



## ◆ *Lincoln Douglas Debate*

# The Commodification of LD

By Jason Baldwin

## Recommendations

In the past three to five years, Lincoln-Douglas-related business has grown spectacularly. Part I of this essay sketches how this happened. Part II offers several reasons to think the commercialization of LD is not an unmixed blessing. And Part III suggests ways that concerned readers can limit the influence of money on high school debate.

By way of disclosure, I have been employed by the University of Kentucky's LD workshop every summer since 1996, and by several other workshops in the years before then. To the extent that I have made money selling a service—and an expensive one—to high school students, some people may conclude that I am part of the problems I discuss below. That judgment, if correct, might be a reason for me to stop teaching at summer workshops, but it would not dissuade me from anything I say here about the dangers of commodifying LD.

### I. History

Turning low- or no-cost activities into more expensive activities is part of the American way, and people have been trying to do it to high school LD since its inception in the early 1980's. Evidence, cases, textbooks, and summer workshops have been advertised in the *Rostrum* since well before I started reading the magazine in about 1990. Until fairly recently, most of these products had little impact on the overall shape of LD. Some students bought their evidence through the mail, for example, but these people did not often reach elimination rounds. The only LD "product" to exert anything like a national influence was the University of Iowa's summer workshop, which earned a reputation for excellent administration, trustworthy teachers, and an academically sound curriculum. Many na-

tionally successful students attended this workshop, and from what I can see, its influence on LD has been overwhelmingly for the good.

A few years ago, business began to make its presence felt in LD as never before. Someone noticed two things: First, the supply of reasonably successful students who wanted to teach at summer workshops vastly exceeded the demand for teachers at existing workshops. Second, the internet offered unprecedented opportunities to advertise cheaply, directly, and, shall we say, flexibly. These two facts suggested a business model: Hire *lots* of reasonably successful ex-debaters to form a workshop. Since they're students, they work cheap. Since they're students, they have strong rapport with the customer base (their friends). Since they're students, they can track (and, for that matter, change) the winds of LD fashion. Since they're students, they judge (or will soon be judging) many important debate rounds. And since they're students, they can get by with saying almost anything when they talk to their friends (the customers).

Viewed strictly as a business proposition, the model was a stroke of genius. And it has succeeded on a massive scale. But the summer workshop was only the anchor for a range of suddenly popular products including evidence, argument briefs, and, most recently, weekend workshops on current NFL topics (some complete with pre-fab evidence and case outlines). I am not aware of any of the sort of outfits I have described selling actual cases yet, but I know of at least two who sell DVDs of demonstration debates using staff-produced cases for each new NFL resolution. There is now at least one tournament operated by an LD business, and more are sure to appear if this proves lucra-

tive enough (by itself or as a means of advertising the rest of the product line).

The website is the public face for multi-faceted LD business concerns, and like other kinds of commercial websites, LD business websites work hard to be more than just (blatant) advertising. They host discussion boards, publish "news" stories and interviews with debate "celebrities," and post tournament results and (of course) pictures.

Websites are not the only marketing front. *Rostrum* ads are still common, as are tournament appearances by staff (sometimes in company t-shirts or even [in at least one case] animal costumes). And businesses trying to break into the marketplace of ideas still need at least one young Turk to patrol online student discussion boards (such as the popular [forum.lddebate.org](http://forum.lddebate.org)) planting pro-company messages and attacking the competition.

No doubt new companies and products and marketing techniques will emerge. Many LD students have now become regular LD consumers, but there is a lot of money yet to be made.

### II. Problems

I see four sorts of problems with the commercialization of LD. Let me be clear that I am not condemning the profit motive as such, nor am I suggesting that everyone who is now making money off of high school LD is implicated in each of the following problems. I am simply pointing to problems with the growing commercial culture in LD.

