

Semi-public speaking: Does virtual high school debate competition increase accessibility for marginalized students?

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“NPR is saying schools might shut down?”
“That can’t be true. Is anyone else saying it?”
“I’m looking now.”

When I overheard this student conversation in early February of 2020, I didn’t think much of it. It was during one of my forensics classes—competitive speech and debate—and debaters were listing on the class whiteboard topics they needed to research before that weekend’s tournament. At the top of the list, circled, was “COVID.” Four weeks later, these same students would leave for Spring Break. They wouldn’t come back for nearly six months.

Three years later, having endured a global pandemic and navigated (semi-successfully) a variety of virtual and hybrid teaching formats, this conversation carries new meaning. While the country was rocked by abrupt school closures, barren grocery store shelves, and the uncertainty of the future, my students had a sliver of comfort most others did not—they knew what was happening, because they had researched it. Moreover, they could *explain it*. My debaters and I had candid conversations about the likelihood that schools might not return after Spring Break. While we continued prepping for future tournaments, hoping they would occur, we also tidied my room, did some end-of-year activities early, and I took photos of each class on the last day before break. When Kansas Governor Laura Kelly made the call to close schools for the remainder of the year, we were disheartened, overwhelmed, and scared, but we weren’t entirely surprised.

As a speech and debate coach, this example illustrates everything I love about my activity. It encourages young people to approach their world, even the scary moments, with curiosity and a desire to understand. It empowers them to decipher reputable sources from those with malicious intent, and to speak with authority on issues of national importance. In an increasingly polarized, uncertain, and dangerous world, these skills are invaluable. A global pandemic is terrifying, but it is much less terrifying when you understand what is happening, and can explain it in your own words.

What is policy debate?

Competitive, high school debate is known as policy debate. Policy rounds consist of four high school students, two from one school and two from another, debating on pre-determined sides of the yearly, national topic, called the resolution (National Speech and Debate Association, 2023).

The 2020 resolution was “Resolved: The United States federal government should enact substantial criminal justice reform in the United States in one or more of the following: forensic science, policing, sentencing” (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2020). During debate rounds, students take turns speaking and participating in cross examinations, in which they engage directly with a debater from the opposing team. Student speeches rely heavily on the use of evidence from expert sources, as well as students’ rhetorical skill. Debate rounds can last as long as two hours, and are judged by an adult volunteer, usually provided by the host school resolution (National Speech and Debate Association, 2023). In Kansas, tournaments occur Friday evenings and all-day Saturday (with the most elite tournaments increasingly stretching into Sundays) at high schools throughout the state. Tournaments routinely stretch late into the evening, with the final elimination round sometimes not concluding until after midnight. It is a grueling schedule of preparation, travel, school vans, cheap hotels, fast food, and little sleep. Further, Kansas is uniquely positioned as a longtime powerhouse state for competitive speech and debate. Throughout the year, Kansas teams routinely finish in elimination rounds at the most competitive tournaments in the country. In 2022 alone, Kansas public high schools won all four national tournament titles – the National Debate Coaches Association, the Tournament of Champions, the National Catholic Forensics League Grand National Tournament, and the National Speech and Debate Association—an achievement unprecedented in an activity dominated by elite, private schools (Mellott, 2022).

The benefits of participating in speech and debate are well documented. Competitive high school speech and debate has long been a training ground for talented young people who grow up to serve in some of society’s most influential roles. Countless politicians, activists, judges, and public figures credit their success at least in part to their participation in high school debate (Sanburg, 2015; Tartakovsky, 2017). Considerable research exists exploring the academic and social influences of debate participation (Allen et al, 1999; Anderson et al, 2012; Anderson & Mezuk, 1999; Bellon, 2017; Hill, 2002; Hooley 2007; Hoover, 2003; Mezuk, 2009), the role of gender in students’ academic performance as it relates to speaking and writing (Ghazvini et al 2011; Peterson, 2018) and the significance of the relationship between coaches and students (Castro, 2017; Gencer et al 2018). Hogan & Kurr (2017) suggest that debate participation yields benefits far beyond those seen in the classroom, preparing students to engage meaningfully in democratic processes:

[Debate] teaches students not only to be better speakers and critical listeners, but also more informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. By studying and participating in debate, students develop a keen appreciation for solid research, well-reasoned arguments, and effective delivery. Student debaters develop a better understanding of the rights and responsibilities of free speech, and they become more attuned to the tricks and deceptions of demagogues and propagandists. They learn how to solve problems collaboratively, and they develop a better appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and opinions in our complex, multicultural society (p. 85).

