is indeed the victim of educational malpractice which may cripple him for life.

Not more than six weeks ago there came into my office a specimen such as I have been describing. I had issued a call for debate candidates. This freshman came to tell me that he had been the

leader of his high school debate team for two years and that, although he felt that his experience had been extensive enough to give him approximately all of the benefits to be derived from the practice of the forensic art, yet he realized that the school needed experienced men on the teams and that he would therefore help us out. What more serious mistake could the high school make than to send its graduates to college and professional school convinced that the continuance of study and practice in the field of debating represents gratuitous effort?

To the proper functioning of the high school in the commencement of Argumentation and Debate training, two conditions are indispensable: the correct evaluation of the work by those in charge of the curriculum and the securing of competent instructors for such courses as may be offered.

One of the leaders among our profession in the high school field says, "I believe that the chief problem in teaching these subjects is to secure from school boards, principals, and superintendents a proper recognition of their importance so that the work may be given a definite place in the curriculum, with credit." Another high school teacher complains that there are three classes of principals and superintendents who block the introduction into the curriculum of real training in Argumentation and Debate. First there are those who think of Argumentation and Debate as a first cousin of Elocution which they dislike, and consequently will have none of it in their schools. Second, those who want just enough Argumentation and Debate teaching to prepare a few selected pupils for exhibition and advertising purposes. Third, those who feel that student debating societies supervised by any teacher no matter what his department, will provide all necessary training.

When we complain that a high school principal is not giving sufficient recognition to Argumentation and Debating work are we quite sure what we mean by "sufficient recognition"? What place should Argumentation and Debate have in the curriculum? If the high school curriculum were turned over to us for reformation, do we know just how we should bring them into the students' program? One thing is reasonably certain: if the educational world is to have confidence in our proposed solution of the problem it must be convinced that we are looking at our work from the standpoint of the ideal curriculum and not at the curriculum from the standpoint of our professional interests.

After we have arrived at some definite conclusion with reference to the terms upon which we should like to have Argumentation and Debate courses admitted to high school schedules, our next problem is how to influence the judgment of those who are in charge of the schools. What answer shall we make when we are informed, as was Macbeth, "the table's full"? Shall we attempt to teach subjects which are extra curricular, hoping that by the demonstration of honest merit we may win admission to the charmed circle of credit earning courses? Is it worth while for a teacher to spend and be spent in teaching something which is the butt of ridicule among the members of the faculty on which he serves or should the teacher of Public Speaking courses refuse to go into high schools except upon a basis of substantial equality with his colleagues?

It is my conviction that there is little to be gained through the acceptance of compromise conditions in teaching Argumentation and Debate. Unless those in charge of a high school are willing to employ a competent instructor and give his work proper recognition, it seems to me that the time is not ripe for the introduction of such courses into that school. When students are able to excuse their lackadaisical work in a course by remarking, "Well, the school doesn't give us any credit for the stuff anyway," and when the teacher has to kick against the pricks of ignorance and prejudice of those who should stand back of him, he has my full sympathy. This association ought to bring to bear its influence in every possible way to win the coöperation of the men who control the outstanding high schools of the country. We need to make our position strong in the prominent places first. The college and university departments which are supplying the high school field with its trained teachers of Argumentation and Debate should exert every possible influence to avoid placing their strong graduates where they will lose their faith in the work, become ashamed of their calling, and move into other departments in which they may enjoy a comfortable sense of equality with their colleagues.

If we are to have proper training in high school Argumentation and Debate, we must have an adequate supply of trained teachers. The conception of a trained teacher for these subjects has undergone some important modifications within the past decade. There are present in this group some of the men who have figured largely in the bringing of the newer and better day. Those high school principals who are behind the times on this matter should be led to revise their ideals.

