

Connecticut Middle School Debate League¹

Middle School Scrimmage

Bethel Middle School November 10, 2014

Smith Middle School, Glastonbury, November 12, 2014

This House would permit schools to discipline students for internet and phone activity.

I have been writing commentary on CDA debates for several years as time permits. This is my first attempt for the Middle School League. If you find it useful you should feel free to use it with your debaters.

Everett Rutan, November 23, 2014

Introduction

While the best way to learn to debate is to debate, it helps to review your debates for what you did well and what you could do better. The trouble is that the only witnesses to most debates are the debaters and the judge. You can and should try to review each round based on your notes and the ballot.

But we can also learn from watching others debate, like the demo round at the scrimmage. You should encourage your students to take careful notes during these rounds—good practice—so you can discuss it afterwards—a good practice!

The first part of this comment consists of a number of observations about debate, illustrated by examples from the demo rounds. The second part consists of an abbreviated flow of the rounds taken from my notes.

How Good Are Your Notes?

The most important thing you do as a debater is listen to your opponents. You can't reply to their arguments unless you know what those arguments are.

Your notes are both the proof that you have listened and a critical aid to your team during the debate. The list of your opponents' arguments provides an outline for your and your teammates' speeches: provide a reply to each and you are well on your way to winning the ballot. Use your rebuttal to summarize both sides to the judge to persuade him to vote for you.

Your notes also provide a record of your performance. In most debates, the only observers will be your team, your opponents, and the judge. Some judges will provide excellent feedback on the ballot; others, not so much. You will need your notes to make sense of the judge's decision.

So, how good are your notes? Did you write down all of the contentions presented in the opening constructive speeches? Did you include the main supporting arguments for each one? Did you capture

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the replies in the second constructive speeches? Can you tell me how each team summarized the round in the rebuttals?

At the end of this comment are my notes for the demonstration rounds at the scrimmages we held in November. If you were there, you can compare them to the notes you took while you watched one or the other of those rounds.

And if you didn't take notes? Here's your first lesson: always take notes. It's good practice!

There are lots of ways to take notes. I make columns on a page (or two pages), one for each speech in the debate. I try to keep the Government or Proposition arguments in the top half, and the Opposition arguments in the bottom half. I try to write the replies in later speeches next to (to the right of) the original argument. This is called a flow chart or flow of the debate, because the arguments and replies flow one to the next from left to right across the page. If I'm debating, I can outline my speech in the column available and use that outline while I speak.

I use a code to label the main contentions, "G1" for the Government's first contention, and "O2" for the Opposition's second contention, etc. I use other abbreviations during the debate for frequently used terms. In this debate school ("S"), parents ("Par"), police ("Pol") and free speech ("FS") occur often. I haven't included those abbreviations here, and my original notes are not as neat as the ones below.

You should find a way to take notes that works for you. There are no rules, other than you (and your teammates) have to be able to read them and they have to accurately reflect the speeches in the round. Most use paper, sometimes larger sheets, sometimes legal pads. Some debaters are beginning to use computers or tablets to take notes, if the league permits the use of these devices.

Note taking, like speaking, is a useful skill. You will need it for your high school and college courses, and in many professions. And it can help you win debates.

What Are We Arguing About?

Debates are often won by the team that does the best job of simply explaining what the argument is about. And much time is often wasted as teams talk past each other because no one makes the issue clear. It's more than simply defining the words in the motion: you must make plain the heart of the matter.

In the demo round at Bethel, the Prime Minister simply notes the Government intends "schools" to include both public and private, and then launches into the Government contentions. Gov assumes everyone knows what the round is about.

In the demo round at Smith, Gov defines "phone and internet activity" by limiting it to negative interactions among students and teachers, and "discipline" as the same sort of actions that would be taken if the activity had occurred in school.

Which do you think is better?

I think the second is better than the first, but neither gets to the heart of the issue, which is letting schools discipline students for certain actions outside of school! Schools can already set rules for internet and phone use in school: what would happen if you tried to phone, text or email a friend

during math class? And Gov would have a very tough time if they proposed monitoring students Skyping their grandparents.

