

The Debate Club in the School Community*

THE BENEFITS OF DEBATE AS AN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY

In our opening discussion, we emphasized that competitive debate is directly modeled on debate in the political world. In a very real sense, students who participate in debate are preparing themselves for citizenship. They are preparing themselves to participate in the political life of the society in which they live. This does not mean that they will necessarily become politicians or civil servants, although they may. It does mean that they will have a better understanding of political issues and conflicts that they read and hear about in their daily lives.

In a more general way, students who participate in debate learn how to think critically. Thinking critically does not mean finding fault with things. It means analyzing and synthesizing ideas. Critical thinkers learn to go below the surface of an argument. They learn how to articulate unstated assumptions and to test the validity of ideas. They learn how ideas relate to each other; they understand the importance of logical consistency. Above all, critical thinkers learn how to think abstractly. They are able to see that conflicts are not always about money, personal feelings, or struggles for power—although they may seem to be on the surface. They learn, instead, that conflicts are often animated by differences of values and principles.

But critical thinking is not simply a skill that is useful for debate. It is, rather, a general intellectual skill that is valued in various guises throughout the disciplines that compose a school curriculum. In the study of literature, critical thinkers know that there is more to learning a novel than simply remembering the plot and the names of the main characters. Critical thinkers are able to articulate meanings that lie behind the text; they can see individual works as both the product of an author's vision and an expression of the author's society. In the study of history, critical thinkers do not limit themselves to memorizing facts. They appreciate the movements and forces that shape events. In mathematics and science, critical thinkers see beyond the confines of a particular problem or experiment. They come to understand the structure of laws and axioms.

* By Joseph P. Zompetti and William Driscoll