A year or so ago I wrote to the administrative officers of about forty of the private secondary schools which are members of The North Central Academic Association, asking them what they were doing in the field of Argumentation and Debate. Some of the replies to my query as to the supply of trained instructors for this work were remarkably reassuring. The head master of one of the schools near Chicago wrote me that he had on his faculty, numbering about ten in all, four or five teachers eminently competent to teach Argumentation and Debate. I knew the members of the faculty in question and I respected them for their scholarship in their own departments but I smiled a good deal as I thought of their preparation for teaching these subjects. One's sense of the ridiculous might almost blind him to the tragedy involved in the benighted ignorance of those who are responsible for what is being done to the students of that school in the name of Argumentation and Debate. One of the leading college presidents of the country not long ago said that the modern public school system is producing graduates who are incapable of independent thinking. If this statement is in any sense true we can do something to remedy the defect by ceasing to entrust the teaching of thought-training subjects to amateurs.

Assuming for the time being that we have solved the first problem, which is the winning of a sufficient amount of coöperation on the part of high school principals to give opportunity for instruction in Argumentation and Debate, the next problem concerns the proper content of the courses to be given. One fundamental consideration to be borne in mind is that we ought, to some degree at least, to make the work preparatory to college Argumentation and Debate. The oral aspects of the training may easily be over-emphasized. The course should aim primarily at the development of the basic principles of sound thinking. We should not try to cover the entire field and we should cling closely to the ideal announced by Professor Houghton in his slogan, "A minimum of theory and a maximum of practice."

The first truth which should be stressed in teaching Argumentation is that there is nothing more valueless and troublesome than unsupported assertion. When students have learned the futility and inanity of controversy, the ingredients of which are, "'Tis" and "'Taint," the foundations have been laid for the study of the science of proof.

Very closely allied to the evils which emanate from unsupported assertion is the student's almost inevitable tendency to support his own valueless assertion by quoting the equally valueless assertion of someone else. Professor George P. Baker once said, "The undergraduate of today has an undue regard for what is in print. Very recently a professor in one of the leading medical colleges of the country said to me, 'You college teachers must do more to make your students understand that not everything in print is indubitable. I spend hours which I need for other purposes in making college graduates grasp that seemingly self evident fact.' " If students come out of college with this generous idea as to the infallible wisdom of linotype operators, what a vast amount of unfounded or misfounded thinking they must have done while in college. This tendency to substitute opinion for proof is a menace which should be met in high school. The student cannot be set right on that matter any too soon.

Then too, the student should be shown the error in entering into discussion without a careful preliminary definition of terms. When the high school student has learned that a considerable amount of the apparent conflict in opinion is merely a matter of terminology, he has acquired a principle which should function vitally in all of his subsequent education.

It is probably unnecessary to say that the beginning course in Argumentation should emphasize the development of the ability to distinguish between incidental and essential. There can scarcely be too much practice in sifting and winnowing the kernels of truth from piles of chaff.

To my mind there is no more important question connected with the work than that which concerns the ideals which students are to take out of the class room regarding the function and the purpose of argumentation. Are they to feel that they have been furnished with a weapon which will enable them to triumph over all those who differ with them in opinion? If we teach argumentation without emphasizing the true purpose of its employment we are performing a service of somewhat questionable value indeed. But is it possible for us to agree as to the aim and the function of argumentation? Students need constantly to be warned against the type of argument which was in the mind of Beveridge when he said, "The friction of argument is far more likely to generate heat than light."

A number of years ago I chanced upon a statement from Herbert Spencer which satisfies me as expressive of the ideal which should be placed and kept before the minds of students in Argumentation. Said that great logician, "In proportion as we love truth more and victory less, we shall become anxious to know what it is which leads our opponents to think as they do; we shall begin to suspect that the pertinacity of belief exhibited by them comes from a perception of something which we have not perceived and we shall learn to supplement that portion of truth which we have found with the portion found by them." If there is any type of human being with whom the world could well dispense it is the individual who goes about looking for an opportunity to try his mental spurs on some one else. The paramount responsibility of teachers in this field is that their students shall be neither a nuisance nor a menace to society. If we make the mistake of the ancient sophists we must expect the fate which befell them and their doctrines.

