

INTERNET DEBATE

by Barbara & Jay Busse

Debate on the Internet presents an inviting supplement to normal methods for acquiring materials, exchanging ideas, assessing instruction and engaging in competition. This new approach to debate may provide a means for overcoming some of the obstacles which prevent students, coaches, and judges from participating in debate.

Team policy debate is now attempted by an ever-diminishing population at both the high school and college level. According to information provided by the NFL, less than 20% of all member schools currently participate in team debate. This is a dramatic reduction from participation levels of the past. Some of the primary barriers to participation include: the time required to acquire the materials needed to be competitive; the cost of acquiring materials through institutes, handbooks, data bases and traditional primary sources; the cost of participation at major tournaments and institutes; increasing demands on the coaching population; the lack of available credit or adequate compensation for coaches; and the lack of a venue in which experimental changes can be easily tested. The object in this article is to address these problems briefly and explain how the LMU Debate Net and other debate internet sites may represent partial solutions.

FIRST, PARTICIPATION IN DEBATE NET SITES COULD SAVE STUDENTS SIGNIFICANT AMOUNTS OF TIME. The problem of finding the time to be competitive has become a significant obstacle for many students. The amount of information available has increased exponentially during the past several decades. To be competitive students need access to thousands of pages of briefs before the year even begins. To demonstrate how much information is required by a successful team program, we secured a basic set of briefs from one of the nation's top high school programs at the beginning of the academic year. The set of briefs did not include the top affirmative positions, or the backup evidence for those cases.

The briefs represented a synthesis of materials collected during the spring and at various summer debate institutes. Even with significant amounts of material excluded, there were over 5,000 pages of materials. More than a dozen varsity debaters had participated in screening and blocking for this one school. Materials had been collected from more than half a dozen top institutes. This program is consistently among the top teams in the country and has regularly had teams reach elimination rounds at national invitationals and are predictably participating in state and national championships. How can most schools ever hope to compete with such a "debate machine"?

Through the debate net, students and programs unable to purchase materials, attend multiple summer institutes, or have responsibilities shared by a large number of experienced squad members, can share the work effort with students in similar circumstances. Fifty students researching in a coordinated fashion could easily generate a data base that would allow them to feel prepared and be competitive. At LMU, we have begun to experiment with this new model of shared distant learning. We encourage others to experiment with technologically innovative approaches to research. Given the huge amount of information now available to students, learning how to manage research effectively will be key to learning in the 21st century.

One of the benefits of shared research is to make the best materials available to students who would not be exposed to the information otherwise. These data bases may be especially useful to some inner city students lacking access to transportation and funds to acquire materials or to students in rural areas without ready access to library facilities.

Additionally, sharing research responsibilities may lessen the time required to secure excellent information on the current debate topic. Students participating in debate research through the net may not be faced with choosing between competing in debate, doing well in other academic work, or having a

full social life. Those with limited time or resources will now find it easier to try debate or continue their participation.

SECOND, PARTICIPATION ON THE LMU DEBATE NET AND AT OTHER SITES MAY REDUCE FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO THE ACQUISITION OF MATERIALS. To purchase all the handbooks and files that are published annually on the high school topic would cost several thousand dollars; to attend a major institute and copy files generated on site could cost several thousand additional dollars per student. Students and teachers who already have access to the Internet can participate for free or for a nominal charge. LMU Debate net software is available for free via the Internet.

Our program illustrates what can be accomplished. We are still experimenting with ways to broaden access and share responsibilities. With internet capabilities, students can download whatever evidence they want on the China topic, or on the Cultural Identity LD topic. Students and coaches will be able to post lists of cases and positions that they feel need researching. Students will be able to examine existing files before deciding to take on an assignment or they may simply choose to research an area that has already been assigned. In the first month of operation at LMU despite a variety of technical obstacles more than 2000 quotations on the China topic were uploaded. Clearly, the LMU Debate Net and other Internet debate sites will work to reduce some of the barriers to participation. This technological support is not designed to replace individual research but rather to focus it and make it more manageable.

THIRD, THE LMU DEBATE NET AND OTHER SITES CAN BE DESIGNED TO PROVIDE FREE INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS THROUGH EDUCATIONAL TEXT FILES, CHAT ROOMS, AND WITH LIVE AND TAPED LECTURES AND DEMONSTRATIONS THAT STUDENTS AND COACHES CAN PLAY THROUGH SOUND CARDS.

