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AUTHOR Weisenborn, Ray E.  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a paradigm based upon four premises: persuasion is any means employed to make someone respond in a predetermined manner; persuasion is at its best in formal debate; debate should encourage judges to place confidence in debaters' credibility; and debating is an art in which the participants must be fully aware of their role as individuals communicating with other individuals. A figure of the paradigm is presented and contains the following elements: audience or judge, communication skills, persuasion skills, formal debate, and persuasion syndrome. The paradigm illustrates that debate is primarily a persuasive process within a larger persuasive syndrome; it is an arena for the exhibition, utilization, and application of interpersonal communication skills. The standards which a judge should adhere to when judging a debate utilizing this paradigm are discussed. (TS)

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DEBATE AS A PARADIGM FOR DEMONSTRATING  
SKILLS IN COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION

by  
Ray E. Weisenborn

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(Mr. Weisenborn is Associate Professor of Speech  
Communication, Department of Speech Communication,  
Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana.)

# DEBATE AS A PARADIGM FOR DEMONSTRATING SKILLS IN COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION

by

Ray E. Weisenborn

Historically debate has been subjected to innumerable charges as to its assets and liabilities for the participants. Brief perusal of the professional journals involved illustrates this fact. There has been a great deal of concern regarding debate as the exhibition of interpersonal or intrapersonal communication skills, argumentation, logic, and also, as a set of pseudo-traits which a "debator syndrome" exhibits. The paradigms presented in this program discuss several of these areas. Each paradigm must resolve a basic dilemma: Is debate a behavioral process or the development of theoretical principles?

The contention of the following paradigm is that debate is the exhibition, utilization, and application of communication skills employed in persuasion. Of necessity, this paradigm will have assets and liabilities, dependent upon one's initial point-of-view. It is not the purpose of this paradigm to change initial attitudes held by those who have preconceived notions as to what debate, judging of debate, and debate participation should be and/or are. This paradigm should be classified as being: 1) The justification of debate as a persuasive process; 2) The justification of debate as training in interpersonal communication; 3)

A delineation of\*judging standards compatible to the paradigm.

It should be realized at the onset that this paradigm is not:

1) Justification for "non-training" in the principles of formal debate; 2) Delineations of desirable communication and persuasion skills.

The paradigm which follows is based upon four premises. Briefly they are: 1) Persuasion is any means employed to make someone respond emotionally, think, or act in a predetermined manner; 2) Persuasion is at its apex of perfection within the parameters of formal debate, 3) Debate should encourage judges to place confidence in debators' credibility and enhance the degree of force attributed to their arguments; 4) Debating is an art in which the participant must be fully aware of his role as an individual communicating with others.

Without attempting to present a comprehensive definition of exactly what persuasion is, let us realize that "persuasion is not a process of formulating decisions, but of getting them adopted."<sup>1</sup> Oliver makes this statement in terms of theories of persuasion, but I believe it is most relevant when we consider the fact that debate is, in fact, a process by which individuals attempt to have a decision rendered in their favor. I do not here wish to discuss the ramifications or merits of decision-making processes in debate, rather, merely point out that persuasion makes individuals respond in predetermined manners.

<sup>1</sup>

Robert T. Oliver, The Psychology of Persuasive Speech (Longmans, Green and Co.: New York, 1942), p. 25.

One should also consider the debator as being an advocate.

Abernathy states that "the one persuading, the advocate, attempts to cause one or more people to believe or act in accordance with the thesis he purposes."<sup>2</sup> Here I believe we have the key to the fact that debate enters into the total persuasive syndrome.

Abernathy points out that the advocate attempts to cause one or more people to believe or act. The key is that at least one person is acting in accordance with a thesis which he purposes; that thesis, of course, is the topic of the debate. It matters little whether one calls it a thesis or a proposition, the point is that there is action to be taken on it. And the action will be taken by a judge who is to be for or against, in not only the theoretical sense, one of the two positions offered. Those positions are advocated by the persuading agents, the debators.

