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ABSTRACT

Argumentation skills are frequently touted as archetypal tools of democratic empowerment, yet theorization of ways to use such tools to achieve concrete social change is rare. As a result, the emancipatory "telos" anchoring American academic policy debate tends to gallop ahead of practical efforts to build empowerment through the debate medium. After considering ways in which the traditional simulation-based contest round format in academic debate may reinforce such a dynamic, this essay explores an alternative vision of debate pedagogy oriented toward cultivation of argumentative agency. It is suggested that this sort of agency can be developed best when teachers and students of debate engage wider spheres of deliberation and learn from practical experience as actors in the public realm. (Includes 25 notes; contains 44 references.) (Author/NKA)

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# Pedagogical Possibilities for Argumentative Agency in Academic Debate

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# Pedagogical Possibilities for Argumentative Agency in Academic Debate

**Abstract:** Argumentation skills are frequently touted as archetypal tools of democratic empowerment, yet theorization of ways to utilize such tools to achieve concrete social change is rare. As a result, the emancipatory *telos* anchoring American academic policy debate tends to gallop ahead of practical efforts to build empowerment through the debate medium. After considering ways in which the traditional simulation-based contest round format in academic debate may reinforce such a dynamic, this essay explores an alternative vision of debate pedagogy oriented toward cultivation of argumentative agency. It is suggested that this sort of agency can be developed best when teachers and students of debate engage wider spheres of deliberation and learn from practical experience as actors in the public realm.

Our principle is the power of individuals to participate with others in shaping their world through the human capacity of language;

Our commitment to argument expresses our faith in reason-giving as a key to that power;

Our commitment to advocacy expresses our faith in oral expression as a means to empower people in situations of their lives;

Our research studies the place of argument and advocacy in these situations of empowerment;

Our teaching seeks to expand students' appreciation for the place of argument and advocacy in shaping their world, and to prepare students through classrooms, forums, and competition for participation in their world through the power of expression; and

Our public involvement seeks to empower through argument and advocacy.

--American Forensic Association Credo<sup>1</sup>

The lofty goals enumerated in the American Forensic Association's Credo have long served as beacons that steer pedagogical practice in argumentation and debate. The Credo's expression of faith in "reason giving," "oral expression" and critical thinking<sup>2</sup> as formulas for student "empowerment" is reflected in the many textbooks that have been

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Freeley 1996, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Standard conceptions of critical thinking skills emphasize acumen in communicative interchange and capacity for cognitive reflection as core elements of such skills (see Ennis 1993, p. 179; Wilen and Phillips 1995, p. 135). For an objection to standard conceptions of critical thinking skills, see Bailin 1995.

written to guide the academic study of argumentation. “The relevance of skill in argumentation seems self-evident to anyone living in a democratic society,” write George W. Ziegelmüller and Jack Kay in *Argumentation: Inquiry and Advocacy*; “The notion of full and free public debate on the vital issues facing society is deeply rooted in the documents and ideas comprising the American conscience” (1997, p. 6). Making a similar point in the introduction to their textbook *Argumentation and Critical Decision Making*, Richard D. Rieke and Malcolm O. Sillars suggest that “the ability to participate effectively in reasoned discourse leading to critical decision making is required in virtually every aspect of life in a democracy” (1997, p. xvii). “We need debate not only in the legislature and the courtroom but in every other area of society as well,” echoes Austin J. Freeley in *Argumentation and Debate*, “since most of our rights are directly dependent on debate” (1996, p. 5).

For those schooled in the tradition of argumentation and debate, faith in the tensile strength of critical thinking and oral expression as pillars of democratic decision-making is almost second nature, a natural outgrowth of disciplinary training. This faith, inscribed in the American Forensic Association’s Credo, reproduced in scores of argumentation textbooks, and rehearsed over and over again in introductory argumentation courses, grounds the act of argumentation pedagogy in a progressive political vision that swells the enthusiasm of teachers and students alike, while ostensibly locating the study of argumentation in a zone of relevance that lends a distinctive sense of meaning and significance to academic work in this area.

Committed to affirming and stoking the progressive energies produced by this faith in argumentation, but also interested in problematizing the assumptions that undergird prevailing approaches to argumentation pedagogy for heuristic purposes, in this essay I

make a double gesture. On the one hand, I underscore the importance of grounding the practice of academic argumentation to notions of democratic empowerment. On the other hand, I challenge the notion that such a grounding maneuver can be accomplished with faith alone. Moving beyond the characterization of argumentative acumen as a skill to be acquired through classroom or tournament training, I propose a notion of argumentative agency that brings questions of purpose to the center of pedagogical practice: For what purpose are argumentation skills used? Where can they be employed most powerfully (for better or worse)? What can be learned from efforts to *apply* argumentation skills in concrete rhetorical situations outside of the tournament contest rounds? In a three part discussion, I advance an analysis that contextualizes these questions and proposes reflective ideas that invite response in the ongoing conversation about the meaning and purpose of contemporary academic debate. After sketching the characteristics of some commonly advanced views on the nature of the connection between argumentation pedagogy and democratic empowerment (in part one), I explain how argumentative agency can serve as a conceptual bridge linking academic practice to empowerment (in part two), and then propose some specific strategies that might be utilized to incorporate argumentative agency as an operative concept within academic settings (in part three).