The most serious and general problem with business in debate is not unique to debate; it is possible in any educational domain and, really, in almost any human practice. The problem is that the end pursued by a business (profit) may threaten



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the ends properly pursued by the practice in which the business operates. Education aims to instill some combination of skills, knowledge, and virtues in students. There is always a risk that for-profit education schemes will compromise the proper goals and standards of a discipline in order to be more popular with consumers and hence more profitable. Although profit and excellence can pull against each other in any domain, the danger is especially acute in education because the potential consumers are, by the nature of the situation, not equipped to distinguish wheat from chaff. A defining feature of studenthood is not knowing what one needs to know. Most students know what they *want*, but few students know what they *need*. Wants can compete with needs, but businesses appeal only to wants.

High school debate is supposed to be a form of education instilling some bits of knowledge (basic moral philosophy, current events) but mostly certain skills (research, logic, rhetoric) and virtues (humility, open-mindedness, graciousness) in its participants. Some people have said that debate is *merely* a game pursued for the amusement of its players; here I will only remark that few of the people who actually pay for debate teams and tournaments would continue to pay for them if they believed that.

Two years ago (in the January 2003 *Rostrum*) I argued that the poor quality of much current LD is due to a failure on the part of those who control the game (coaches and judges) to key student incentives (ballots, speaker points, and ultimately trophies) to the larger educational ends of debate. Instead, LD has been allowed to take on a life of its own with internally evolving standards of success that are at best unrelated to, and at worst opposed to, more generally accepted standards of intellectual and rhetorical excellence. In this climate, the profit motive can be especially destructive by giving students what they want (tips for trophies now) rather than what they need (skills for life later).

And, in general, this is just what has happened. Most of the obvious examples have to do with the content of the prod-

ucts or services being sold to LDers; these examples relate in one way or another to the skills and knowledge that LD students should acquire. There can be no serious question that commercialization has fed the cancerous growth of jargon, speed, debate theory, and so-called postmodern so-called philosophy in LD.

But I want to focus here on commercialization's less noticed threat to the *virtues* that debate training should inculcate. Any well functioning person who spends much time around debaters knows that the most successful debaters are not always the best people. Successful debaters can be arrogant, combative, and cruel. This is one reason that good (i.e., successful) debaters do not always make good teachers or coaches. Debate teachers are supposed to model virtues (humility, patience, and kindness, for example) that some talented debaters never seem to acquire.

It used to be that the largest summer LD workshops (which were non-profit programs of colleges and universities) selectively hired ex-debaters as staff members partly on the basis of personal character. I don't mean that this practice was universal or perfectly realized or even articulate; nor do I mean that character was the main hiring criterion. But I believe that character did function at least as a constraint in the minds of the administrators hiring staff for such programs. I can recall several prominent debaters in the past decade who would almost surely have been hired by national workshops had they not been known to have insulted other students or disrespected their coaches. In the hiring decisions I helped to make, my colleagues and I frequently asked questions like: Does this person have the maturity and self-control to enforce rules and maintain appropriate boundaries with students? Would we be proud to present this person to parents as a teacher of their children? Is this the kind of human being we would want our students to become? Asking such questions is no special virtue; it should be standard procedure for anyone responsible to hire teachers, especially teachers who work as closely with, and exert as much influence on, their students as debate teachers do.

From what I can tell, character considerations do not meaningfully inform the hiring decisions of current for-profit workshops. These workshops want to attract as many students as possible. Ex-debaters are both cheap labor and an excellent source of publicity. Workshop students want to learn to do whatever last year's winning debaters did; they don't stop to quibble over maturity or virtue. So private workshops are now hiring as many successful ex-debaters as possible, including some who would have been deliberately not hired in earlier years. That's not to say that any workshop hires only vicious people or unworthy role models. I know several admirable, trustworthy people who teach at for-profit workshops, and there are doubtless other such people whom I do not know. But I also know of people with records of very public poor behavior who have been hired and actively promoted by for-profit workshops. These workshops are not hiring on the basis of poor character, but nor are they hiring on the basis of good character. They are not hiring on the basis of character at all. They are indifferent to character, because character does not improve their bottom line.