These skills are now arguably more important than ever. In a time of increasingly insidious disinformation being produced and shared on a mass scale via social media and other online platforms, it is difficult to quantify the value of the skills fostered in the debate classroom.

Barriers to Participation

Despite the wealth of research documenting its many benefits, there remain a variety of barriers preventing many students from participating in competitive debate. These barriers have contributed to a lack of diversity which has long plagued both high school and collegiate debate programs. Competitive, policy debate has historically been dominated by white, male students from elite private schools (Dillard-Knox, 2014; Fine, 2010; Hogan & Kurr, 2017; Kelsie, 2019; McGrath, 2020; Reid-Brinkley, 2008). In many ways the rhetorical and behavioral expectations embedded within the activity make debate inherently exclusionary for many students of color, particularly Black students. Reid-Brinkley (2008) notes that Black debaters must navigate a nuanced set of expectations for how they perform their identity within debate rounds, including

changing one's appearance, standardizing language practices, and eschewing cultural practices at least while participating in debate. In essence, students of color are performatively 'whitened' in order to have an opportunity for achieving in debate competitions. 'Acting black' or brown is problematic because those performative identities are not privileged in terms of successful participation. In fact, they signify a difference, an opposite, a negative differential. It is not that the debate community actively operates to exclude based on race, instead it is an exclusion based on racial performance, in other words, how the differentially colored body chooses to style itself." (p. 68).

Initiatives like the Urban Debate League and The Louisville Project have been extremely successful in both fostering debate participation among inner-city schools, as well as bucking historic debate norms to instead prioritize the lived experiences and culture of students of color (Dillard-Knox, 2014; Monteith, 2023 ; Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Reid-Brinkley, 2012). While these efforts have dramatically increased the participation of debaters of color, much work remains to increase the activity's diversity and competitive equity.

In addition to exclusionary behavioral expectations, funding needed to facilitate a competitive debate program is often a barrier to participation for schools from under-resourced communities. A typical debate season necessitates multiple overnight trips, including several out of state tournaments, access to school vehicles, team meals, tournament clothing, a laptop for each debater, tournament entry fees, and payment for assistant coaches and hired judges. My debate team of just over 100 students, spent nearly \$13,000 in the 2022-2023 season, only made possible through student dues, parent donations, district support, and a variety of fundraising efforts. For smaller debate teams, or those in historically neglected communities, raising such funds can be a monumental barrier to participation (Texas Debate Collective, 2023). Even if an under-resourced school can maintain funding for a debate program, competitive success at the highest levels of competition increasingly requires students to spend weeks of their summer attending costly debate camps hosted by elite universities, typically ranging from \$2,000-\$8,000 per student (Georgetown Debate, 2023; Jayhawk Debate Institute, 2023; Michigan Debate Institute, 2023; Northwestern National High School Institute, 2023). In light of these enormous financial burdens, it is perhaps unsurprising that competitive high school debate, for all its efforts to diversify, is still dominated by white, male students, often from privileged schools in wealthy communities (Allen et al, 1999; Allen et al, 2004; Anderson & Mezuk, 2012; Dillard-Knox ,

2014; Hoover, 2003; Kelsie, 2019; McGrath, 2020; Mezuk, 2009; Monteith, 2003; Pineda & Salinas, 2009; Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Reid-Brinkley, 2012; Schwartz-DuPre, 2006; Stepp, 1997; Tarin, 2022; Tartakovsky, 2017; Texas Debate Collective, 2023; Worth & Reed, 2010).

