



“You gave the debate to one team based on style?” “snigger...” “You must be a new judge.” “No one gives the debate based on THAT!”

Have you heard these comments before? I have; adjudicating in the World Schools debating format and seeing more people approaching Schools debate in radically different ways. On the eve of the 2015 World Schools Debating Championships to be held in Singapore, it is worthwhile looking at how Schools debating has been approached in Singapore and whether things are evolving for the better.

I am not convinced that they are.

I believe that way too much emphasis (sometimes, exclusive emphasis) is placed on the “issues” in the debate at the expense of the execution of the arguments and their delivery. Content has been worshipped while Style and Strategy are sacrificed. What you say on the floor

is the only thing that matters, not how you say it.

This will make debate increasingly esoteric and inapplicable to the common person. Having seen how specialised American Policy debate become (600 words a minute? Good luck trying to follow that debate), I shudder to think that WSDC matches might follow a similar trend. I hope my fears are never realised.

I add the caveat, of course, that not every match and speaker and judge fits the mould of what I am describing. At the same time, it is enough of a general trend that it is worth noting.

What has happened?

Over the last year, I have seen more parents attending debates and was pleased by this development, since parental support is wonderful for a student debater. I asked the parents if they enjoyed the matches and was surprised by the blunt “No” I received from many of them. They told me that they found the speakers hard to follow, with many speaking at break-neck speed and using technical jargon that was like Sanskrit to the non-debaters.

In hindsight, I should have seen it myself. But when one has been in the circuit for so long, the changes come gradually and I may have missed them. But I have noticed that more judges are having to write furiously to keep up with the speakers instead of being able to listen comfortably and evaluate the debates from a bird's eye view. Some might not even glance once at a speaker once he or she has commenced her speech. If a specialist like a judge can barely keep up, how can the average audience member cope?

The answer may be that they simply can't. To test this, I have been showing videos of older WSDC matches from the late 1990s and early 2000s to non-debaters and asking them to watch later matches post 2010. I have asked them watch matches involving different nationalities as well to get a sample. While they did not watch the entirety of the matches (no time for that), the samples they watched generally led them to conclude that the older matches were easier to understand because they were easier to follow. The modern debates are just harder to follow and intense focus and concentration is needed from the audience members to keep up.

Shockingly, some debaters I have spoken to do not really care. To them, the only relevant issue is whether the judges can follow and understand them. They don't care that the audience cannot and some even seemed to take perverse pride in being able to speak in a way that their peers cannot match and understand.

What are the complaints I have received from audience members? Keeping in mind that this is feedback from parents and non-debater students:

1. Too fast. We cannot understand the speakers at all.
2. Jargon. The debaters assume we know the terms but we don't. What is "self-actualisation?"
3. Lack of explanation. I get the general idea about slippery slope. But how does it work exactly.
4. Too loud. We are speaking in a classroom but the debaters are yelling.
5. Boring. There is no attempt to entertain us or to make the debate relevant to us, especially through examples.
6. Lack of inclusion. The debaters are focused on the judges or their notes and not on us.

A simple test criterion I used in the past to determine if I had watched really good engaging debate was "would someone on the street pay to watch this debate?" I now use a slightly more forgiving criterion: "if an average reasonable person walks into this debate, and assuming he/she had time, would they stay and watch or would they leave?" I believe that in more and more debates, people would be opting to leave.

How did it happen?

I believe that 3 fundamental judging paradigm shifts may have occurred.

- Judges are basing which team convinced them purely on the issues raised in the debate.
- Judges are deciding which team convinced them, rather than which team convinced an average reasonable person.
- Many judges are not assigning scores immediately after a speech.

The WSDC format clearly indicates that speeches are to be graded in three distinct categories: Style (40%), Content (40%) and Strategy (20%). This meant that all of these three areas are to be evaluated prior to assigning a total grade.

However, I have seen judges refuse to put in the separate scores and just assign a total score at the end. They freely admit that this was based purely on the content score and that style and strategy was not really a factor in the scoring.

When required to fill in the separate categories, I have seen judges putting in average scores (28s) for every single speaker, sometimes BEFORE the debate has started. I have also seen adjudicators being TOLD to just split the total score into the appropriate ratios and assign the scores instead of judging each area independently.

Furthermore, during debriefs, judges are instantly saying "style was equally good" even though there was a huge disparity. Either they are not judging style at all or they are just assuming that "as long as I can hear them, style is good." Even if a speaker was screaming in a room and eardrums are bursting, that's ok. Here is a 28 for you.

In some cases, I believe that there is an active decision not to judge on style, as seen by the disparaging remarks made to judges who do award debates based on style. When a team that was clear and effective in their delivery (albeit with simpler logic and arguments) almost always loses to a messy, hard to understand team (delivering the more sophisticated case written by their coach), style is clearly not a worthy issue for many judges. One judge frankly said that he would like to scrap style from WSDC as a category altogether.

The same goes for strategy as well. I will give you a small example of teams where 2 out of 3 speakers refused to take a single POI and another team where a member stood to offer a POI, but had NOTHING to say when accepted and then meekly sat back down. These teams, were not penalised in strategy at all for these errors.

