



4. Professional Development

A coach should view her debate teams not as a hobby or as charity work but as an extension of her career as a teacher. A coach applies the knowledge and skills that she has acquired through her experience as an educator when working with her debaters, and conversely she learns how to employ the methods of debate in the traditional classroom. This chapter will discuss opportunities to develop as a coach, ways in which teachers can professionalize the role of debate coach within their school community, and applications of debate in the classroom.

Learning to Be a Debate Coach

In one sense, it may seem as though there is little to learn about teaching debate. After all, most coaches are already trained as teachers, and who doesn't know how to argue? There is something to this perspective: many teachers become very fine debate coaches despite having little or no formal training.

On the other hand, the profession of debate coach has been around for over one hundred years, and in that time many standards, conventions, and best practices have been developed and shared. New debate coaches who do not pursue opportunities to learn more about the activity and how to teach it are forcing themselves to reinvent the wheel. Even coaches who debated in high school or college years ago will find that much has changed in recent years, leaving them out of touch with the newest developments in debate theory.

The bottom line is that even experienced debate coaches commit themselves to constant education, and this should be doubly true for newcomers to the activity. At the same time, coaches must accept not only that they will they never be experts in debate, but that it will not be long before their students begin surpassing them in terms of knowledge of the topic and experience in debate rounds. Debaters who truly enjoy the activity immerse themselves in it. They spend free time researching, reading files, and thinking about debate. Many give up several weeks of their summer to study at institutes with some of the finest debate minds in the country. Most of all, though, they have the benefit of the best teacher out there: experience.

When it comes to learning about debate, there is simply no substitute for the experience of crafting arguments, testing them out in a round, and learning from one's mistakes. The

excitement of competition drives students to investigate the activity at a depth that a coach generally has neither the time nor the inclination to achieve.

This is nothing to worry about. In fact, it is very healthy. Some of the most successful debate programs in the country rely heavily on experienced students passing on their knowledge to beginners. The coach will have more than enough to do in handling the logistics of the program: running practices, getting the team to tournaments, etc.

Still, coaches do need to learn something about the activity to do their jobs effectively, and fortunately there are a variety of resources available to assist them in this task.

Coaching Colleagues

From the perspective of the coach, one of the most valuable things about an urban debate league is that there is a built-in support network for them. In addition to her league administrators, who make it their business to stay up-to-date on the latest methods of teaching debate, a teacher can also turn to any of the other coaches in the league for help, knowing that they are all educators in similar situations. They all come from the same school system, face similar budget constraints, and work with students who present the common challenges. Chances are good that if one coach is having a problem with something, another coach somewhere else in the league has already had to deal with the same thing and will be ready to share advice and ideas.

Thus, coaches should take advantage of any opportunities for community support that their league makes available. This includes not only official events like coaches' meetings, conferences or training seminars but also informal get-togethers, and particularly in the down-time between rounds at tournaments.

It is in every coach's interest to get to know as many other coaches as possible, but it may prove particularly valuable to seek out an experienced coach with whom one has especially good rapport in order to build a mentoring relationship. Anyone who has been around debate long enough to earn the designation 'experienced' probably loves the activity and will be more than happy to welcome new coaches into the fold. As an added benefit, students on a relatively new team will probably welcome the opportunity to meet and learn from experienced debaters who have been trained by an experienced coach.





Manuals and Textbooks

Because debate has been around for such a long time, a number of works have been published over the years for use by coaches and teachers. These manuals can be very helpful – offering advice, lesson plans, practical suggestions and principles for how to operate your team. You may want to read through several sources of information and choose the parts from each that make the most sense.

Like any other area of academic materials, these vary in quality. They also deal with a vast array of debate formats. Styles and methods for teaching the same format vary greatly with time and location. Most likely, the administration of a coach’s urban debate league will provide her with some instructional materials that are most relevant to way things are done in her league. Once again, consulting with other coaches will usually turn up valuable suggestions as well.