Students or coaches may ask questions in real time or they may play lectures for groups or individual students at their convenience. At LMU, free lectures and day long workshops will be scheduled in the fall on the upcoming team policy and L.D. topics. One goal for the LMU Debate Net is to offer an electronic institute this summer, with lectures in real time or available on a recorded basis. An electronic institute could provide the opportunity to have debates with other participants from around the country in real time, to listen to critiques in real time or at a lagged time convenient to one's work or school schedule. Our goal is to have audio and video debates through the Internet.

An internet tournament would eliminate travel costs, hotel bills, car rentals, and some opportunity costs since students with academic or work conflicts could have rounds scheduled at their convenience. Rounds could take place both in real time and on a lagged time basis. Speakers would have the choice to run speeches concurrently, or to have them recorded on the computer and have a lagged round where individual speeches would be given and judged at everyone's convenience. The computer can be programmed so that speakers would be limited to a single playing of a speech and then the computer would allocate time for each subsequent speech. A debate could conceivably be spread out over several days or a week. The judge could then hear the entire debate at his or her convenience. This new technology is not designed to replace tournaments and traditional institute participation but rather to provide a supplementary vehicle for improvement of debate skills. These programs may be especially valuable for those who cannot afford to participate in national competition. For students in areas in which travel is prohibitively expensive or made difficult by distance and weather conditions, additional electronic opportunities to compete may increase student skill levels.

FOURTH, THE LMU DEBATE NET AND OTHER SIMILAR PROGRAMS, MAY BE ABLE TO REDUCE SOME OF THE BURDENS THAT COACHES FIND SO DAUNTING. Some coaches complain that

they feel overwhelmed by the amount and variety of research materials generated in team debate. Without the time or the resources to attend summer institutes some coaches have expressed reservations about the state of their knowledge at the start of a new year. These concerns can be relieved by instructional workshops on the internet, the ability to participate in chat rooms with lab leaders and their coaching peers, and access to a library of lectures, practice rounds and demonstration debates. The opportunity to have practice rounds with other schools without spending time transporting and organizing trips will save coaches's time. Students at programs without coaches could secure coaching through the Net.

Finally, it may be easier to secure judges and retain coaches if their hard work could be made easier. If they could listen to some practice and tournament rounds at their convenience, they would be more productive and spend less time to accomplish their forensic objectives. The opportunity to catch one's spouse or children could lengthen the tenure of at least some coaches. Simplifying debaters' work will moderate coach workload as well. Providing more opportunities for debaters may not require additional coaching time, a real boon for a coach with significant work-related or personal responsibilities. There are many ways to realize these benefits. The potential to have practice debates with students from other parts of the country may make it easier to schedule practice rounds and insure student participation. Without the physical limitations of a normal tournament, it would be possible to have all of one's teams participate in an electronic tournament. A tournament with 1,000 or more teams participating in real time or on a lagged basis over several weeks would be sure to generate some excitement among students normally limited to only local competition. Much of this work could be engaged with modest coach support.

FIFTH, THE LMU DEBATE NET WILL BEGIN TO OFFER CLASSES FOR STUDENTS, COACHES AND POTENTIAL COACHES IN THE SUMMER OF 1996. In the past such coursework

was only available in traditional classrooms. New approaches to distance learning may dramatically increase access to coursework for professional development. Some lectures, demonstrations, and classroom participation will be available for free. If someone were interested in securing professional development or academic credits tests will be administered, a fee assessed by the University and credited upon successful completion of scheduled work and examinations. Similar courses have been offered in recent semesters here at LMU in the traditional format and accepted by the Los Angeles Unified School District for credit towards professional development. New technologies may make such professional development available simply and inexpensively to a much broader audience. College credit will be made available for student participation in the electronic institute this summer.

SIXTH, THE LMU DEBATE NET AND OTHER SITES MAY PROVIDE FOR EXCITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED EXPERIMENTATION WITH DEBATE. Changes in the format may include Lincoln-Douglas debate on the Policy/team topic. There may be an opportunity to try parliamentary debate, the most rapidly growing type of debate at the collegiate level. Another opportunity may include more student judges (varsity level competitors), a judging practice which is almost universal in some types of college debate. There may be opportunities to require detailed judging philosophies from all potential critics and keep these in electronic data bases. Through very large tournaments, it may be possible to diversify the judging pool and require students to adapt to a wide variety of judging philosophies and styles of presentation. Since participation costs would be minimal, the barriers or resistance to experimentation may also be reduced. Providing experimental divisions might mean more students may be attracted to participation in some type of debate. The LMU Debate Net and other sites on the net hold out that promise.

We hope that we have tempted you to investigate further the ways in which technology may make it
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