Persuasion is at its apex of perfection within the parameters of formal debate. Many people will come to grips with this position; many will disagree with this particular point. Bryant says rhetoric is "the rationale of informative persuasive discourse aimed at adjusting ideas to people and ... people to ideas."<sup>3</sup> Debate, of course, is informative and suasive in nature; thus, we must consider that the whole rationale of debate may be as Bryant has said. Further, Capp and Capp point out that "educational debate

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Elton Abernathy, The Advocate: A Manual of Persuasion (David McKay Company, Inc.: New York, 1964), p. 7.

3

Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech XXXIX, No. 4 (Dec.1953), pp. 404,413.

is in part an exercise in persuasive speaking."<sup>4</sup> I am certain all of us have heard the point that one can prove anything with a set of statistics, and, of course, in debate "rhetoric" we find that there is a quote to counter every quote. It is not my point or my intention to have a quote for every particular I want substantiated. I wish to illustrate that many theorists express the viewpoint that debate is persuasive speaking.

In "A Program of Speech Education," reprinted in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, it is stressed that the teaching of advocacy is the essential purpose of scholastic debate.<sup>5</sup> Advocacy can be interpreted to mean persuasive methodologies and theories. Potter points out that speakers in the debate situation are "attempting . . . to persuade by all the logical and psychological means that are appropriate."<sup>6</sup> Again, it is not my purpose here to delineate what those logical and psychological means are. My point is merely this: The logical and psychological processes apparent in

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Glenn R. Capp and Thelma Robuck Capp, Principles of Argumentation and Debate Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), p. 196.

5

Contest Committee of the North Central Speech Association, "A Program of Speech Education," Quarterly Journal of Speech XXXVII, no. 3 (October 1951), p. 354. Recommendations of the Contest Committee of the North Central Association with Respect to Speech as submitted by the Speech Association of America.

6

W. Charles Redding, "Presentation of the Debate Speech," in Argumentation and Debate, David Potter (ed.), (The Dryden Press: New York, 1954), p. 222.

the advocacy of the thesis or proposition are, in fact, what debators work with. Argumentation - yes. The use of logic - yes. But it is the total persuasive syndrome that is being affected, not merely interpersonal or intrapersonal communication arenas. Nor are persuasion and intrapersonal communication to be considered synonymous. As Walwick and Mehrley state:

To treat debating as both a paradigm of persuasion and as a training ground for rational intrapersonal communication is probably counterproductive, for they are essentially different processes.<sup>7</sup>

In "Toward a Point of View for Contest Debate." Theodore Clevenger, Jr. makes the following points:

No doubt strong persuasive efforts must be based upon sound basic analysis, and to this extent the persuader has need of debating techniques; no doubt, also, lines of argument in debate must be firmly tied to sensible motivational analysis, and to this extent, the debator has need of persuasive methods.<sup>8</sup>

Clevenger, I believe, makes a very vital point to substantiate the communication and persuasive skills paradigm. It is simply that while we must realize the inherent values of debating techniques and the development of lines of argument, debate must work with motivational analysis. Motivation is the key here. Persuasive methodologies (and I believe we can find support for this contention

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Theodore J. Walwick and R. Samuel Mehrley, "Intercollegiate Debate: An Intrapersonal View," The Speech Teacher XX, no. 3 (Sept. 1971), p. 193. Walwick and Mehrley would develop a paradigm of debate as intrapersonal communication skills.

8

Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "Toward a Point of View for Contest Debate," Central States Speech Journal XII, no. 1 (Autumn 1960)p.24.



in the great wealth of theoretical writing within our professional journals) are primarily designed with the audience in mind. It is the persuader, the advocate, who is attempting to utilize all of his communicative skills and all of his training and awareness of persuasive methodology to turn his audience, whether that audience is one person, five, or fifty, to a point of agreement with his stand on a particular position.

Granted, "man does use persuasion to reach accomodation."<sup>9</sup> But even more so, "Persuasion may provide the opportunity to evolve a best solution by drawing upon the mass of persuasive effort that may be directed toward a problem."<sup>10</sup> One must not look further than this statement when considering the paradigm for the presentation of issues in a debate situation and standards by which to judge the effectiveness of that presentation. We know that debate directs individuals through logical analysis and argumentative lines toward a particular problem. The problem is obviously twofold. There is an affirmative position and a negative position toward that problem. As Anderson has told us, the best solution to the problem, as perceived by not only the advocate, but also by the judge of that clash, is going to be made by drawing upon the mass of persuasive efforts directed toward that problem. Again, persuasion is at its apex of perfection within the parameters of formal debate.