The NAUDL Policy Debate Manual

The NAUDL has newly revised its manual titled: “Policy Debate: An Introduction for Urban Debate League Students and Coaches.” It can be accessed on the NAUDL website and you can also receive paper copies from your league director. The manual explains the basics of policy debate, details strategies for affirmative and negative debating, and describes the responsibilities and techniques for speaker positions.

University Assistants

Most major cities that are home to urban debate leagues also support one or more university debate teams. In some cities, college programs may even have been the impetus for the league’s formation. In any event, there are most likely members of those teams who would be more than willing to assist new coaches with policy debate instruction. Even in cities where there are no college debate programs, there are typically many former debaters who attend local universities. These students may be particularly interested with local high school teams since they do not have college debate program to join. In either case, these assistants can provide valuable expertise on current policy debate practices that not even an experienced coach can rival. Plus, because they are close in age to the students, they can form valuable friendship and mentoring relationships, even serving as role models for students who never thought of themselves as ‘college material’ before.



Nuts and Bolts: The Limits of University Assistants

The assistance of a current college debater can be invaluable, especially to a beginning coach who does not have any debate experience of her own. Coaches should consider limits to what these assistants can or should be allowed to do, however. Coaches should discuss with the assistant exactly her role and commitment to the team, and then keep an eye out for potential problems.

Lack of Teaching Experience. No matter how good they are at debating, most university assistants have little or no experience as educators. Thus, they may present information too quickly or in ways that is over the heads of or just not relevant to their audiences. Coaches should make sure they are frequently present whenever their university assistant is working with students, both to help her develop more effective teaching practices and to help the students comprehend the material they are learning.

Different Styles. College debate is in many ways very different from the activity as it is practiced in many UDL's, even though the rules are largely the same. University assistants should be helping students to succeed at the style of debate that is used in their UDL, not encouraging them to debate like a college debater. This problem can be nipped in the bud if the coach and the assistant have a conversation about stylistic differences and reach an understanding about what students need to learn.

Busy Schedules. University debaters must balance the usual demands of college coursework with the demands of their own debate careers. If they are frequently traveling to compete on the weekends, they probably spend most of their days catching up on schoolwork. The result is that they may not have as much time as they would like to help out with a high school debate team. Coaches should talk with their assistants at the beginning of the year to work out a reasonable level of commitment that does not interfere with the assistant's schoolwork or debate career. Even with careful planning it is important to note that this schedule may occasionally be disrupted by semester changes and college breaks.

Inappropriate Behavior. Although university assistant may be closer in age to the students than to the coach, they are still bound by the ethical and legal obligations of adult faculty members. They should try to form friendships with members of the team, but this cannot come at the expense of responsible behavior. Romantic or sexual relationships are off-limits, as is the use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs with, in front of, or around the students. It is also important that they understand that they are obligated to report such behavior on the part of the students if they witness it and to report physical or sexual abuse if a student mentions it to them. Be sure that assistants are clear on these ground rules BEFORE they begin working with students; school policy may even require it.



Summer Workshops for Coaches

Many summer institutes that train students in debate also offer programs for coaches. Summer workshops teach the substance matter of the new national topic. They also teach students how to research and conduct practice sessions. In addition to directly learning methods of debate coaching from experienced instructors, these workshops offer a valuable opportunity for coaches to tap into a much wider network of other coaches beyond those in their league. Coaches can learn an incredible amount of information concerning both debate and how to teach it more effectively.

Defraying Costs to Summer Coaching Workshops

Unfortunately, travel, tuition, and lodging at these institutes can be expensive, although those costs vary greatly from location to location. Both the National Forensic League and the National Debate Coaches Association provide financial aid to coaches to attend these workshops. Often if you contact the workshops directly they might be willing to waive all or part of the local costs. Most workshops are eager to have coaches observe their programs, so they will do what they can to work out arrangements. Sometimes, visiting coaches are allowed to earn their keep by assisting the directors of the institute as chaperones or in some other capacity.