### LIMITS OF PURELY PREPARATORY PEDAGOGY

In the process of explaining their teaching approach, argumentation scholars sometimes invoke a bifurcation that separates academic study of argumentation from applied practice in public argument. This explanation typically begins with an elucidation of the democratic and emancipatory potential of debate as a process of decision-making, and then proceeds to an explanation of academic study as an essential *preparatory* step on

the way to achievement of such emancipatory potential. This route of explanation is consistent with the American Forensic Association Credo, which declares that the purpose of forensic education is to “*prepare* students through classrooms, forums, and competition for participation in their world through the power of expression.”<sup>3</sup>

Writing from this posture to defend the value of National Debate Tournament (NDT) policy competition, Edward Panetta posits that NDT debate “will *prepare* students to be societal leaders ...” (1990, p. 76, emphasis added). Similarly, Austin Freeley suggests that academic debate “provides *preparation* for effective participation in a democratic society” and “offers *preparation* for leadership” (1997, p. 21, emphasis added).

What are the entailments of such a preparatory framework for argumentation pedagogy, and how do such entailments manifest themselves in teaching practice? On the surface, the rhetoric of preparation seems innocuous and consistent with other unremarkable idioms employed to describe the learning process (college *prep* courses and *prep* school spring to mind). However, by framing argumentation pedagogy as preparation for student empowerment, educators may actually constrain the emancipatory potential of the debate enterprise. Exclusively preparatory orientations place students and teachers squarely in the proverbial pedagogical bullpen, a peripheral space marked off from the field of social action. In what follows, I pursue this tentative hypothesis by interrogating the framework of preparatory pedagogy on three levels, considering how it can position sites of academic inquiry vis-a-vis broader public spheres of deliberation, how it can flatten and defer consideration of complex issues of argumentative engagement and how it can invite co-option of argumentative skills.

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<sup>3</sup> Reprinted in Freeley 1996, p. 22, emphasis added.

### *Debate as Laboratory*

As two prominent teachers of argumentation point out, “Many scholars and educators term academic debate a *laboratory* for testing and developing approaches to argumentation” (Hill and Leeman 1997, p. 6). This explanation of academic debate squares with descriptions of the study of argumentation previously discussed that highlight debate training as preparation for citizenship. As a safe space that permits the controlled “testing” of approaches to argumentation, the academic laboratory, on this account, constitutes a training ground for “future” citizens and leaders to hone their critical thinking and advocacy skills.

While an isolated academic space that affords students an opportunity to learn in a protected environment has significant pedagogical value,<sup>4</sup> the notion of the academic debate tournament as a sterile laboratory carries with it some disturbing implications, when the metaphor is extended to its limit. To the extent that the academic space begins to take on characteristics of a laboratory, the barriers demarcating such a space from other spheres of deliberation beyond the school grow taller and less permeable. When such barriers reach insurmountable dimensions, argumentation in the academic setting unfolds on a purely simulated plane, with students practicing critical thinking and advocacy skills in hypothetical thought-spaces. In this scenario, although they may research and track public argument as it unfolds outside the confines of the laboratory for research purposes, students witness argumentation beyond the walls of the academy as spectators, with little or

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the simulated environment may be very helpful for students to learn the process of seeing both sides of an issue; they can freely experiment with defending multiple sides of a proposition in relatively risk-free exercises with their peers. Additionally, the simulated environment can be an excellent milieu for students to build confidence, gain familiarity, and develop assertiveness in the process of oral advocacy (see Coverstone 1995, p. 8-9),

no apparent recourse to directly participate or alter the course of events (see Mitchell 1998). The sense of detachment associated with the spectator posture is highlighted during episodes of alienation in which debaters cheer news of human suffering or misfortune, because such news constitutes evidence that, for example, might tidy up the uniqueness of a disadvantage or bolster the inherency of an affirmative case.<sup>5</sup>

Complete reliance on the laboratory metaphor to guide pedagogical practice can result in the unfortunate foreclosure of crucial learning opportunities. These opportunities, which will be discussed in more detail in the later sections of this piece, center around the process of argumentative engagement with wider public spheres of deliberation. In the strictly preparatory model of argument pedagogy, such direct engagement is an activity that is appropriately pursued *following the completion of academic debate training*.<sup>6</sup> Preparatory study of argumentation, undertaken in the confines of the academic laboratory, is conducted on the plane of simulation and is designed to pave the way for eventual application of critical thinking and oral advocacy skills in “real-world” contexts.

However, such a preparatory pedagogy has a tendency to defer reflection and theorization on the political dynamics of academic debate itself. For example, many textbooks introduce students to the importance of argumentation as the basis for citizenship in the opening chapter, move on to discussion of specific skills in the intervening chapters, and never return to the obvious broader question of how specific skills can be utilized to

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<sup>5</sup> Murchland categorizes cultivation of the “spectator” mentality as one of the most politically debilitating failures of contemporary education: “Educational institutions have failed even more grievously to provide the kind of civic forums we need. In fact, one could easily conclude that the principal purposes of our schools is to deprive successor generations of their civic voice, to turn them into mute and uncomprehending spectators in the drama of political life” (p. 8).