To summarize what I have said regarding the class room work in Argumentation: we should be content in high school to lay foundations. We should aim at the standardizing of the work in order that college teachers may know what has been done by those who have had the high school course. I have indicated in a very sketchy way what some of these fundamentals are, viz., an appreciation of the vanity of unsupported assertion, a knowledge of the simple tests of evidence, a sense of the necessity for painstaking definition, the ability to see the essential features of a situation and, most important of all, a definite sentiment as to the purpose in the development of the logical and rhetorical faculties and an unwillingness to prostitute these high powers to sordid ends.

If time permitted, I should like to discuss the debating society as an agency through which much good may come to the class room work. The voluntary association of students, under sympathetic, coöperative, and competent faculty supervision has in it elements of the greatest potential value to the participants. I must however pass to the consideration of the interschool debate.

Here the problems grow on every bush. The institution of debating has been under fire from all sides; its critics have been not only numerous but bitterly caustic. Let me give you some of the opinions which these critics have expressed. Says one: "After watching closely for a number of years the development of interscholastic debating in one of our larger cities, the writer has been

impressed with the fact that practically all of the abuses charged against interscholastic athletics exist with important additions in interscholastic debating.—In many cases the task of the debaters is reduced to the simple effort of committing to memory the work of the coaches,—about as genuine a test of mental capacity as would be a talking match between two parrots.—Debaters seek to trick their opponents.—Coaches employ great shrewdness in formulating propositions to be submitted to opposing teams.—Is the aim of debate the training of sharpers or the training of thinkers?—Intricate problems that are puzzling legislators, presidents, and cabinets, these young logicians settle with supreme ease. Questions of international moment from which the Hague Tribunal would shrink these embryo statesmen dispose of in two brief hours.—Well may they, after repeating speeches prepared at least in part by their coaches and largely above the ken of their fellow students, well may they say in conclusion to their long suffering audience, ‘I thank you.’ ” (B. L. Gardner. *School Rev.* Vol. 19)

A Mr. von Kaltenborn tells in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* of his pathetic experience in losing a debate to Princeton because he had been assigned to the defense of the side in which he did not believe. (The question was on the federal incorporation of trusts.) This victim of the cruel practice of asking the student to investigate the arguments and the evidence on the side which runs counter to his moral (?) sense, says: “In my own case after thinking and believing that federal incorporation is about the most unsatisfactory solution of the trust problem, I was sent to Princeton to argue for federal incorporation. The insincerity as well as the artificiality of my speech was as apparent to the judges as it was to myself and we lost the debate.—Moreover I have never ceased feeling thoroughly ashamed.” The *Outlook* remarks editorially, “Mr. von Kaltenborn concludes his heartfelt protest with the following expression of his opinion, ‘Informal discussions are almost the only kind encountered in real life. One give-and-take session with men who believe what they say and are permitted to say what they believe is better training than a dozen formal debates.’ ”

A reading of the indictment leaves one with something of the feeling expressed the other day by a certain United States senator who was asked what his position was on the question of expelling one of his colleagues. He replied, “If one tenth of the charges against him are proved true, I shall vote for his expulsion.” We

as a profession must seriously consider the objections to debating as it is now conducted and attempt to settle this problem. If we can obtain as good results in the teaching of Argumentation and Debate without the interscholastic debate as with it, then it seems to me that, under the circumstances we ought to drop it at once. If the interscholastic debate contributes to the effectiveness of our work then we ought to defend and perfect it.

Are the educational values in interschool debating overshadowed by the inculcation of dangerous tendencies of thought and purpose? Are we killing the spirit of discussion by insisting upon a cut and dried formalism of procedure, thus rendering the training barren of practical results? Is it a moral offense to pay scant regard to the debater's personal opinions and convictions in assigning him to his task? Are we training sophists and shysters instead of straight thinkers? Are most high school debaters mere phonographs and have they lost their originality of thought? Is there no good to be derived from forcing high school students to investigate perplexing social, economic, and political questions? Are we to believe that students who have been trained in debate must be born again before they can win honorable success in after life?

