

Contemporary Argumentation and Debate

The Journal of the Cross Examination Debate Association

Volume 21

2000

Edited by

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KENDALL/HUNT PUBLISHING COMPANY
4050 Westmark Drive Dubuque, Iowa 52002

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Printed in the United States of America

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RESPONSE

Sonja K. Foss

To respond to the effort to integrate intercollegiate debate and invitational rhetoric requires that I begin with an acknowledgment of my standpoint, the perspective and experiences out of which my response develops. I never competed in intercollegiate debate and, in fact, I do not recall ever seeing such a debate. I do not know the basics of debate – *taglines*, *flow*, and *power tagging* mean nothing to me, and I certainly never have experienced a fear of the dreaded counter-warrant. My only experience with intercollegiate debate has been that when debaters enroll in one of my presentational speaking classes, I inwardly groan because I think to myself that they are going to be arrogant and talk way too fast. I offer my perspective, then, from a standpoint of ignorance about intercollegiate debate.

Because I have no experience with intercollegiate debate, I have chosen as my starting point not debate but the nature of the world in which we currently live. I believe that one of the major communication problems we face is a pervasive atmosphere of unrelenting contention that Deborah Tannen calls the *argument culture*. In this argument culture, we tend to respond to people and ideas in an adversarial frame of mind with communication designed to attack, criticize, and oppose, even when our goals might better be accomplished with other modes of communication. We see evidence of this adversarial approach to understanding and approaching the world in, for example, negative political advertisements, the lack of civility that has come to characterize debate in political and legislative settings, the hostile and abusive language in which many private and public interactions are conducted, and the increasing use of physical violence as a means for resolving differences. In the face of this argument culture, I believe that communication scholars and educators have a responsibility to try to counter this culture by helping students develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to use communication to create a more civil and humane world. Cindy Griffin and I developed invitational rhetoric in part to provide an option for rhetoric rooted in respect and civility rather than domination and contention.

Intercollegiate debate seems to me to teach skills that are antithetical to invitational rhetoric and to the achievement of a civil and humane world; it is an activity that perpetuates

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rather than intervenes in the argument culture. For this reason, I offer revolution as a rhetorical option for dealing with the incompatibilities between debate and invitational rhetoric. I suggest that the fine debaters who are working on this issue develop something apart from CEDA and NDT instead of trying to change those structures to make them more compatible with civil and humane values.

I suggest revolution for two reasons. The first is rooted in my belief that the effort to change others violates their value and integrity. By trying to change CEDA and NDT, we engage in the effort to change others and thus violate a fundamental assumption of invitational rhetoric, which is that rhetors do not have the right to make others acquiesce to what they believe is the best way. I am becoming increasingly clear in my understanding that we do not have the right to impose our perspectives on others. Just as we want to be allowed to create our own life experience, we have to let others do the same. Such a stance does not simply mean tolerating others and their perspectives because tolerance still suggests disapproval; it suggests that we believe others ought to be doing things differently from what they are. Instead, allowing means appreciation of the differences among individuals, a stance of the joyful allowing of another person to be different from us. Revolution – rather than evolution – allows those in intercollegiate debate to debate as they choose. Those who want to engage in interaction in other ways can do that, without trying to make those involved in CEDA and NDT change.

A second reason I offer revolution over evolution is that I am becoming less convinced that strategies of opposition are effective as a rhetorical option for creating change. Feminist theorist Sonia Johnson suggests that what we resist persists (*Going* 26-27), by which she means that whatever receives our attention and energy is what thrives and is maintained. When we oppose, bang up against, and struggle to get individuals or things to change, we give those persons or things power. By bestowing our belief and energy on them, we reinforce them as reality; we become their accomplices as we strengthen them. My guess is that if debaters interested in invitational rhetoric proposed some of the changes they are suggesting to CEDA and NDT participants, CEDA and NDT simply would reinforce their systems – they would strengthen, refine, and embellish the edifice of intercollegiate debate and would subvert and co-opt in subtle and creative ways those who are trying to make changes in that system.

Instead of working within the CEDA and NDT systems to create change, I suggest as a rhetorical option living in the world the way we want the world to be (Johnson, *Wildfire*

251). This option involves figuring out how we want our world to be and then living in ways that enact that world. Our focus should be not on doing something now to create something different in the future. Instead, because what happens in the present is always and automatically creating the future, how we behave now is what we get in the future (Johnson, *Wildfire* 37). If we want a future world in which people respect one another, do not try to dominate one another, and work cooperatively, we have to respect one another now, engage in non-dominating acts now, and work cooperatively now. If we want to have interactions among students on the basis of communication skills that contribute to the creation of a civil and humane world, then we have to engage in such interactions now.

What I am suggesting is that those of us who are interested in exchanging ideas rooted in the model of invitational rhetoric simply go off and engage in a different style of intercollegiate interaction concerning communication (notice that I am working hard to avoid calling the event *debate* because I suspect that term is not going to work for us anymore). Although I do not have a clear idea of how such an exchange would look, it probably would be less a competition of ideas in a marketplace and more a process of joy in the development of ideas together. We would move away from the notion of having the best idea win, and our focus instead would be on coming up with ideas and letting the individuals involved choose whether those ideas are ones in which they want to participate. The basic question would be not whether an idea is true or is the best idea but whether it is an idea in which an individual wants to participate. The process also probably would be characterized by the development of communication skills such as working together, respecting one another, affirming one another, and building on and extending ideas. I suspect that the process would not involve a judge because no one else can decide for us what we should think or the ideas in which we choose to participate.

I am excited about the possibilities that lie before us in terms of debate and invitational rhetoric. I know that, despite my preference for revolution over evolution, those involved in this endeavor will pursue the path for developing their ideas in the way they believe is best, and I trust their competence in doing that. I applaud the fine work they have done on this project so far and wish them much success in their journey.

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