<sup>6</sup> In Coverstone’s formulation, political activism is the proper pursuit of debaters who have advanced far in their contest round training and are sufficiently steeled to enter the dangerous waters of the public sphere (1995, p. 8).



support efforts of participatory citizenship and democratic empowerment. Insofar as the argumentation curriculum does not forthrightly thematize the connection between skill-based learning and democratic empowerment, the prospect that students will fully develop strong senses of transformative political agency grows increasingly remote. Kincheloe further argues that purely preparatory pedagogy actually underwrites right-wing educational reforms that directly undermine student agency.

The argument that we must wait until men and women are prepared to assume the responsibilities of participation has been deployed as an attempt to thwart every democratic impulse in history. In the discourse of Reagan-Bush educational reform, the concept of teacher empowerment is lost as democracy is reduced to a set of inherited principles that teach teachers (and students) to adapt to rather than to question the social and institutional arrangement they encounter. The teacher education that accompanies these reforms disregards any analysis of the nature of the democratic impulse and avoids the cultivation of the skills necessary to a critical examination of the social and educational institutions in which they live and work (1993, 36; see also Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 187.)

### *The Danger of Co-option*

Diverse social theorists have proposed that information and communication have emerged as significant media of domination and exploitation in contemporary society.<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging that economic inequality still represents a major dimension of exploitation, these theorists have argued that new and even more insidious means of social control have developed in recent times. These methods of control are insidious in the sense that they suffuse apparently open public spheres and structure opportunities for dialogue in subtle and often nefarious ways. Who has authority to speak in public forums? How does socioeconomic status determine access to information and close off spaces for public deliberation? Who determines what issues are placed on the agenda for public discussion?

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault, Habermas, and Touraine have each advanced variants of this argument within the contexts of their disparate approaches to social criticism..

It is impossible to seriously consider these questions and still hew closely to the idea that a single, monolithic, essentialized “public sphere” even exists. Instead, multiple public spheres exist in diverse cultural and political milieux, and communicative practices work to continuously transform and reweave the normative fabric that holds them together. Some public spaces are vibrant and full of emancipatory potential, while others are thoroughly colonized by restrictive institutional logics. Argumentation skills can be practiced in both contexts, but how can the utilization of such skills positively transform the nature of the public space in which dialogue takes place?

For students and teachers of argumentation, the heightened salience of this question should signal the danger that critical thinking and oral advocacy skills alone may not be sufficient for citizens to assert their voices in public deliberation. Institutional interests bent on shutting down dialogue and discussion can silence oppositional voices, no matter how persuasive such voices may be. These same interests may recruit new graduates skilled in argumentation and deploy them in information campaigns designed to neutralize public competence and short-circuit democratic decision-making (one variant of Habermas’ “colonization of the lifeworld” thesis; see Habermas 1981, 376-373).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the implicit

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<sup>8</sup> Habermas sees the emergent capacity of capitalist institutions to cope with intensifying legitimation deficits through resort to manipulation of public opinion and the manufacture of mass loyalty as a development with profoundly transforms the Marxist political dynamic. By colonizing terms and spaces of public dialogue with instrumental, strategically-motivated reasoning, institutions are said by Habermas to have engineered a “re-feudalization” of the public sphere, the formation of a strategic monopoly on argument which functions to foreclose possibilities for critical deliberation by members of an enlightened, debating public. This colonization thesis supplements the traditional Marxist problematic of class exploitation by highlighting a new axis of domination, the way in which capitalist systems can rely upon the strategic management of discourse as a mode of legitimation and exploitation. Habermas warns that as public spheres become increasingly colonized, systems break off totally from lifeworld perspectives, communicative decision-making yields entirely to instrumental imperatives, and the fabric of democracy unravels as institutional actors settle into an alienating, manipulative and coercive patterns of strategic action.

bridge that connects argumentation skills to democratic empowerment in many argumentation textbooks crosses perilous waters.

The example of the legal profession is instructive in this regard. While it is certainly undeniable that there has been a large and impressive contingent of debaters who have parlayed their argumentative training into worthy and satisfying legal careers, there are also debaters who, after completing their debate training, have taken up the law as a “default” option. Seeing law school as a natural extension of debate, one is tempted to assume that a legal degree will afford students the necessary credentials, connections, and skills to pursue the *telos* of democratic empowerment trumpeted in the introductory chapter of many academic debate textbooks. Unfortunately, many debaters who enter law school in this default mode learn that the limited opportunities for employment in the legal profession severely circumscribe their substantive advocacy options. In cases where debaters-turned-law-students accumulate significant financial debt during law school, end-of-the-pipe options may be restricted to jobs that chafe against the debaters’ moral and/or political principles. As Barbara Finkelstein points out, when the educational system fails to affirmatively embrace the challenge of developing a sense of agency for students, and when skills are imparted in a decontextualized manner, the notion of citizenship is emptied of its political purchase, and institutional co-option this sort is invited.

... [C]itizens in a “just and friendly society” ... are social beings who in their public roles reveal their character and commitments. As citizens, they practice moral agency. If the conditions of modern life prevent the social exercise of moral agency--if the political economy precludes it, government ceases to require it, education fails to model it--then freedom and justice are threatened. If people cannot, will not, or do not identify and socialize personal commitments in public acting, then they cease to be citizens. They are transformed into cunning rationalists, or mere functionaries, no longer the protectors of justice, freedom, or dignity. As a moral matter, their commitments to freedom, justice, and dignity become either empty pieties, or worse, demagogic invocations of socially disconnected rhetoric (1984, p. 16).