If I had been on Opp at Bethel, I would have started the first constructive by pointing out to the Judge that Gov hadn't defined the debate clearly. Since the motion doesn't limit the scope in any way, I would have said this meant that Gov had to justify schools setting and enforcing rules for all student use of phone and internet no matter where or when it occurred, no matter what they did. This makes the argument that the motion violates the right to free speech very stronger. If Gov doesn't define the motion clearly, this is a legitimate Opp strategy.

At Smith, the Gov definition slips in the idea that the motion is limited to actions that would be banned at school in the definition of "discipline." But they could have made this much clearer.

So, what is this debate about, and what is the best way to express it? We all agree that schools can limit phone and internet use in school. And we all agree we don't want schools censoring all phone and internet activity outside of school. So the Smith definition limiting school involvement to interactions between students, or between students and teachers, is the right idea.

Rather than define individual terms, my preference is to provide a clear interpretation of the meaning and intent of the motion right at the start. For example:

Mr.(or Madame) Speaker, I rise today in support of the motion, this House would permit schools to discipline students for phone and internet activity. By "this House" we mean the United States. Schools already may discipline students for phone and internet use in school. And we are not proposing schools overstep their authority by interfering in all student phone and internet use. Specifically we interpret the motion to allow schools to extend the same rules and responses they apply in school to student phone and internet use outside of school where two or more students or students and faculty are involved. Examples include cyberbullying, sexting, and posting false and derogatory items about faculty members. We believe you should accept this motion for the following reasons...

All of this takes about 30 seconds to say, and it precisely limits the scope of debate to the activities the Government wants to focus on, and even provides examples! The Judge knows exactly where Gov stands.

Note it is usually a good idea to define, "this House" so you don't have to deal with schools in, say, China. And there may be times when you want to explicitly define certain words or phrases, perhaps even referring to a dictionary.

But the Prime Minister should always tell the Speaker/Judge/audience exactly what the Government plans to talk about.

Cover!

Print out the flow charts below. Hold them at arms' length, far enough so you can't see the words clearly. Notice anything?

Dark space, indicating arguments, and white space, indicating the lack thereof. The pattern of dark and white space tells me a lot. It tells me whether the constructive speakers were doing their jobs or not.

At Bethel, the Leader of the Opposition only replies to one of the two Government contentions, and the Member of Government doesn't mention the Government contentions at all. At Smith, both Opposition speakers reply to the Government contentions and present their own contentions. But the Government team never specifically replies or even refers to the Opposition contentions! Why should a Judge ever vote for a team that ignores the other side?

The job of every speaker after the Prime Minister is to cover all of the arguments in the debate. The Leader of the Opposition has to present his case, but he must save enough time to respond to each of the Government's contentions. The Member constructives should each contain arguments that cover both the Government and Opposition cases.

As a beginner, the easiest way to do this is to handle the contentions one by one, starting with either the Government or Opposition side and following with the other. You may see experienced speakers tell the Judge their plan at the beginning of their speech: "First I'll review the Opp case, then I will cover Gov." This requires two skills: organizing replies to all the arguments, and managing your time so you spend just enough on each one (while also allowing time to accept and answer POIs).

There are more sophisticated ways to cover all the arguments. You may notice that in the Bethel demo the second and third Opposition contention (O2 and O3) directly contradict the second Government contention (G2). Rather than speak about all three separately, you can point this out to the judge, and cover all three at the same time:

Mr. Speaker, the second and third Opposition contentions and the second Government contention all deal with who provides the most effective student discipline—parents and police on the one hand, or schools on the other. My side believes...

But as in all things, learn to walk before you run. Covering each contention in turn is simple and effective.

One last word: the rebuttals are for summarizing the debate, not responding to contentions. The last Opposition and Government speakers should explain how the arguments, taken as a whole, provide the Judge with a reason to vote for their side. Find two or three main issues where the sides clashed, use them to organize the contentions and the supporting arguments, and show how on balance the day is yours.

This is a way of covering all the arguments, but you are wasting these last words if you spend them replying to specific contentions. Remember, you may not introduce new arguments in the rebuttals in any case.

