

"On the Brink of Being Elite...Or Obsolete?"

By Rami Hernandez

While talking to one of my extempers the other day, I made the following comment: "Just bring your laptop into the prep room, and you'll have all of the evidence that you need at your disposal." The student promptly reminded me that laptops and other electronic devices are prohibited in the extemp prep room.

Technology seems to be a point of great controversy in the debate community. Rich Edwards article in the December issue of *The Rostrum* brought up several great points about how computers will not destroy policy debate. Now we must ask ourselves which direction we are heading in as a community in regards to the issue of technology. Our school recently hired a Director of Educational Technology who told us at a faculty meeting earlier this school year, "We have to make a decision. Does Loyola wish to be on the cutting edge of knowledge or do we wish risking becoming an irrelevant school?" The same question applies to the debate community. Regardless of anyone's personal convictions, we live in a digital age. An age where WHAT we know is not as important as WHEN we know. We can no longer hang onto the belief that forensics is purely a live-audience public speaking activity. The dynamics of our world are changing rapidly, and as educators we have a responsibility to help shape this future. The answer to the question I posed earlier is that we must embrace new technologies and work to implement them into the speech and debate community. Otherwise, we risk becoming irrelevant to today's youth. I will focus on three suggestions we as a community should implement. First, we must allow laptops and live connections to the Internet to in all events. Second, we should create a technology vision and plan for how we are to incorporate technology and its usage at tournaments. Finally, we should start moving to

virtual or hybrid (part virtual/part live) tournaments.

#1—Laptops and Internet for All

The argument that laptops create unfair competition in debate rounds is not only false, but dangerous. Case in point: In a recent article on cnn.com, it was reported that 3rd world countries are purchasing \$100.00 laptops for their students in school. These students are expected to become proficient in using their computers. Do we want our students to be less technically proficient than people in 3rd world countries? Well, that is what regulations against the use of laptops create. Educators in the debate community haven't figured out what leaders of 3rd world countries already have: Understanding and using technology is a vital part of the education of today's young person.

By banning laptops and the Internet at forensics events, we are sending a signal that technology is evil and unnecessary to be successful. Think about what the ramifications of this are. We are telling our students that you can make it without needing today's relevant research skills—the ability to use technology to find what you need when you need it. The reality is quite different. While previous generations could rely on the absence of these skills, the current ones cannot. Both the world of business and education are demanding employees who understand how to use technology effectively. Our students could potentially find themselves at a disadvantage to their fellow students when they get into what is becoming a global job market. Is this the legacy we want to leave as an activity? Do we want to become the last vestige of the pre-technological age? Do want to be looked down upon by our fellow educators and the rest of the world as a "joke of an activity" that significant lim-

Where Are We Headed As A Community?

its our students' growth?

Laptops are part of world and they are here to stay. Now is the time for us to embrace their use in all facets of our activity. I believe the real reason that many coaches in the activity want to ban their usage is because they are either afraid of technology, do not know how to use computers, or both. I applaud the NFL's test year on the use of laptops, but we need to go further. We should allow students to use them and connect to the Internet in all debate events and in Extemp. Dr. Edwards' did an excellent job in his article of pointing out why laptops are a great leveler in Policy Debate, and it would be no different in L/D, Public Forum, and Extemp. We live in an age where information is available quickly and equally for everyone. Responsible use of this information is perhaps the most important thing we can stress to our students.

Imagine an extemper who has all of his or her information on a laptop. This would do away with having to create and move files around. Also, imagine if this student were able to access the latest information on the web on a particular topic. That is the way the real world operates. When giving a presentation, one is expected to give the most current and up to date information. We teach the opposite of this. How often do we listen to extempers who give us false or incorrect information? What is the educational value of that? Moreover, having access to the Internet during prep time would eliminate the disparity that larger teams have over smaller ones, thus evening the playing field. News would be available to all. Some say this creates lazy extempers, but the reality is that great evidence files cannot make up for ignorance of a topic. The most successful extempers will still be the ones who follow the news and create files on topics as well

as outline potential topic areas. Also, 30 minutes goes by very quickly and it is hardly enough time to become competent in a topic. Pre-tournament preparation would still be a must for Extemp.

In debate, access to the Internet would allow students to immediately answer claims that they know to be false or suspect. Rather than living in a fantasy world, students would be able to check what is happening in the real world at this moment and seek the truth of any given situation. One of the chief criticisms of debate is that it has little application to what is going on in the real world (i.e. nuclear war scenarios and normative thinking). Well if you have that problem, allow students to access information in a moment's notice to counter those claims. Some would say that the information found on the Internet is suspect, but rather than embrace the fact that it is our duty to educate students on assessing the reliability and validity of sources we put blinders on and allow this issue to go unresolved. What better way, then, to teach students these skills than within the context of debate rounds?