### ARGUMENTATIVE AGENCY

In basic terms the notion of argumentative agency involves the capacity to contextualize and employ the skills and strategies of argumentative discourse in fields of social action, especially wider spheres of public deliberation. As a bridging concept, argumentative agency links decontextualized argumentation skills such as research, listening, analysis, refutation and presentation, to the broader *telos* of democratic empowerment. Focusing pedagogical energies on strategies and possibilities for utilizing argumentation as a driver of progressive social change, argumentative agency fills gaps left in purely simulation-based models of argumentation. Moving beyond an exclusively skill-oriented curriculum, teachers and students pursuing argumentative agency seek to put argumentative tools to the test by employing them in situations beyond the space of the classroom. Through action research,<sup>9</sup> students and teachers and students simultaneously cultivate their own senses of agency and work to transform the world around them.

The sense of argumentative agency produced through action research is different in kind from those skills that are honed through academic simulation in the classroom. Encounters with broader public spheres beyond the realm of the academy have the potential to trigger a unique sense of spatial awareness for students and teachers, a cognizance of fields of action in which they have maneuvering room to bring their talents to bear in concrete efforts to transform the unfolding trajectory of events. This perspective affords critical insight that promotes reflection and prompts questions about the basic assumptions

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<sup>9</sup> While action research theorists generally share the belief that the school or university should become a space of political struggle, there are a variety of differing interpretations branching out from this basic assumption. For example, in *Teachers as Researchers*, Kincheloe (1991) outlines a “critical constructivist” action research program that highlights the fluidity of the research process by drawing upon postmodern theory to problematize the categories and methods of inquiry.

that inform pedagogical practice. “Education as *empowerment* means more than giving students the tools to take up a place in an already constructed system of labor,” explains David Sholle; “[I]t means providing the means by which students can rethink their relationships to the world of work and develop abilities as critical citizens, working toward a more just and equitable democracy” (p. 19, emphasis in original).

Eschewing approaches to education that view exclusively as preparation for later action, those who pursue argumentative agency in their academic work fuse preparation and action together. This approach builds on “kritik” arguments in academic debate that configure tournament contest rounds as a site for local political action, but it increases the stakes by steering discussion to wider spheres of deliberation beyond the peer disciplinary audience. This approach is drawn from scholars such as Felski, who suggests that in the present political milieu, “it is not tenable to assume that hermetically sealed forums for discussion and debate can function as truly oppositional spaces of discourse” (Felski 1989, p. 171). Indeed, the cost of maintaining a strictly detached, technically skill-based curriculum in this environment can be courtship of a *de facto* alliance with a right-wing vanguard of regressive political forces seeking to empty higher education of its explicitly political content. As David Sholle explains, to overcome this reactionary tide, teachers can embrace a vision of transformative pedagogy that enables students to develop powerful senses of personal and collective agency, i.e. foundations for active citizenship.

More and more, the function of *public intellectual* is given over to those working in think tanks (primarily right wing) and the role of university intellectuals is being reconceived as that of “technicians” ... if the university is to overcome this “crisis” ... it must revitalize the function of the professoriate as both *public intellectuals* and *critical teachers*. The accomplishment of this goal depends on reconceptualizing the school as a public sphere essential in developing a critical democracy in which teachers take up a role as *transformative intellectuals* whose scholarly work and pedagogical practice serve to educate students to become active citizens (Sholle 1994, p. 21, emphasis in original).

The notion of argumentative agency is not only important for the task of lending weight to projects in debate oriented toward the *telos* of democratic empowerment. The pursuit of action research carries intrinsic transformative benefits in the form of concrete political change. In this vein, Giroux mentions Foucault and Gramsci as scholars who have insisted on the importance of engaging with broader public spheres.

Academics can no longer retreat into their careers, classrooms, or symposiums as if they were the only public spheres available for engaging the power of ideas and the relations of power. Foucault's (1977) notion of the specific intellectual taking up struggles connected to particular issues and contexts must be combined with Gramsci's (1971) notion of the engaged intellectual who connects his or her work to broader social concerns that deeply affect how people live, work, and survive (Giroux 1991, p. 57).<sup>10</sup>

#### CLEARING SPACES FOR ARGUMENTATIVE AGENCY

Up to this point, I have been describing argumentative agency in general terms, striving to locate the notion in a wider frame of reference. In this final section, I distill more specific ideas that serve as provisional answers to the questions that initially drove the study: How can argumentation skills be used? Where can they be most powerfully employed? What can be learned from efforts to *apply* argumentation skills in concrete rhetorical situations? While it might seem tempting to pursue exact answers to these questions, it would be unwise to cast the concept of argumentative agency in overly

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<sup>10</sup> In another context, Giroux describes this imperative as the necessity of linking academic study to oppositional public spheres: "As educators, we can help make the political more pedagogical by joining with social groups and movements outside schools that are struggling in order to address a number of important social problems and issues. Such alliances are important not only because they link the struggle for democratic public schooling to wider societal concerns and issues, but also because they demonstrate the possibility for intellectuals to work not merely as specific intellectuals in their respective work sites, but also as part of a number of separate but not unconnected struggles in which their theoretical and pedagogical skills can be put to use. Put another way, as critical educators, we can move beyond our social function as public/university/private school teachers so that we can apply and enrich our knowledge and skills through practical engagements in oppositional public spheres outside the schools" (Giroux 1988, p. 35).

formulaic terms. Ultimately, the dimensions and dynamics of argumentative agency are properties that emerge organically out of situated pedagogical milieux. The idiosyncratic interests and talents of particular students and teachers shape the manner in which the skills of argumentation receive expression as tools of democratic empowerment. Attempting to theorize the proper, precise nature of these expressions would inappropriately pre-empt creative efforts to invent modes of action tailored to fit local situations. A more heuristically valuable theoretical task involves reflection on the types of *spaces* that might serve as promising fields for cultivation of argumentative agency. In what follows, I attempt to clear such conceptual spaces by suggesting possible modes of action research that can support efforts of argumentation scholars to develop the efficacy of argumentation skills as tools for democratic empowerment.

