

The thinking skills acquired in debate, then, are important and useful in other activities. And the same may be said for the oratorical skills that are fostered by participation. Debaters learn how to think on their feet and to express themselves clearly in front of an audience. These skills can serve them, of course, throughout their academic careers, but they are also fundamentally important in a variety of professions, such as teaching, law, business management, or citizen activism. In sum, there are broad educational benefits to participating in debate. Debate is not a closed, isolated skill. Yes, students who participate learn how to debate, but they learn far more as well.

THE COMPOSITION OF A DEBATE CLUB

The foregoing discussion is clearly relevant to the principles guiding the composition of a debate club. Once debate is understood as an activity that is educational and intellectually beneficial, it is clear that it should be offered broadly, not narrowly. In an open society, education does not belong to a privileged minority; what is more, it embraces more than just the talented students or those who can succeed brilliantly. It is axiomatic that the study of mathematics is good for the student who studies hard and struggles to pass, not just for the student who wins the math prize at the end of the year. And it is the same with debate. Some students will win contest after contest, while others will never make it to a final round. But participation in debate is beneficial for all of them, both the winners and the losers.

The corollary is that debate clubs should be inclusive, not exclusive. In forming any kind of competitive team in a school, the temptation is to favor those who will help the team to win, but this kind of favoritism is not appropriate when it excludes students who will gain substantial educational benefits from participating. More than that, the students who are not star debaters can be contributors, not just beneficiaries. As we have emphasized earlier, debate is very much a collaborative activity. Preparation for debate competition involves extensive sharing of ideas in discussions. Students work together to craft cases. Often students who do not do well in competition—because they do not think quickly enough in a spontaneous and reactive context—are major contributors when arguments are constructed beforehand in the friendly ambience of the debate club room. They can be the students who ask the best questions or make the subtlest connections. Their participation helps other students do well in the competition.

FOSTERING A SPIRIT OF INCLUSION AND COOPERATION

Debate clubs work best when there is a strong sense of group identity, when members feel that they are part of something. The individual debater should not feel that he or she is a soloist, meeting casually with other soloists for the sake of a competition, only to go off independently afterward. Rather, the debater should feel that the debate club is like a symphony orchestra, which exists as an ongoing corporate entity. When this feeling exists, the reward is a broad sense of well being. Everyone in the group shares the joys of victory; the disappointment of loss, when shared, is assuaged. A sense of group identity is not a mystical goal that can be