So what do the judges use to determine the winner? "Issues" – mainly looking at the content that has been raised by the speakers. Many judges look at these areas of clash and then, like in a tennis match, tries to see who edged ahead in more issues or in the more critical issues. Sometimes, the emphasis on issues is so strong that the judges' tracking did not follow the speakers based on their prioritisation of the arguments but purely based on the issues raised. Thus, if one team had all three speakers speak on 1 issue, this might be neutralised by a single speaker raising this issue on the other side.

Given that the judges only care about the "issues" and not on style and strategy, many debaters surely see no need to emphasis style and strategy and now just focus on flooding the debate speech with as many issues as possible. The audience simply has no chance.

It might be useful if the judges took a more detached approached to judging instead of being the evaluator who needs to be convinced by either team. Why? Because an adjudicator is a highly specialised, well-read specimen who understands the complicated jargon being used by the debaters. This meant that these judges will now be more lenient on the speakers with bad delivery and structure. "Sure it was hard to follow, but I managed to... so it's ok."

Instead, they should be looking at the debate to see which team would have done a better job of convincing the average reasonable person in the audience. This now raises the bar on the clarity of the arguments, since the speakers, like the judges, would have to presume that any points not understood by an audience member would not be regarded highly. Judges are often told to be an empty slate when viewing the debate. I believe this principle extends to ensuring that you are truly looking at the debate from the perspective of someone with no prior debating experience.

I have also seen that many judges refuse to assign scores to the speakers immediately after each speech. Rather, they wait until the debate is over and then assign the scores. This creates a problem. When looking back at the notes, the impression of the speaker's speaking ability and strategy is less evident, since the notes only capture the "issues." This then contributes to the scores for these two categories being flattened out, especially for the forgotten earlier speakers.

The key takeaway is that the debaters in the WSDC are increasingly encouraged to ignore style and in many cases, strategy as well.

Is this good or bad?

I don't think this is a good development at all.

I believe was the principles behind the WSDC was engagement, including engaging the audience! This is why WSDC organisers make it a point to bring debaters to different schools in host nations to ensure that there is more exposure for the speakers instead of shoving the whole tournament into a single venue. That is why style has a separate category and has the same points as content! If this principle is sacrificed, then we are betraying the original intent of the WSDC.

Worse, debating is an activity that is supposed to prepare youth for rigorous argumentation in the future. They are in for a rude shock if they think that their clients and bosses are going to be furiously tracking their arguments on paper. They will be at a severe disadvantage to the ones making plain arguments made in approachable language with an engaging manner. I currently interview for Harvard as an alumni and I have been frankly shocked by the lack of engagement and clarity in applicants who are debaters on the Singapore circuit.

And specifically, debating should not merely be an esoteric forum for intelligent individuals to exchange views. Rather, these arenas should serve as the modern day agora where the best arguments are articulated for the benefit of all the citizens, including those who cannot speak well. When debate becomes a lonely, specialist activity that audiences would rather avoid, then we have failed to live up to this noble tradition.

I fear too for the future of debaters on the WSDC circuit. Already, at the primary schools debating championships, where style is given an even higher weightage, speakers galore are still reading from pre-written cards and failing to make eye contact. Why would they bother, when they know they can get away with this with nary a chiding from the judge? Why would the coaches bother to get them to deliver from their hearts and their minds, when they can write

their students' cases? Sure, the students won't understand them and deliver them badly, but it's about the issues and they got the issues out. Woot.

If we are not careful, we might end up like the way debate has transformed on the American circuit. I recall that the student debate in America was a great avenue for the articulation of ideas and audiences were compelled to listen. I thought the events of The Great Debaters movie ([shown here](#)) were exaggerated but scrolling through the Harvard Archives, I found that debates amongst the students were attended by throngs of their peers.

I then realised that our own debates on the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA) circuit generally consisted of the two teams, the judge and the rat in the corner. The break rounds had audiences for sure, but those tended to be eliminated teams from out of town who were trapped by the snow anyways. I recall that there was only a SINGLE occasion where there were external audience members and they ended up being the parents of one of the debaters (Hi Mr and Mrs Blenkinsopp! I hope you are well). And they said they did not even enjoy the debate.

Why? On APDA, the emphasis is on getting the issues out, not on explaining them and convincing the judges. I was actually reprimanded for having too few points and trying to explain too much.

Keep it up on the WSDC and we may well end up like American Policy speakers. Want to know what 600 words per minute sounds like? [Here it is](#) . Brace yourselves.

I hope this never comes to pass. But how I yearn for the days when student debates in Singapore, though fewer in number, had more students attending them just to enjoy them. The topics were weird and the judging was not stellar. My secondary 4 team debated RGS on the motion "I'd rather be the drum than the piano." Our arguments may not have been the most stellar... but we got our points across, we made the audience laugh and they all took away somethings from the debate. The best of all, we never had to compel those audience members to attend.

Ah well. We live in hope.