### *Debate as Link to Fields of Social Action*

Possibilities for argumentative agency are obscured when debate scholarship is approached from a purely spectator-oriented perspective, an activity to be conducted on the sidelines of “actual” public policy discussion. Insofar as the act of research is configured as a one-way transaction in which debaters passively gather and assimilate information through impersonal channels, this spectator orientation gains currency and becomes an acquired habit. Within this pedagogical horizon, possible options for action that move beyond traditional library research and contest round advocacy become more difficult to visualize.

However, adding more active dimensions of inquiry to the research process transforms research into an endeavor that yields appreciation of the latent fields of action overlaying particular issues taken under consideration. On a most basic level, personal



contact with key players involved in a particular controversy can add significant texture to the research act. For example, simply conversing with prominent authors, policy-makers and lobbyists can alter a debater's conception of the dynamics involved in controversies under review. Such dialogic exchanges are often surprisingly easy to initiate,<sup>11</sup> and can open up a number of intriguing possibilities. Initially, contact of this nature can be instrumental for students seeking to develop their own senses of argumentative agency. With the contact initiated by students, the research process is straightforwardly reconfigured from a one-way transaction involving static texts and passive assimilators of information to a dynamic, two-way exchange in which students assert their ability to shape and steer the agenda of conversation.<sup>12</sup> Interlocutors engaged by students in this manner have responded enthusiastically and reciprocated by asking questions about the nature of the debate activity itself as well as the specific features of projects pursued by argumentation scholars.<sup>13</sup> The resulting discussions can help students develop confidence

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<sup>11</sup> The spread of internet technology has made it possible to directly contact almost any published author, public figure, or policy-maker involved in public dialogue within a matter of minutes. Search engines such as Yahoo and Altavista enable researchers to scan the entire internet for personal and institutional contact information that can facilitate such exchanges.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Loyola (LA) debater Madison Laird once authored a high school debate handbook that contained traditional and expected evidence on the 1987/88 high school topic, but also included transcripts of interviews conducted by Laird with Loyola University political science professors. Laird produced extremely powerful, legitimately published evidence by respectable sources merely by asking provocative questions to such sources and then distributing the document throughout the debate community. The resulting exchange was extraordinarily illuminating, especially since Laird pitched questions to the professors in a manner that highlighted anticipated *stasis* points of contest round debate (e.g. "in your opinion, is it true that reduction in U.S. commitment to NATO will prompt West Germany to build nuclear weapons").

<sup>13</sup> In 1997, Samford's debate team engaged government officials and humanitarian workers in a remarkable e-mail dialogue concerning an issue prominent in debates on the 1997-1998 intercollegiate policy debate topic regarding U.S. security assistance to Southeast Asia. Specifically, Samford's Leonard Neighbors asked about whether or not the United States should disclose the maps of bombing runs on Laos conducted during the Vietnam war. For intercollegiate debate participants, this was a pertinent question given that many teams were running affirmative cases that dealt with the issue of demining / removing unexploded ordnance from Laos. The dialogue resulting from Neighbors' queries provided a fascinating and fresh perspective on



that their work is valuable and intriguing to others outside their group of immediate disciplinary peers, while also providing an occasion for students to reflect on their status as actors in the world and develop a language to explain this status to others.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, direct contact with participants involved in unfolding controversies can help students conceive of their research areas as fields of action rather than simply static topics or issues. Live encounters with key players afford students the opportunity to learn “inside” information regarding upcoming events or decision-points that may represent occasions for students to directly participate by shaping the trajectory of discussion.

### *Debate as Transformative Pedagogy*

Once students begin to conceive of research areas as fields of action, it becomes easier to invent strategies for intervention. One such strategy might be the extension and adaptation of the debate experience itself beyond the immediate peer audience. For example, familiarity with the debate process affords students the expertise and wherewithal to organize, execute and amplify public debates. By creating forums in which salient and pressing contemporary issues can be debated and discussed in a robust, wide-open fashion, students can lend vibrancy to the public sphere.<sup>15</sup> As James Fishkin explains, the

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the demining discussion, and many of the email messages were quoted in contest rounds as legitimate evidence following Doyle Srader's publication of the material on his website (<http://www.public.asu.edu/~srader/UXO.html>).

<sup>14</sup> This reflective process is an essential feature of educational action research. As Kincheloe explains, “the critical core of action research involves its participatory and communally discursive structure and the cycle of action and reflection it initiates” (1993, p. 183).