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Kenneth E. Anderson, Persuasion: Theory and Practice (Allyn and Bacon, Inc.: Boston, 1971), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 39.



Another point greatly discussed not only in theoretics but also in pragmatics, is that contest debate stresses winning. One can find articles related to what is wrong with debate, or what is right with debate. One of the charges leveled is stated by Abernathy: "The debator is changed from a sincere student of speech into a 'debate bum,' trained in the tricks, fair or unfair, of winning, rather than in honest techniques of persuasive speaking."<sup>11</sup> Abernathy, I feel summarizes his argument for us quite clearly. His position is obviously one that does not stress winning (and I am sure that all of us would go along with the fact that debate should stress winning, but rather it should stress the application of principles to practice in a particular situation). Again, a key for this paradigm is honest techniques of persuasive speaking which are stressed as the fundamental precepts of debate.

Debate should encourage judges to place confidence in debators' credibility and enhance the degree of force attributed to their arguments. When we realize that formal debate must, of necessity, involve the individual, I believe that there are two skills which the debator must perfect. They are concomitants: one is communication skill, the other is persuasive skill. These two skills must work in juxtaposition right up to the last moment of the formal debate clash. Minnick states that "any advocate...

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Elton Abernathy, "The Criticism Against Speech Tournaments," Quarterly Journal of Speech XXVIII, no. 3 (October 1942), p. 356.

can try to persuade the decision-making agency [the judge] to accept his views right up to the instant the decision is made."<sup>12</sup> And this is, of course, what we must then again come to grips with. All of us have our own theoretical position as to what are the best communicative skills or what the communicative skills are that should be employed in the formal debate situation. Additionally, we all have our own ideas as to what the particular thrust of the persuasive skills should be, and which should be employed at a given time, and which are the best means to develop one of these communicative skills. Again, my position is not the delineation of these skills, but rather the fact that we should stress them in instruction, rather than some other elements of debate.

The judge looks at the individual debator through very distinct eyes. Murphy and Erickson say "the judge appears in debating situations as a critical observer of [the attempts] to persuade an audience to accept or reject the proposition."<sup>13</sup> Again, it need not be that the audience is composed of a great milieu of people. One judge is enough to make, as Murphy and Erickson state, the critical observation as to which position should be accepted.

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12

Wayne C. Minnick, The Art of Persuasion (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1957), p. 12.

13

James J. Murphy and Jon M. Ericson, The Debater's Guide (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.: Indianapolis, 1961), p. 88.

Obviously the judge must scrutinize both positions carefully. Two-thousand years ago, Herodotus made the point quite well in his History:

It is impossible if no more than one opinion is uttered, to make a choice of the best; ...but if opposite speeches are delivered then choice can be exercised.<sup>14</sup>

Of course the point made quite clearly here is that the judge must react to two different pairs of advocates or two individual advocates, dependent upon the debate form. The debator is attempting to affect the judges' judgement in terms of his own credibility and through the comparative situation, is attempting to have a stronger degree of force attributed to his arguments than his opposition. Bauer makes the same point: "The most important thing for all judges to remember is that the decision is comparative."<sup>15</sup> In a paradigm such as is being presented, it is imperative to remember that we are talking of two separate sets of advocates. Thus, the paradigm would be operative for both the negative and the affirmative as they approach the proposition. As the debator works with his particular position--be it affirmative or negative--he is attempting to make the judge place confidence in his particular position. He does this through the exhibition of communicative and persuasive skills.

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George Rawlinson (trans.), The Histories of Herodotus (Dent: London, 1910), Vol. II, p. 122.

15

Otto F. Bauer, Fundamentals of Debate: Theories and Practice (Scott, Foresman and Co.: Chicago, 1966), p. 91.