Bethel Demo Round, Nov. 10, 2014

Prime Minister	Leader Opposition	Member Gov't	Member Opp	Opp Rebuttal	Gov Rebuttal
<p>"Schools": Public and private</p> <p>G1: Internet and phone use has an adverse effect on learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning is social -It is artificial to separate in-school and out of school actions <p>G2: Schools are better at student discipline than law enforcement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Students respond to school figures 	<p>G1: Protecting free speech doesn't prevent interaction.</p>		<p>G1: Interaction limited if free speech not protected</p> <p>G2: if law is broken, call police</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -if not, call parents 	<p>Summary</p> <p>Free speech</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -students have rights -they can be limited -but only if they break the law -then it's a police matter <p>Free speech matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -slippery slope if you punish students for criticizing teachers on Facebook <p>Illegal activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -double jeopardy for schools to punish twice -if not illegal, leave it to the parents -school punishment like suspension lead to worse outcomes 	<p>Summary</p> <p>Which side is more feasible if you find something online?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -go to police, courts? -school discipline -Opp would close doors for students <p>Which side upholds the law?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gov limits, not bans, speech -no First Amendment violation if post is not legal -free speech may be limited if people are in danger
	<p>O1: Motion violates the First Amendment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supreme Court has upheld student rights (Tinker v DesMoines) <p>O2: Parents are better at discipline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -students only spend 15% of time in school -school discipline is broken <p>O3: Police are better for serious offenses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -cyberbullying and stalking are crimes 	<p>O1: SC said school could ban disruptive activity</p> <p>O2: Parents' rights not affected by motion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parents may not be aware of child's actions -school a middle ground between parents and police <p>O3: school discipline is consistent and effective</p> <p>Police still available</p>	<p>O1: Tinker sets a precedent to protect student rights</p> <p>O2: Gov takes away parents' rights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teachers may not know students well <p>O3: Students need to understand seriousness and repercussions of their actions</p>		

Smith Demo Round, Nov. 12, 2014

Prime Minister	Leader Opposition	Member Gov't	Member Opp	Opp Rebuttal	Gov Rebuttal
<p>"phone and internet activities": negative interactions among students and faculty</p> <p>"discipline": same measures as for in school infractions</p> <p>G1: school norms should hold outside of school</p> <p>-First Amendment not violated</p> <p>-student behavior won't be monitored</p> <p>G2: School discipline is most effective</p> <p>-closest to students</p> <p>G3: Strikes at root and prevents escalation</p>	<p>G1: How would they know about student behavior if they don't monitor?</p> <p>G2: School is not life</p> <p>-students need separate life</p> <p>-what about students who feel alienated from school?</p>	<p>G1: no monitoring</p> <p>-rely on reports by students, then investigate</p> <p>G2: schools closest to students after parents</p> <p>-parents can only discipline own child</p> <p>-school can deal with interactions</p> <p>G3: Pre-emptive</p> <p>-school can step in before it goes to police</p>	<p>G1: no monitoring means it will be ineffective</p> <p>-students reluctant to report others</p> <p>-punishes free speech</p> <p>G2: School effective in school</p> <p>-parents effective outside of school</p> <p>-serious offenses to the police</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>Constitutional rights</p> <p>-Gov would suppress free opinion</p> <p>-students say bad things every day</p> <p>-Opp protects student rights</p> <p>Safety and welfare</p> <p>-can't protect students from physical bullying now</p> <p>-can't protect from cyberbullying without monitoring</p> <p>-risk punishing over opinions on religion or politics</p> <p>So Gov will violate rights without solving anything</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>What is the most effective way to handle cyberbullying?</p> <p>-doesn't infringe rights to punish cyberbullying</p> <p>-school is the best place to help students develop life and social skills</p> <p>-Gov said motion is about cyberbullying, not religion or politics</p> <p>-motion covers activities which are not permitted in school</p> <p>-they would be treated the same way as if they happened in school</p>
	<p>O1: Violates free speech</p> <p>-would punish opinions about teachers</p> <p>-extreme behavior is a matter for the police</p> <p>O2: Outside the school's jurisdiction</p> <p>-school is taking parents' role</p>		<p>O1: noted this above</p> <p>O2: noted this above</p> <p>O3: Police exist to deal with serious offenses</p> <p>-cyberbullying and sexting are crimes</p>		