<sup>15</sup> An excellent public debate driven by an academic debate team occurred in 1994, when Cyrus Kiani and Paul Skiermont debated the contentious local issue of where to build a bridge over the Ohio River in the Louisville, KY community. Kiani, Skiermont, and the University of Kentucky coaching staff researched the issue, prepared arguments, and presented an informative and well-received public debate on September 30, 1994 (see Walfoort 1994). Following the debate, Kiani and Skiermont were deluged with questions about

sort of civic engagement fostered by such face-to-face debating helps to counter the drift toward a phantom democracy that Tocqueville feared would result from citizen apathy and widespread political withdrawal.

Tocqueville paints a picture of a democracy with consumers but no citizens, a democracy of individuals but no associations, and a democracy in which people are satisfied but do not think about public issues or shared concerns. Tocqueville's frightening speculation was that such a form of despotism could be "established even under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people." If we can create a democracy of civic engagement at the local level, we may forestall the fate Tocqueville feared (Fishkin 1995, p. 154-55).

Public debates represent sites of social learning where the spirit of civic engagement can flourish, ideas can be shared, and the momentum of social movements can be stoked. Unlike one-way communication engineered by mass media news outlets and public opinion polling, the interaction that occurs in public debates is a unique form of dialectical communication. Dynamic, back-and-forth exchange pushes issues beyond shallow lines of sound-byte development. The drama of debate draws in interested audiences, creating the possibility that dialogue will spill outward beyond the immediate debate venue and into communities, schools, universities and other civic groups. Furthermore, because public debates are flexible, students and teachers can creatively tailor formats and topics to fit local needs, as well as experiment with new forms of debating.<sup>16</sup>

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the UK debate society; citizens, politicians and public interest activists expressed amazement that such a university organization existed, and urged the team to continue their involvement in community issues.

<sup>16</sup> A March 19, 1997 debate on the topic of police brutality held at the University of Pittsburgh demonstrated the dynamism of a format that mixes student debaters with high-profile advocates. By asking questions directly to prominent figures in the local dispute regarding the establishment of a citizen review board to monitor police behavior, Pittsburgh debaters injected novel arguments and perspectives into the public dialogue and provided a forum for supporters and opponents of the board to "meet face-to-face in a structured setting, instead of jawing at one another in the media and courts and public rallies" (Muschick 1997; see also Happe 1997; Mitchell 1997).

On another level, the transformative dimension of debate pedagogy can be extended through outreach to traditionally underserved educational populations. With recognition of the emancipatory potential of critical thinking and oral advocacy skills in hand, students and teachers trained in argumentation are transforming debate practice into a tool of empowerment by working with others to bring the debate experience to students who lack the opportunity to engage in exciting, rewarding and powerful intellectual activities such as debate. In addition to countering educational inequities, such efforts enable debaters from diverse backgrounds to interact and learn from each other in significant ways.<sup>17</sup>

### *Debate as Public Advocacy*

The skills honed during preparation for and participation in academic debate can be utilized as powerful public advocacy tools. Using sophisticated research, critical thinking, and concise argument presentation, argumentation scholars can become formidable actors in the public realm, advocating on behalf of a particular issue, agenda, or viewpoint. For competitive academic debaters, this sort of advocacy can become a natural extension of a

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<sup>17</sup> Urban Debate Leagues in cities such as Atlanta, New York, Detroit, Louisville and Chicago currently provide opportunities of this sort. Recently, the Open Society Institute has emerged as a generous sponsor of such leagues and is working to expand and deepen the growing network of inner-city debate programs. "Encouraging dialogue between students and teachers from inner-city schools and those from outside the inner city can result in profound learning," an OSI informational flier explains; "When those who rarely have opportunity to interact come together on the common ground of a debate tournament, education becomes the bridge across the chasms of difference. As one inner-city Atlanta student noted: 'When we are working together on an argument, I see our similarities more than our differences' (Open Society Institute 1997, p. 2). In addition to pursuing the establishment of policy debate leagues for high school students, outreach programs have also worked to incorporate debate pedagogy into existing curricular spaces (e.g. History, Political Science, Social Studies, and English courses) at both the secondary and elementary level. For example, the University of Pittsburgh has developed working links for this purpose with the Horace A. Mann elementary school as well as Langley High School in the Pittsburgh City School system.

long research project culminating in a strong personal judgment regarding a given policy issue and a concrete plan to intervene politically in pursuit of those beliefs.<sup>18</sup>

For example, Jurgen Habermas has given concrete expression to his theories of discourse ethics and communicative action in numerous direct interventions into the German public sphere.<sup>19</sup> These interventions have taken the form of newspaper articles, speeches and public appearances on such topics as the historical interpretation of National Socialism,<sup>20</sup> the process of German reunification, and the political role of the student movement.

Habermas presented his most comprehensive comments on this latter issue at a June, 1968 meeting of the Union of German Students. At this meeting, he suggested that students have the capacity to roll back colonization of the lifeworld and public sphere, and in so doing, directly complicate institutional moves to cover for legitimation deficits by fencing off public scrutiny and tamping down critical protest.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On the 1992-93 development assistance topic, the University of Texas ran an extraordinarily successful affirmative case that called for the United States to terminate its support for the Flood Action Plan, a disaster-management program proposed to equip the people of Bangladesh to deal with the consequences of flooding. During the course of their research, Texas debaters developed close working links with the Two Rivers Group, a social movement devoted to stopping the Flood Action Plan. These links not only created a fruitful conduit of primary information, they also enabled the Texas team to organize sympathetic members of the debate community to support efforts by the Two Rivers Group to block the Flood Action Plan.