There has been a great deal of discussion evolving around the position that debate can be either an exhibition of interpersonal or intrapersonal communication skills. My contention is that debating is an interpersonal awareness arena as opposed to an intrapersonal awareness arena. Oliver states:

An individual engaged in formulating a judgment is enacting the role of a scientist or logician. But when his own mind is made up, he must turn his attention to a problem different, more complex, and more difficult; namely, how to persuade others to accept his conclusion.... His thinking is not subject-centered, but audience-centered.<sup>16</sup>

The debator as an individual communicator cannot center his ultimate arguments on himself, nor on the particular proposition at hand. After his analysis is complete, after he has developed his lines of argument, after he has attempted to foresee all the inherent flaws and assets of his position, then he must communicate them as an individual to his hearers. He cannot do this by being a debate machine; he cannot do this by being a debate "bum;" he cannot do this by using the tricks of the trade. He must be an individual employing communicative skills in the interpersonal arena of communication. Capp and Capp go further. Their advice to debators is this: "You must persuade your listeners to accept the reasonableness of your arguments. To persuade your listeners, you must analyze their interests, attitudes, and knowledge of the subject."<sup>17</sup> Again, I believe the point should be quite clear:

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Oliver, loc cit, p. 9.

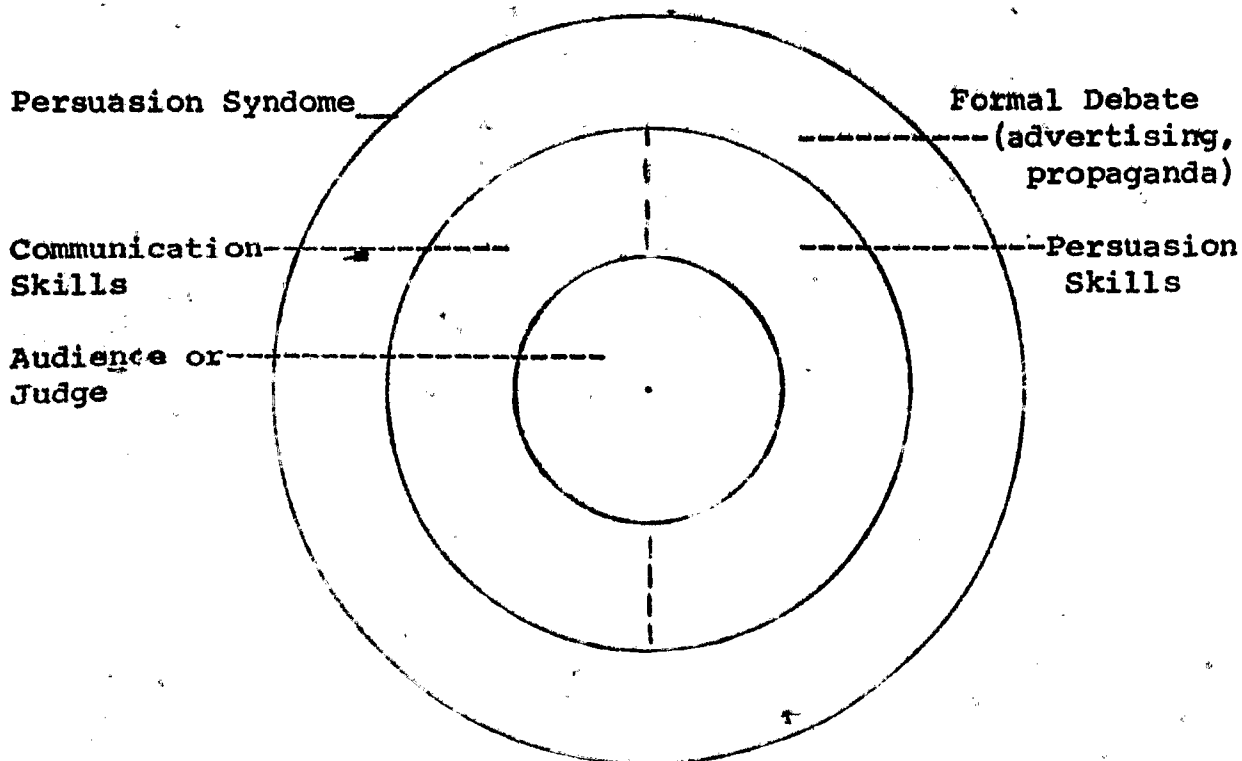
<sup>17</sup>

Capp and Capp, loc cit, p. 211.