The reality is that technology is now being incorporated into all facets of the workforce. Now is the time for the debate community to respond to this by embracing technology and creating a plan for its usage at tournaments. Ignoring the problem and hoping that it goes away is not the solution.

#2—Let There Be a Technology Plan

So, what can we do to make technology a viable part of the debate world? First, we need to make sure that every student in this activity has access to a laptop at debate tournaments. The NFL and state organizations should start creating programs that allow disadvantaged students the opportunity to receive a free laptop or one at a significantly reduced rate. Students who receive these laptops should be trained in their usage both in and out of debate rounds. Workshops should also be held for coaches on how to incorporate this technology in their lesson plans and in the training of their students. The money is out

there. We need someone who has the background in fundraising and in speech and debate to spearhead a project like this one. If third-world leaders can do it, then so can we. This would put us at the forefront of secondary education....Does it put you at the forefront or just allow you to catch up with the rest of secondary education?...Perhaps it puts you in the position to lead? We could become leaders in the use of technology in education. That would translate to more support and participation in our activity.

Second, we need to ensure that students at tournaments have free wireless access to the Internet at tournaments. When I go on a college campus today, I expect to be able to connect to the Web. If our activity is truly college preparatory, then our students should expect the same. Students should be clearly told of the regulations of web usage and the penalties for violating these rules.

Third, every team, organization, and tournament should have its own website. Part of the training we could do as a community is in team website development. The web is how people connect is this day and age, and we should encourage its usage for such things as announcements, results, and discussion. After all, we are supposed to be the best communicators on any given campus.

Fourth, we need to explore ways of using technology to bridge the gap that exists in this activity. The vast majority of teams lack the resources or the time to travel nationally. This leads me to the final point I will discuss: The Creation of Virtual Debate Tournaments.

#3—Enter the Matrix

Very few things in my life have forced me to grow up than debating on the national circuit. I did not get this opportunity until I got into college. It truly was an eye-opener on where I stood both intellectually and competitively to other students across the country. It is also extremely expensive. Most nationally competitive teams spend over \$40,000-\$50,000 a year. We are an activity of "haves" and "have-not's." So, how do we close this gap? How

can we allow competitors from different parts of the country compete against each other?

The solution is the creation of virtual debate tournaments. Right now, this might be a cumbersome undertaking, but then again our students are already facile with using free products such as iChatAV for the purpose of videoconferencing, so perhaps it is only us that need to embrace what is already available to make this happen. Even if not everyone has the resources or the technology to make this happen yet, it is something we should begin exploring and implementing as soon as possible. If we do it might look something like this:

Envision debaters in classrooms at their schools with a table or desks adjacent to a blank wall. On the wall there would be a projection of their opponents whose desks would be set up in the same way on their end. A debate judge would view this round either from one of the rooms or even in the comfort of his or her own home. Evidence would be transmitted electronically from one computer to another. Decisions would be electronically transmitted to the tournament tab room.

This is a future for debate that is just around the corner. Yet, this model is not necessarily the only one. There is also the possibility of having hybrid tournaments where some students would show up at the school and some would debate via cyberspace. The point is there is an opportunity to make debate something that is more readily available to the masses as opposed to an elite few—the few who can afford it.

All debaters would now be able to compete on the national circuit. No one can make the claim anymore that debate travel is too expensive or time consuming. This would not completely eliminate travel tournaments, but it would allow for more flexibility with scheduling. Students would miss less class, and they would still have opportunities for interaction with others students. As a coach, I would have a hybrid schedule where we would travel to some tournaments and go virtual with a few others. It would help with the burn-out a lot of us have to go through as coaches if

we had the ability to create a lighter travel schedule. It would also encourage many coaches to take the level of their team's competition to the next level. Right now, this may seem like a fantasy, but the speed of our technological breakthroughs makes this a distinct possibility within the next decade.

Conclusion

The world of debate has been a gateway for many of us to better and brighter futures. We must seriously evaluate where

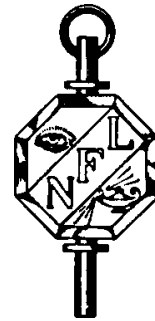
we are headed as a community in terms of technology. In this age of *MySpace*, iPods, and on-demand entertainment, we need to create a plan for the next generation of debaters. If we fall behind on this, we risk becoming irrelevant and could even be supplanted by other activities our students choose to undertake. Often as a debate community, we are not open to growth and its possibilities. This is one of those critical times when we cannot fall asleep at the switch. I am a mere amateur in the world of technology. However, even I can see where

we are headed and what we need to do. Let us collaborate and work together to make this possible. We may not be around for the future, but we certainly have the opportunity to influence what it will be like.

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