And, I am sorry to say, it seems to me that many non-profit workshops have, in turn, lowered their own hiring standards in order to remain competitive (and solvent). More than one LD workshop administrator has told me in so many words that their institutions are loosening their old standards in order to stay afloat.

The first problem with the growth of debate-related commerce, then, is that the profit motive may compromise educational standards. The discounting of character in workshop hiring decisions is one serious example of such compromise.

A second problem with the pursuit of profit in debate is that it encourages students to substitute purchased products for educationally valuable work. This problem is as old as mail-order evidence and cases, but it has grown recently as the use of such materials has become accepted among debaters at all levels. I am confident that I learned more in high school from the time I spent preparing for debate rounds





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than I did from the actual debate rounds themselves. Navigating a library, unpacking dense academic prose, writing clear arguments, and anticipating the dialectic of objections and replies are among the important skills LD students can acquire through their tournament preparation. But these skills come only at a high cost of time and effort. Debate businesses offer evidence, cases (or case outlines), and argument briefs at a much lower cost. And the successful names attached to these products lead—I would say *mislead*—many students to think the products are better than what the students could produce for themselves. Businesses thrive on substituting ease for effort. In some instances, this is all (or nearly all) to the good. But in an educational context where effort is the *only* means to learning, this economic division of labor is another way the profit motive threatens the purposes of the activity.

My third concern about the commercialization of LD is its promotion of an unhealthy celebrity culture. This occurs for at least two reasons. First, debate products and services will sell more if the people who sell them and the people who use them are viewed as debate stars. Second, debate students (like many people) are highly susceptible to the flattery of being treated like stars themselves, even if they are not highly accomplished. So debate businesses aggressively promote their staffs, their success stories, and even (to some extent) their ordinary customers. Their websites may circulate campy gossip and “insider only” jokes about staff and favored students. “Exclusive interviews” with popular students appear as celebrity infotainment. Pictures of regionally successful debaters with “live reports” on their performances pop up on tournament weekends. One recent web banner ad for a for-profit workshop played overtly to celebrity appeal by showing a hand reaching out as if to cover an intrusive camera with a headline reading, “Fight the paparazzi.”

I don’t mean to suggest that these kinds of tactics are unusual in our culture or especially sinister when practiced by debate businesses. But I do believe it’s unhealthy for everyone involved to elevate

high school debaters to celebrity status. Most students I’ve taught have been too fixated on tournament success even without the prospect of debate stardom. The celebrity system encourages all students to focus on the wrong values, holding out trophies and reputation as the highest goods debate can offer. Moreover, many successful debaters already have bloated egos that can only be aggravated by fawning publicity from company websites. Likewise, promoting undergraduate judges and assistants as trend-setting heroes attracts the wrong sort of alumni back to debate.

The fourth problem I see with LD businesses is that they create conflicts of interest. The same ex-debaters who do most of the grunt work at these outfits also judge frequently at tournaments. They end up judging students they have been paid to teach in the summer and students using arguments and evidence they (the judges) were paid to produce. And because for-profit workshops tend to hire armies of high school seniors early in the debate season for the next summer, these future employees are now *routinely* being judged by their future employers and colleagues. In any other domain, these financial ties would be recognized as obvious conflicts of interest.

On the one hand, some of these conflicts are not unique to employees of for-profit businesses. Staff members of established non-profit institutes also often judge students who have attended their workshops, and that, too, is a conflict of interest that should end. On the other hand, I believe that these conflicts have sometimes been exploited by debate businesses. There has, for example, been a subtext in some advertising to the effect that “Our staff does a lot of judging at *important* tournaments, so if you want to know what *wins*, it would be a *good idea* to attend this workshop.” I have talked to more than one student who felt unfairly targeted (or ignored) due to such connections between her judge and her opponent. I am sure some such reports are the result of exaggeration and misperception. But having known some of the judges in question, I doubt that all are.

When assessing conflicts of interest,

it is important to understand that a relationship need not actually produce unethical conduct in order to constitute an inappropriate conflict. The conflict is created by the circumstances, not by the immediate actions of the parties involved. So even if no debate business employee has ever judged unfairly due to his business affiliation, that affiliation still creates a conflict that should be recognized and remedied. For the same reason, not even ideally fair-minded coaches are permitted to judge their own students against the students of other coaches.