In addition to being prohibitively expensive for many, a variety of other factors exist which further exclude marginalized groups from competitive debate. Students with sensory processing sensitivities often struggle with the crowded, noisy, chaotic environment of a debate tournament, particularly between rounds when student time is unstructured. Those with physical disabilities might struggle to navigate an unfamiliar high school which may or may not be easily accessible. Diabetic students often struggle to find time at tournaments to monitor their blood sugar—I once interrupted a debate to force one of my top competitors to eat a granola bar after her mother called to tell me her sugars, which could be tracked via an app, were dangerously low. Muslim students are routinely left without a space for their evening prayers, and those fasting for Ramadan are forced to sit in a cafeteria while their peers eat lunch. Transgender and nonbinary competitors often endure being misgendered by their opponents and judges, and a lack of access to all-gender restrooms, much like they experience at school (Sanburg, 2015; Tartakovsky, 2017). Even the dress code is problematic, as the expectation that students wear a suit to compete can be prohibitively expensive, and disadvantages students with diverse body size and gender expression, as well as those with sensory sensitivities. While many tournament hosts have taken proactive steps to address these concerns, like offering designated prayer and sensory rooms, there remain far too many barriers preventing students from participating in debate, particularly those from already marginalized populations.

These barriers provide important context when considering the transitioning to virtual debate competitions. In an activity plagued by a lack of diversity since its inception, it is worth considering the ways in which virtual debate practices might increase the activity's accessibility. Debating from home, via computer, offers a path to participation to students who otherwise might not have the opportunity, particularly those from less-resourced schools, or those hindered by financial and travel burdens. While virtual learning was far from perfect, it is worth considering the ways in which virtual debate practices might lessen some of the barriers which have historically prevented many students from participating in the activity.

Transitioning to virtual debate

When my building returned to school in the fall, after a nearly six-month absence, we did so in an entirely virtual format. The transition to remote learning was rapid, with little time for school communities to prepare for the reality of school closures. The lack of in-person learning had dramatic impacts on students' academic performance, as well as students' and teachers' mental health (Anjur, 2021; Ashta et al, 2023; Beer, 2022; Bonella et al, 2020; Erden & Aliyev, 2021; Fisher et al, 2022; Schramm & Schramm, 2021; Windarwati et al, 2022). Education disparities caused by a lack of community resources were only exacerbated by online learning, with low-income students and students of color disproportionately harmed by the transition to virtual schooling (Ashta et al, 2023; Fisher et al, 2022). The long-term implications of COVID's disruption to schooling are only now beginning to come into clearer focus, and will likely manifest in students' socio-emotional and academic performance for decades to come. While such scholarship is still emerging, very little explores the way non-athletic competitive activities,

like speech and debate, pivoted to a virtual learning environment, and the implications this pivot had for students, schools, and communities, despite over four million high school students participating in speech, debate, and theatre activities (Niehoff, 2020).

Following the contentious election of 2016 and the social upheaval of the summer of 2020, debate's emphasis on collaborative problem solving and expert research was arguably more needed than ever. In the fall of 2020, as many students returned to school in a fully remote format, debate similarly pivoted, with students competing from their own homes via zoom (Malis, 2021). While this transition was a massive shift in tournament practice, it is one the debate community largely embraced. Here, it is important to note competitive debaters are no stranger to online communication platforms. In the 2012 National Debate Tournament (NDT), one of the two most elite collegiate debate tournaments in the country, the two teams competing in the final round debated entirely from laptops, rather than printed evidence (Cram, 2014). In the years that followed, high school and collegiate debate programs almost entirely pivoted away from carrying thousands of printed pages of evidence in burdensome, plastic tubs, to storing evidence and speeches on digital platforms accessed during the round using a laptop. Today, it is rare to see a team at a high school debate tournament competing without the aid of a computer. Now, it is common practice for debaters to share their speeches via flash drive or e-mail chain with their opponents before speaking. Judges often opt to be included in this evidence sharing as well, with an increasing number forgoing traditional, paper ballots in favor of paperless ballots completed online.

Further, since its inception, women, queer debaters, debaters of color, and other under-represented groups have used social media and other online platforms to communicate and build a sense of community in a historically white, male-dominated activity. Further, all debaters rely heavily on internet databases and communication platforms for research, scouting other teams, and team collaboration (Schwartz-Dupre, 2006). Pre-formatted cards (pieces of evidence read during a debate round) are shared by hundreds of thousands of debaters on the platform Open Evidence, and it is now considered universal best practice for all competitors to utilize the high school policy debate wiki to disclose their arguments prior to the debate round (similar to the process of discovery in a criminal trial). Some researchers have even experimented with utilizing Artificial Intelligence to coach and provide feedback to debaters, though this practice is still in its earliest, experimental stages (Petukhova, 2017). Further, limited research suggests that gamification of debate instruction, utilizing remote learning platforms, may increase student engagement in the activity (Domanis et al, 2019). Arguably, this preexisting reliance on and familiarity with various online platforms made our activity particularly well equipped to make the transition to fully remote competition.