There are unquestionably many intelligent and honest people who answer these questions in the affirmative and view the interscholastic debate as an agency of unmitigated wickedness. It will readily occur to you that I cannot in the time at my disposal take up and answer all of these questions. I can do little more than suggest some general lines of approach.

I often wonder whether the bitter critics of debating realize the full implication of their charges. It seems to me that those who are on the field can hardly accept silently the conclusions implicit in the criticism. When it comes to the immoral tendencies alleged to exist in debate training we must look to the fruit of the tree? Do the products of the system justify the conclusions of the critics. It seems to me that a fair appraisal of those who have done battle on the forensic platform would certainly not rank them as inferior to their associates either in ability or in character. For my own part I admit that I cannot see how the advocacy of truth on either side of a debatable question endangers honest convictions. Are we not a little tempted to smile when ex-President Roosevelt thanks fortune for his escape from the contamination incident to the investigation of the evidence on both sides of a two-sided question? What an

amount of wrangling the world would be spared if some of the useless contention between individuals could be transferred to the field of open-minded thought within the individual brain box!

But what shall we say when the finger of accusation falls on the page of dishonest practice in interscholastic debating? When anyone mentions the chicanery and trickery between schools, when the charge is made that the debaters are mere parrots, we debate coaches feel some of the uneasiness experienced by a certain Yorkshireman who was holding a wedge for his fellow workman, Thomas, to drive into a large stick of cord wood. Thomas had a marked obliquity of vision and as he stood with the maul poised in the air, one eye was fixed on the wedge while the other hovered on the head of the boss. The Yorkshireman looked up apprehensively inquiring as he did so, "Thoomas, are ye lookin at me or at wood?" It seems to me that at least one eye of our critics is upon the coaches. This charge of dishonesty, be it noted, comes largely from the coaches themselves. Do high school debate coaches mean to charge their rivals with deliberately doing what a student would be expelled from school for attempting? Is there honor among thieves but none among debate coaches?

I am not ignorant of the fact that pressure is often placed upon coaches by those who intimate to them that their positions are insecure unless their teams bring home the bacon. Must a man who fights with a halter around his neck use all means to win? Certainly we should do all that we can to lighten the outside pressure but we should not forget our inside braces. This association ought to be able to reach the ears of principals and superintendents with a plea for an attitude on their part which will enable coaches to be educators and not charlatans. Debates conducted under the auspices of a university board which has power to control the actions of contestants, to select judges, etc., are likely to be freer from dishonest practices than are debates between bitter rivals over whom there is no outside authority. If we cannot have honesty in prepared debates, we had better have extempore debates. (Such a plan is used in the high school contest debates held under the auspices of the University of Montana and the results are said to be satisfactory.) When rival debate coaches meet personally, talk frankly, and agree to be as honest in their rivalry as they are in other particulars they can raise debating in the eyes of the public which is now frankly sceptical as to its value. If

coaches will agree to hang together there will be fewer separate hangings carried out by school executives who are looking for victories instead of education.

I have dwelt at length on interschool debating because it furnishes such a large proportion of the training which high school pupils now receive and because I believe that it is the fountain head of interest in Argumentation and Debate and should therefore be kept as pure as possible. Preparation for these debates offers one of the choicest opportunities for the highest type of mental training. It must be taken advantage of by a trained teacher whose eyes are capable of seeing a good deal further than the day of the debate, and who can use the impetus of school rivalry and not abuse it or worse still be used by it. All opinions to the contrary notwithstanding, I believe in debating as an agency for quickening interest in all matters forensic and for rendering to those who engage in it a service of inestimable value. We can never legislate honesty into debate relations. The institution of interschool debating can be preserved, and the great benefits which accrue to us from it made secure in just one way—coaches must rise to the situation, they must resolve to labor for the future in the spirit of true educators, they must learn to say with Woodrow Wilson, "I am willing, no matter what my personal fortunes may be, to play for the verdict of mankind."