Many UDL's offer free training seminars for their coaches and are sometimes able to recruit the same top-notch instructors who are billing out at top-dollar to for-profit summer institutes.

In the end, though, such seminars are valuable professional development opportunities that will benefit both the teacher and her school's debate team, and the school should really be willing to assist with the cost as they would for any other professional development activity. The next section of this chapter will discuss strategies for seeking such professional support from one's school administration.



School Support

Both common sense and a large body of research support the notion that a school is only as strong as its community of teachers. Thus, school administrators have a vested interest in supporting the professional development of the teachers who work for them. This means enhancing the ability of teachers to use the tools and methods already available to them and expanding the range of tools and methods at their disposal. Coaching the debate team can do both of these.

Unfortunately, too many administrators treat the debate team like just another extracurricular activity rather than as an educationally valuable part of the school community. Consequently, many coaches do not receive the support and compensation that they deserve as professional educators.

Ways that Schools Can Support Their Coaches

Providing Stipends. Some leagues provide stipends for their coaches, others leave this up to each school to provide. Coaches who are not being paid for their efforts should begin lobbying the school administration for compensation based on the extra hours she is putting into a school activity. Sports coaches get compensated, as do teachers in summer school and other educational programs that take place outside of the regular school day. Debate is a little of both, so why shouldn't debate coaches get paid?

The local teachers' union may be helpful; teachers' contracts often specify compensation for teachers who work in recognized after-school activities. One strategy in this area would be to get the debate team 'recognized'.

Hiring Assistants. Even if the league provides the coach stipend, it may not provide additional funding for an assistant coach. Funding a stipend for an assistant can be a less expensive way for the school to make a contribution. The school may also be more willing to support the assistant when outside funds support the coach. Most likely, the assistant will need to be another teacher at the school, but sometimes schools will pay others like a local college student who is helping out.

Creating a Debate Class. If a school is not willing or does not have to pay its debate coach, the school may be able to support the coach by allowing the time she spends working with the debate team replace some of her previous teaching duties. For example, the creation of a debate class gives her extra time to accomplish debate teamwork that she otherwise has to do in her free time. A debate class can also broaden the impact and appeal of participating on the debate team to a larger audience of students, which is good for both the school and the team. Plus, when debate is taught as a class, coaches have new leverage to get students to come to practice, compete in tournaments, etc. Some of these may be graded course requirements and other commitments to the team can be rewarded with extra academic credit.



Allowing for a Planning Period. The provision by the school of an extra planning period, during which the coach is not responsible for teaching a class, can give her time to keep up with administrative duties such as tournament registration and support building that she would otherwise have to do after hours.

Paying for Incidentals. Urban debate leagues cut down on the costs of operating a debate team by eliminating the need for tournament registration fees and overnight stays. However, other costs still arise. There are transportation expenses, photocopies and printed briefs to be made, and supplies to buy. These costs can add up when they come out of the coach's pocket. A school that won't contribute money to the team directly may still be able to offset these costs by providing access to school resources such as buses, photocopiers, computers, printers and even the building itself so that the team can host a tournament.

Granting Professional Leave. Schools can minimize the demands that coaching places on a teacher's time and money by giving her paid leave and a reliable substitute teacher for debate-related activities that occur during a regular school day. This would include the time missed to attend tournaments or workshops.

Supporting Professional Development. When coaches invest time and effort into becoming better teachers, the school benefits. The school should support the time commitment by covering the cost and/or counting the time toward professional development requirements of the school district.

Winning support from a school doesn't happen overnight. The coach must develop an advocacy strategy and be persistent, perhaps starting with some of the smaller requests. The most important thing is to keep the successes and benefits of the debate team visible, and to explain how school support is necessary for this great program to be sustainable. The coach's willingness to invest her own time and energy to begin the team should be proof of its value and makes the case for giving her the professional support she deserves.