Barriers to participation in virtual debate

Fully remote, virtual debate, much like virtual schooling, was fraught with challenges, particularly early in its transition from traditional, in-person tournaments. In many ways, it further disadvantaged students from under-resourced schools, including those with limited access to internet, inconsistent adult presence in the home during the school day, childcare responsibilities, or a need to work outside the home (Ashta et al, 2023; Fisher et al, 2022). Students from well-resourced schools, with access to fast, reliable wifi and a private, quiet room

from which to compete were at an immediate advantage in the world of virtual debate. This disparity was clear as I judged remote debate tournaments each weekend—while some students debated from a kitchen table or shared bedroom, their family members frequently in and out of the camera’s frame as the round progressed, others competed from what were obviously home offices, complete with comfortable desk chairs and a suitably professional background of bookshelves or framed pictures. While some students made do with a school-issued laptop, others used multiple monitors to allow easy navigation between the zoom room, e-mail chains, and speech documents. Further, mistreatment of students of color persisted. Monteith (2023) notes that virtual debating brought with it increased concerns about the surveillance of student competitors. They argue the default practice of recording collegiate debate rounds conducted via zoom, without the competitors’ consent and at times despite their explicit objections, constitutes racialized surveillance. Particularly when consent is ignored, it is not difficult to imagine how such surveillance can easily be weaponized against Black debaters, as well as other debaters of color.

Benefits of virtual debate

These criticisms are warranted and deserve further exploration and analysis. For all its flaws, however, virtual debate likewise brought with it a variety of benefits previously unseen in the activity, particularly by making debate more accessible to a diverse population of students. Most significantly, students from less privileged schools were no longer limited by prohibitive travel and hotel costs. While research on this topic has yet to emerge, I observed firsthand how this allowed the competition at weekly tournaments to diversify tremendously. A typical debate invitational hosted in the Kansas City metro area would largely consist of competition from area schools, as well as those from nearby Lawrence (30 minutes away), and perhaps Topeka (an hour away). The most competitive Kansas City tournaments, such as those granting bids to the Debate Coaches Invitational (DCI) tournament, would see a handful of the best teams from throughout the state, while still predominantly featuring schools from the metro area. During virtual debate tournaments, the geographic diversity of competitors, from my own experience, increased significantly. Suddenly it was commonplace for students from Garden City (six hours away), Derby, Hutchinson, Buhler, and Wichita (all roughly three hours away), Manhattan (two hours away) and a host of others to compete in Kansas City-area tournaments every weekend.

I contend that this increased diversity benefitted everyone, including financially privileged schools like my own. In an average season, I take my Kansas City team out of the metro area four or five times. In the fall of 2020, we competed virtually in hours-away Wichita, Hutchinson, Garden City, Derby, and a host of other schools we never would have visited were it not for online debate. I saw clearly the benefits of this diversified competition schedule. Debate success hinges on a speaker’s ability to persuade their audience, and Southcentral and Western Kansas provided a new audience, with diverse expectations, worldviews, and argumentation preferences. Competing outside of the familiar Kansas City Metro area challenged my students to persuade those whose lived experiences at times differed greatly from their own. Though this often proved frustrating, it also forced my students to become more flexible and nimbler in their argumentation style. Absent virtual debate, they never would have been asked to stretch and grow their rhetorical skills in this manner.

Similarly, because judges could join the virtual debate round from anywhere in the world, college debaters from throughout the country could participate in any tournament. This not only diversified the judge pool (something Kansas has historically struggled to do) but allowed more experienced judges to join each tournament, giving our students better, more nuanced feedback after each round. In a typical year, the judge pool is limited to whomever the host school can recruit to judge on any given weekend. In Kansas City, this is typically parents and community members from the host school, alumni from the host debate program, and college debaters from the nearby University of Kansas. Conversely, virtual debate allowed coaches to recruit alumni and college debaters from throughout the country to judge each weekend, significantly diversifying the judge pool and broadening the scope of feedback to which our students were exposed.