<sup>19</sup> A panoramic account of Habermas' various interventions can be found in Holub 1991. The interviews in *The Past as Future* (1994) and *A Berlin Republic* (1997) also provide lucid insight on the nature of Habermas' participation in German public debates.

<sup>20</sup> Recently, this angle of initiative has taken on increasing importance for Habermas, who has "consistently intervened where he observes attempts to paste over the Third Reich and restore a sense of normal continuity from Bismarck to Kohl. Because these revisionist voices have also found more prominent media (among them the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), the critique of historical revisionism has become a constant theme in Habermas's writings since 1986" (Hohendahl 1997, p. xiv).

<sup>21</sup> "The student movement is of central importance, according to Habermas, because it calls into question the legitimacy of capitalist society at its weakest points. It unmasks the ideological obfuscations, critiques the attempts at diversion and opens discussion on fundamental issues of economics and politics. It does not

Motivated by the publication of Habermas' doctoral dissertation, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, German students arranged mass protests in early 1968 against the Springer publishing house, producer of the *Bildzeitung*, a mass circulation newspaper trading in sensationalism and hard-line conservatism. At Habermas's urging, the students were energized to initiate this resistance, choosing to target Springer based on the Frankfurt school's sustained critique of the mass media as arch-enemy of unfettered public argumentation. As Holub describes, "[a] press such as Springer's has the double function of excluding the public from real issue-oriented discussions and of mobilizing the public against those who, like the protesters, try to engender public debate" (1991, p. 88). This anti-Springer campaign is one example of student movement mobilization undertaken in name of Habermas' suggested project of "repoliticizing" (see Habermas 1970) the public sphere.

It is possible to go beyond thinking of debate as a remedial tool to redress educational inequities to start seeing debate as a political activity that has the potential to empower students and teachers to change the underlying conditions that *cause* inequities among schools and communities in the first place. In this task, the public advocacy skills learned by debaters can be extremely efficacious. The ability to present ideas forcefully and persuasively in public is a very powerful tool, one that becomes even more dynamic when coupled with the research and critical thinking acumen that comes with intensive debate

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accept the pretext that only experts can decide on matters of economic and political concern. Instead it removes the aura of expertise from state decision-making and subjects policy in general to public discussion" (Holub 1991, p. 88). Alain Touraine, a sociologist who has worked closely with the student movements in France and Chile argues that the unique cultural position students inhabit affords them uncanny political maneuverability: "Students can now play an important role because the sharp rise in their numbers and the increased duration of studies have resulted in the constitution of student collectivities with their own space, capable of opposing the resistance of their own culture and of their personal concerns to the space of the large organizations that seek to impose themselves even more directly upon them (1988, p. 120).

preparation. A crucial element of this transformative pedagogy is public advocacy, making debate practice directly relevant to actors which are studied during research, and making the topics researched relevant to the lives of students and teachers.

Some may express reservations about the prospect of students settling on a particular viewpoint and defending it in public, given that the tradition of switch-side policy debating has tended to tie effective critical thinking with the notion of suspended judgment.<sup>22</sup> However, it is possible to maintain a critical posture, even while taking an active, interventionist stance. “Generally speaking, action researchers see the process of gaining knowledge and changing society as interlinked, even inseparable” explains Martin; “Intervention to change society produces understanding--including new perspectives of fundamental theoretical significance--which in turn can be used to develop more effective intervention” (p. 264). “Research and activism should operate in tandem,” Milan Rai writes in a discussion on Noam Chomsky; “you need to interact with others in order to develop ideas” (Rai 1995, p. 59).

A critical and transformative method of action research requires constant reflection to ensure that all aspects of the research enterprise (e.g. purpose, normative assumptions, methodological tools, and tentative conclusions) are problematized and revised throughout

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<sup>22</sup> Those holding this viewpoint may want to consider Milan Rai’s argument there may be problems with the very notion of suspended judgment as a truly neutral posture in the present political milieu. Summarizing Chomsky’s position on this matter, Rai argues that the decision to remain neutral and uninvolved in political matters is itself a distinctive political choice: “Chomsky suggests that, ideally, U.S. universities ought to force students to face the fact that their work as professionals is related to the exercise of power, and that in the course of their work they will make political judgments which affect the world at large ... This cannot be avoided--even if you decide to do nothing, this will have some effect on others. This power confers some responsibility. Having faced this problem, students may choose to transfer the burden of decision to others and abrogate their responsibilities” (Rai 1995, p. 136).

the endeavor as part of an ongoing learning process.<sup>23</sup> Woolgar has characterized the synergistic interplay among dimensions of inquiry as the “dynamic of iterative reconceptualization,” a process whereby “practitioners from time to time recognize the defects of their position as an occasion for revising its basic assumptions” (1991, p. 382). According to Woolgar, what sets this dynamic in motion is the practitioner’s embrace of “reflexivity”; i.e. affirmative problematization of scholars’ own conceptions of themselves as critical agents in light of continually shifting theoretical assumptions.<sup>24</sup> Woolgar argues that the potential reflexive benefits of action research are strong warrants for its embrace and pursuit as a scholarly method of research.

