

Karl Popper Debate and the Public Sphere*

Discovering the World through Debate is an introduction to educational debate, particularly to Karl Popper debate, the form most common in member countries of the International Debate Education Association. This text serves as a practical guide for those wanting to learn to debate as well as for teachers of debate in educational settings. To better understand educational debate—its functions, practices, and value—we begin by distinguishing three argument spheres: the personal, public, and technical. An “argument sphere” is a community wherein arguments are heard. We first distinguish the “public sphere” from the personal and technical spheres. Next, we define and examine debate in the public sphere, which is central to educational debate. Last, we examine how debate can be taught in educational settings in ways that emphasize the best of debate in the public sphere.

Debate is not only an activity of the public sphere. Debate also takes place in personal and technical spheres. By briefly considering how debate functions in these spheres, we can better understand how it works in public arenas.

DEBATE IN PERSONAL, TECHNICAL, AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Debate is a decision-making tool used in a variety of argumentative settings. We group these settings into three spheres or communities: the personal, the technical, and the public. These communities have different standards for distinguishing good arguments from poor ones, for deciding which debating techniques are appropriate or inappropriate, and for deciding acceptable or unacceptable norms of conduct.

Debates in personal settings include arguments between husbands and wives, parents and children, roommates, and the like. We use debate in these personal spheres to negotiate our way through disagreements that arise in everyday life. Husbands and wives argue about issues in their relationship, about personal finances, or about how to raise their children. Parents argue with their children about topics ranging from finances to the amount of freedom the children should have. The processes of critical and creative thinking that debate teaches help us act in ethical and effective ways in these personal disagreements.

Debate also functions in a technical sphere. Arguments in technical communities involve participants who share common areas of expertise. For instance,

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