There were practical benefits to online debate as well—Muslim students no longer needed to search foreign schools for a suitable place for daily prayers, those with medical conditions had easier access to medicine, snacks, and the comfort of home, and students with sensory needs weren't forced to navigate crowded, noisy tournaments. Students with dietary needs due to a medical condition, vegetarians, or those who kept Kosher or Hallal, no longer had to gamble on tournament concessions, pack appropriate food, or skip meals altogether. Debating virtually minimized the emphasis on student dress as well, allowing competitors to wear comfortable clothing—something especially beneficial to those who would otherwise struggle to find suitable competition attire. Students and coaches no longer had to suffer through hours long bus rides to tournaments, or nights spent in inexpensive hotels, often crammed three or four students per room. Students with physical disabilities or mobility limitations were no longer burdened with traversing an unfamiliar school campus, repeatedly getting in and out of a school bus or van, and hoping for an accessible hotel room. When debate and forensics tournaments occurred during Eid, Passover, Easter, Ramadan, Diwali, and a host of other significant religious and cultural observances, students had more opportunity to compete while also spending time with their families because they didn't have to travel out of town.

While each of these examples may seem insignificant to many (and they are, admittedly, largely anecdotal) they represent multiple, intersecting barriers making participation in debate more burdensome for many students and judges. While research on COVID's impact on debate participation is still emerging, I have observed directly how the transition to remote debate tournaments lessened or eliminated entirely many of these burdens, making competition more welcoming for a diverse population of student debaters. Despite its flaws, virtual debate practices, in many ways, made the activity more inclusive, accessible, and accommodating for both students and judges than ever before.

Discussion and recommendations for future action

Debating virtually, like online learning, was imperfect. Competing in debate tournaments via zoom seriously limited students' ability to engage with an audience, technical glitches lessened speech clarity, debating from home limited the participation of students without the luxury of a private, quiet room, and a reliance on technology privileged students from higher income environments (Hill et al, 2022). Despite these barriers, however, it is worth exploring whether the advent of virtual debate perhaps brought more benefits than barriers. Namely, it is important

to consider the ways in which virtual debate practices might radically increase equity and diversity within the debate community, as well as ways these practices might be maintained in a post-COVID educational and competitive landscape.

The most obvious potential benefit of online debate practices is its ability to increase equity of participation among students. Participating in competitive debate is prohibitively expensive for many students, particularly those from economically disenfranchised communities (Littlefield, 2001; Texas Debate Collective, 2023). Further, schools with smaller debate programs might not be willing or able to justify to school leaders why these funds should be spent for only a handful of students to compete at weekend tournaments, regardless of their enthusiasm or talent. Debating via online platforms allows students to compete from their own homes, which significantly reduces the cost of participation. Eliminating the burden of arranging and paying for transportation, hotel accommodations, food and other travel expenses in this way could make participation easier for schools without significant financial means. In the long term, maintaining some virtual debate practices could radically increase overall participation in the activity by making it less financially exclusionary.

Another potential benefit of the continued use of virtual debate competitions is an increase in community diversity. While no records exist to explicitly detail the number of students and coaches of color in the debate community, research indicates that the activity remains overwhelmingly white and predominantly male, both in high school and college (Allen et al, 2004; Anderson & Mezuk, 2012; Dillard-Knox, 2014; Hoover, 2003; Kelsie, 2019; McGrath, 2020; Mezuk, 2009; Monteith, 2023; Pineda & Salinas, 2009; Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Reid-Brinkley, 2012; Schwartz-DuPre, 2006; Stepp, 1997; Tanin, 2022; Worth & Reed, 2010). The National Speech and Debate Association (2023), the national association to which most high school debate programs belong, reports 137,568 current student members, 4,188 active coaches, over 3,000 member high schools, and nearly 2 million estimated alumni in the United States. While not all schools with active debate programs choose to join, this membership data provides a useful snapshot of overall high school participation. Of their current student membership, 25.05% are Asian, 10.93% are Hispanic or Latinx, and only 6.72% are Black. Conversely, white competitors make up nearly 47% of the student membership (National Speech and Debate Association, 2023). A variety of historical, structural, and ideological factors likely converge to prevent more students of color from participating in competitive speech and debate, most of which are well outside the scope of this paper. That said, reducing the financial burdens, travel, and time commitment needed for students to participate in debate tournaments by maintaining online competitive practices, would almost certainly increase participation of students from historically marginalized communities.