The debator is an individual communicator and he will communicate to an audience with predispositions toward his subject. He must ferret out those predispositions, make himself cognizant of them, and adapt to the communication situation in an attempt to make his position the one which receives the highest degree of credibility, logic and force. Then and only then, will the decision on the particular proposition be rendered in his favor.

With these four points in mind, the paradigm is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Debate as a Paradigm Demonstrating skills in Communication and Persuasion



The paradigm can be interpreted either deductively or inductively. For convenience sake, let us initially view it in the sequence in which the theses have been presented, or deductively, progressing from the outer to the inner circle.

The act of communication is a persuasive syndrome, of which the second level -- formal debate -- is one of the primary applications. In parentheses are suggested other particular applications within the persuasion syndrome. (Obviously, there are innumerable others.) Within the guidelines of formal debate individual communicators exhibit communication and persuasion skills directed toward a topical proposition (thesis). The focus of the skills developing the thesis is the agent to be persuaded, the judge.

Let us observe the paradigm from an inductive perspective. The judge enters a debate analyzing two teams (advocates/individuals) in clash. He will witness individual advocates as they communicate their wealth of information and lines of argument on a particular issue, and he will evaluate them as individual communicators. He will evaluate their persuasive arguments. He will then assess the clash within the framework of formal debate. Ultimately, he will render a decision which indicates that he has been persuaded to accept one line of argument over another.

Let me restate two primary principles which this paradigm is not. One is that I believe that it is quite clear that the paradigm does not subsume training in the principles of formal

debate. Secondly, I have not attempted a complete delineation of the desirable communication and persuasion skills required in formal debate.

What I believe the paradigm effectively illustrates is that debate is primarily a persuasive process within a larger persuasive syndrome; it is an arena for the exhibition, utilization, and application of interpersonal communication skills.

What standards then, could a judge adhere to in judging a debate utilizing this paradigm? It is obvious that personalities, backgrounds, and predispositions of judges will be as diverse as the debators who present the clashes. However, as debators have certain principles to which they must adhere and certain options which they can follow in presenting their lines of analysis and persuasive arguments, so, too, judges have standards which they can employ in assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the advocates. I believe there are four standards which are compatible to this paradigm. 1) Judges must assess which advocates have given them the most credible arguments and the strongest degree of force for those arguments through the exhibition of persuasive skills. 2) Judges must assess which of the advocates have most successfully, within the parameters of formal debate, persuaded the acceptance of their thesis. 3) Judges must assess which advocates are the more proficient individual communicators as they presented for topic analysis. 4) Judges must evaluate which advocates have exhibited enough communicative and persuasive



skills and methodologies to warrant the superior comparative position.

Thus, the requirements for judging within this paradigm quite explicit: Judges should be aware of degrees of communicative skills; they should be aware of degrees of effectiveness of employed persuasive skills; they should know the principles of formal debate; and ultimately, they should be aware of the fact that the debate environment is a persuasive one. Thus, the premise for judging is thus: Advocates presenting issues in opposition to alternative points of view can be viewed as individual communicators attempting to persuade an individual to a decision which can be made up to the closing minute of the debate.

Obviously any paradigm may be rejected. If rejection of this one is based solely on preference for a more theoretical or technical paradigm which incorporates core logic, argumentation, hypothesis testing, or different policy options, without giving due consideration to the conceptual strengths of the persuasion syndrome, then I believe that rejection is not well founded. If, however, the rejection is based on the fact that persuasion does not attempt to make the judge respond in a predetermined manner or that persuasion is at its apex of perfection within the parameters of formal debate, I can accept that rejection for it is based upon a theoretical position not of debate, but of persuasion. And, should rejection of the paradigm be based on its reliance upon communication skills, again it is not based upon a theoretical

position toward debate, but upon a communication philosophy.

Debate is persuasion, or it is not. If it is not persuasion, then it does not involve communication. And, not involving communication per se, it is not a behavioral act, merely the development of theoretical principles. I am reminded of an old proverb:

The fool tries to convince me with reasons--  
the wiseman persuades me with my own.