In fairness to the businesses I am criticizing, I must note that this last concern about conflicts of interest is as much a problem with tournament administration as it is with money in LD. There are many potential conflicts of interest in debate judging situations, many of them unrelated to business ties. It is tournament directors who need to be more vigilant in monitoring and blocking potential conflicts of interest. The growth of debate businesses is simply the occasion for serious and widespread conflicts of interest that must be acknowledged.

### III. Remedies

Supposing that you share my concerns about the effects of the profit motive on high school debate, what can you do? The obvious remedy is, don’t feed the beast. One of the glories of a market economy is the freedom not to buy. If you do not like the influence of mail-order evidence, “demonstration” DVD’s, or for-profit workshops, do not patronize them.

If you are a student accustomed to buying your ideas from other people, you can substitute your own work for the products sold to you by college students. You will learn more, not just about the current debate topic, but also about how to research and write. In addition to your local libraries, there are probably many people in your community, perhaps even in your circle of acquaintances, who would freely provide insights on debate topics as or more valuable than those you can purchase from a brief company.

Doing your own work is not only



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more educationally profitable, it is also massively more satisfying. If you have ever grown a tomato or built a bookcase or baked a cake or changed a tire, you know how empowering it feels to be able to do for yourself what other people must pay to have done. Similarly, you will enter debate rounds with a sense of confidence when you have mastered the topic literature and written cases for yourself. You will know your arguments inside and out because they are really yours. You will have a greater sense of responsibility for both your successes and your failures because you will know that they are rooted in work you have done rather than paid someone else to do for you. Like an athlete, you will know that whether you win or lose, you are getting stronger and sharper because you are exercising. If you are fortunate enough to have a coach and teammates who work with you on LD, you will also experience the satisfaction of working with people you like and respect to produce something greater than any one of you could have produced alone.

If you are a coach, do not purchase topic-specific debate products for your students, and discourage them from purchasing them privately. Create research and casing assignments that will force students to do their own work. They may grumble now, but they will thank you later for what

they learned from actively doing instead of passively consuming. Of course, hands-on debate preparation makes more work for coaches, too: You will have to teach your students the skills they need in order to do what LD businesses would otherwise do for them. The NFL has a number of free resources for coaches, including a growing internet archive of *Rostrum* articles on various events. Money that would have gone for topic-specific briefs can instead be spent on building a team library of classic and contemporary books that will allow students to research topics for themselves (more on this in a future article).

If your students attend summer workshops, make informed recommendations to their parents. You will, after all, have to live during the school year with whatever beliefs and attitudes those workshops instill. Find workshops with staff members you trust to serve as academic *and personal* role models. Compare costs and ask what motives drive various institutes. Non-profit workshops are often official programs of universities; for-profit workshops often just rent space from universities. Coaches opposed to the expensive residential workshop system might collaborate with local colleagues to produce low- or no-cost commuter workshops for their students.

Finally, anyone who hosts an LD tournament should adopt stringent disclosure

policies to block conflicts of interest. People who produce or sell topic-specific LD products should not judge LD rounds at all. People who have taught (or will teach) at a given summer workshop should not judge students who have attended (or who have been hired to teach at) that workshop. Rich Edwards, creator of the popular "Tabroom on the PC" tabulation software, has told me that it would be easy to revise his program to block such conflicts if tournaments requested such a revision. Coaches should firmly request that tournament directors implement these or similar policies to ensure fair and impartial judges for their students. That these changes might appear daunting for some tournaments shows just how rampant conflicts of interest are in debate judging today.

I recognize that students and coaches may have a variety of reasons for purchasing debate products, some of them legitimate. I also recognize that some of the people employed by debate companies are honorable and constructive educators. But the growing influence of money in LD and the shift away from skillful self-reliance toward passive consumption and entertainment are causes for concern.

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