... [T]he prospect of engaging with [policy-makers and other interested audiences beyond the academy] seems too good an opportunity to miss. The attempt to forge and manage relationships with potential audiences provides a welcome experimental probe. For it provides the chance of acquiring first-hand experience of attempts to change people’s minds. So we should welcome opportunities to become involved in this kind of exercise. Not because this will legitimate our own enterprise; it may or may not. But because it will provide excellent materials for further thinking through the consequences of presuming to know something for a particular audience outside [our own fields] (Woolgar, p. 386).

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<sup>23</sup> The notions of constant change and unlearning on the part of the researcher and continuous rearticulation of knowledge (understanding) throughout the research act draws from the field of critical (transformative) pedagogy and cultural studies. As Kincheloe explains, “[t]he critical core of critical action research involves its participatory and communally discursive structure and the cycle of action and reflection it initiates” (1993, p. 183). For analysis surrounding these assumptions as bases for critical transformative research see Aronowitz and Giroux; Giroux 1988; Kincheloe 1993.

<sup>24</sup> “Relexivity currently asks us to problematize the assumption that the analyst (author, self) stand in a disengaged relationship to the world (subjects, objects, scientists, things)” (Woolgar, p. 383). This posture shares much in common with the research orientation of critical ethnography, which holds that “the work must find ways of communicating that do not simply reaffirm old ‘ways of seeing’; it must challenge the very foundations of our experience of ourselves yet be understandable and sensible.” This involves commitment “to study the character and bases of one’s own work practices and their relation to the knowledge such practices produce” (Simon and Diplo 1986 , p. 200). In the context of rhetorical theory, Leff has located a similar dialectic at work in the synergistic interplay between the “productionist” and “interpretive” impulses of classical rhetorical theory (see Leff 1996 , p. 89-100).



Woolgar's commentary highlights the fact that a strong sense of reflexivity can be achieved only when scholars embrace epistemological humility and curiosity,<sup>25</sup> leaving their academic *raison d'être* open to question and engaging in a perennial pursuit of different ways of knowing. In the context of argumentative agency, such a posture might be supported through intermittent and alternating episodes of public advocacy and academic study, in which students draw upon the synergistic interplay between the two spaces of investigation to calibrate their evolving political opinions and interventions.

Such a posture addresses Coverstone's concerns that debater-driven public advocacy projects would take on the character of "mass actions" designed to "homogenize the individual members of the debate community" (1995, 9). By assuming a reflexive stance that relentlessly destabilizes and interrogates the assumptions undergirding particular public advocacy projects, debaters can add a crucial element of reflection to their practice. Such reflection can highlight the potential dangers of political engagement and generate strategies to negotiate these pitfalls through shared discussion. Coverstone's fear that the radical heterogeneity of political opinions found in the debate community "means that mass political action is doomed to fail" (1995, 9) is accurate as a diagnosis of the utopian prospects for a monolithic and ideologically consistent social movement to spring forth from the ranks of activist debate participants. However, Coverstone overlooks the emancipatory potential of smaller groups within the debate community to organize with like-minded colleagues. While the radical heterogeneity of political orientation in the debate community likely blocks the formation of a homogenous mass political movement, the same diversity also has the potential to support a panoply of ideologically diverse (and even

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<sup>25</sup> For discussion of the importance of "epistemological curiosity" as part of critical research, see Freire 1985, p. 173; Freire and Macedo, p. 380.



contradictory) micro-movements. Although participants in these smaller movements may be advocating different causes and pursuing distinct strategies of intervention, the common thread linking their projects together is a quest to develop argumentation skills as tools to impact events unfolding in fields of social action.

### CONCLUSION

The continuing desertification of the public sphere is a phenomenon that serves as an urgent invitation for argumentation scholars to develop remedial responses. As the Credo of the American Forensic Association trumpets, members of the forensics community in this nation are well positioned to make such responses, given the community's commitment to debate and argumentation as tools of democratic empowerment. In this essay, I have argued that faith alone is insufficient to bring about the translation of argumentation skills into tools of democratic empowerment. Instead, such a successful translation requires affirmative efforts to clear spaces that free scholars to exercise and develop senses of argumentative agency. With greater room to maneuver for inventing strategies for action, taking risks, making mistakes and effecting change, scholars can use their educational experiences as opportunities to practice, hone, and reflect upon the things that can be done with argumentation skills *not only* in the cozy confines of tournament competition, but in the world beyond as well.

Evolution of the idea of argumentative agency, in both theory and practice, will be determined by the idiosyncratic and often eccentric personal sentiments and political allegiances held by students and teachers of argumentation. In the closing section of this essay, I suggested that those interested in seeing debate skills become tools for democratic empowerment can clear spaces for argumentative agency in their respective pedagogical and

political milieu. This might involve supporting and encouraging efforts of students to engage in action research, establishing contacts with key players involved in controversies under consideration, sharing the process of debate pedagogy through public debates and debate outreach, and pursuing public advocacy from a critical transformative perspective that links critical thinking with judgment and action.

At a recent dinner held in his honor, Brent Farrand (Debate Coach of Newark High School of Science) gave a brilliant and moving speech that touched on many of the themes discussed in this essay. Looking back on his own career, Farrand offer a poignant charge for the future. “Perhaps the time has come for each of us to consider choosing a road that travels to other places than just between practice rounds and tournament sites,” Farrand reflected; “Through some admittedly dark times when each of us felt like voices in the wilderness, we cradled, protected, refined and polished this gem of education. It is time now to carry it out into the world and share it” (Farrand 1997).

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