Similarly, allowing students to compete from their own homes has the potential to make the activity more accessible for a variety of populations. Eliminating travel time to and from tournaments could free up considerable time for students and their families, reducing stress on students who must maintain a job or childcare responsibilities outside of school, or those who do not drive and have unreliable transportation to and from campus. Further, the ability to compete from the comfort of home might uniquely benefit students with disabilities, such as diabetic students who must monitor their sugars and may need to eat during rounds, students with mobility limitations who might have difficulty navigating an unfamiliar school, or students with

anxiety or sensory processing sensitivities who might be uncomfortable in a loud, crowded in-person debate tournament. Competing from home may even provide meaningful accommodations for students of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, such as those in need of space for daily prayers, or those fasting. Currently, scholarship in this area is absent, and would greatly benefit both the debate community and education as a whole.

Finally, it is worth examining the ways virtual debate practices might be continued in a post-COVID landscape. While debating via online platforms brought with it a host of challenges, it likewise produced a variety of benefits, particularly to some of our most marginalized students. Though debate, like public schools more broadly, has largely transitioned back to in-person competition formats, maintaining elements of virtual debate, adapted to a post-COVID educational landscape, may provide unique opportunities for increased accessibility and equity. The most obvious way to maintain these practices is for tournament hosts to offer both in-person and virtual debate formats. While this does take a bit more planning, particularly when soliciting and scheduling volunteer judges in each division, offering an online division will provide valuable choice to coaches and students alike. Particularly since most coaches have now learned how to manage entirely virtual tournaments, transitioning to a hybrid format would be reasonably easy and low-cost for the host school.

Additionally, well-resourced schools with established debate programs should consider hosting more than a single yearly debate invitational. Each school is required to host one in-person tournament each season, as mandated by the Kansas State High School Activities Association, but nothing prohibits schools from hosting more (KSHSAA, 2023). In addition to their in-person or hybrid tournaments, larger programs in well-resourced districts could easily host small, virtual tournaments either during the week or on weekends. For a large program with an extensive alumni network, soliciting a judge pool would be relatively easy, and the entire tournament could be run by a single person with a few keystrokes of a laptop. Further, this practice would allow host schools to significantly reduce or altogether eliminate entry fees, since the tournament will require almost no funding to execute. Some schools have already begun this practice, and a wider adoption could vastly increase the overall accessibility of the activity.

Finally, additional research is needed on the impact of virtual engagement both in competitive debate, and education more broadly. Scholarship examining the intersection of disability, cultural difference, language barriers, and other elements of students' lived experiences within the world of virtual debate would be especially of value. Further, broader examination of the unique experiences of students from historically marginalized communities in virtual debate could have broader implications for speech and education practices.

Conclusion

For all its many hurdles, virtual debate made the activity more accessible for all, diversifying both the competitive and judging pools, and minimizing barriers to participation. Virtual debate allows students to speak to and in front of people they never would have met otherwise, introducing them to diverse perspectives and worlds outside of their own. Though in many ways virtual schooling made the classroom feel much smaller, it also made it much, much larger. While few debate coaches are sad to have transitioned back to in-person competitions (in no

small part because hoisting a trophy over your head is a lot more fun than having it mailed to your school a month after the tournament) we would be remiss to reject entirely the value and unique opportunities granted by a virtual debate format. Debate is an innately democratic activity, grounded in critical thinking, research, and oral advocacy (Fine, 2010; Hogan & Kurr, 2017). As such, it is uniquely beneficial not only for the intellectual and emotional maturity of participants, but for the health of our broader society. Virtual debate practices provide an opportunity to invite more students into this invaluable activity by increasing equity and diversity within the community. As educators and coaches, it is imperative that we embrace these practices, because like democracy, debate is strongest when all are empowered to participate equally.

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