Debating and public speaking as oral literacy: promoting democratic education

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This paper is a reflection on the NSW Department of Education debating and public speaking programs and efforts to make these programs more inclusive and democratic.

This paper is largely a reflection on my experience as a teacher/trainer and adjudicator in debating and public speaking for the Performing Arts Unit in the NSW Department of Education and Training. My experience is over roughly a decade, from the late 1990s, and is concentrated in working with primary school students, both at a state level and in regional and school specific programs, primarily in south-western Sydney.

The skills of oral literacy clearly go beyond those learned in debating and public speaking. Oral literacy is about a broader notion of communication. Nonetheless, these skills are an important component of our ability to communicate, and particularly our ability to gain recognition and respect for our ideas and opinions. These skills are particularly important because they are central to much of the way in which our society publicly deliberates, and because these skills are often used as an informal mechanism for stratification and establishing (or more likely reinforcing) social hierarchies.

The history of public speaking and debating in NSW offers an insight into a process of democratisation that has been taking place in the state’s schools. Skills that were once confined to a social elite are increasingly becoming part of the mainstream education curriculum. In the process the definitions of public speaking and of debating, the skills and the judgement of what constitutes ‘good speech’ have also begun to change.
This is not to argue that these skills have lost their hierarchical characteristics altogether. Public speaking and debating remain a very particular form of communication – even within the public realm where people come to discuss politics, social organisation and how we collectively live together.

As a reflection, this paper is also informed, although perhaps less explicitly, by other experiences. I have also worked in the non-government sector, with social movements, particularly around issues of Indigenous rights and issues of peace and conflict. I have also been an active member of the Greens, a party that operates via consensus, a very different discursive principle to the implicit logic of debating.

In this paper I want to argue that the developments within public speaking and debating in NSW are to be welcomed. I argue these developments represent two separate but connected processes. Firstly, public speaking and debating have been opened up to more students. New competitions have emerged, skills have been incorporated into other aspects of the curriculum and schools previously excluded have been included. Secondly, the nature of debating and public speaking has itself begun to change. Aspects of affectation most closely associated with status and class have been diluted, there has been a shift away from formalism and there has been greater attention paid to the skills of listening and engaging with the ideas of others.

These changes make for a more democratic public sphere. They do so for different reasons that reflect the nature of the different changes. Not only do these developments promise a more inclusive public debate in the sense that more students, from more diverse backgrounds, participate, but the nature of that debate may also be more inclusive because of the values it embodies. This is far from an ideal picture. But it appears a step in the right direction.
The changing face of debating and public speaking

Many aspects of public speaking and debating have the characteristics of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) termed ‘cultural capital’. Cultural capital refers to the cultural resources that allow privilege to be transferred between generations. Bourdieu argued that elements of the education system were largely dedicated to this process. Educational systems, he argued, set in place structures where those from wealthy and middle class backgrounds prospered at the expense of working class children. By doing this, the education system obscured the processes of class reproduction – making the success of the better off appear to be the result of skill and hard work, rather than the privileges of birth.

Something of this process certainly appears to be in place in the realms of debating and public speaking. For some time these activities were dominated by a relatively small number from relatively elite schools. There is a very strong tradition of debating, for example, amongst the elite Greater Public Schools (GPS) in NSW. Within the public system the strongest debating traditions are in inner city selective schools, such as Sydney Boys and Sydney Girls, North Sydney Boys and North Sydney Girls and Fort Street.

A shift to a more inclusive approach has begun. Here I focus on the public system, primarily because this forms the great bulk of my experience, but also because it is in the public system that we would expect to find the best test on inclusion. The number of schools, students and competitions have all increased rapidly over the past 10–15 years. Prior to 1990 the Department of Education ran three debating competitions, for Years 9 and 10, Year 11 and Year 12. The Department also ran a public speaking competition for senior high school students sponsored by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, although this began about 25 years after the debating competitions.

The number of competitions began to expand in the 1990s. A junior high school public speaking competition, sponsored by Legacy, began in 1995 and a primary school competition for students in Years 3–6 began in 1996. A primary school debating competition, for Years 5 and 6
began in 1995 and a similar competition for Years 7 and 8 began in 1998. The nature of these competitions has also changed in some respects, although this is discussed later in the paper.

The number of students involved, and of schools, has also increased. In 2006 over 1300 teams entered the debating competitions. Teams typically comprise four students, although many schools rotate members throughout the competition allowing greater participation. Over 2000 primary school students entered the primary public speaking competition – the Multicultural Perspectives Public Speaking Competition – in 2007.

These are still relatively small numbers. However, this represents the tip of a much larger iceberg. In many schools, those involved in formal competitions are only a small proportion of those that engage with debating or public speaking. Many schools have internal competitions, or mini-regional competitions with neighbouring schools, to allow greater participation. Those that excel are then entered into the more formal statewide competitions. Likewise, debating and public speaking skills are increasingly being integrated into assessments for core subjects, such as English and History. It is becoming increasingly difficult to complete a school education without having to get up in front of your class and make a case.

From my experience some of the most important changes were taking place at the edges of the formal competitions. The Department also runs a series of skills workshops and training days for students and teachers. These ‘flying squads’ travel around the state, from the Riverina to the North Coast, from eastern Sydney to the far west of the state. A typical event will include students from a number of neighbouring schools, usually a significant proportion (sometimes all) of a particular year. A typical day might have anything up to a couple of hundred students in total.

The workshops usually run all day and involve a number of experienced debaters and public speakers giving an overview of the skills involved, followed by students practising those skills in small groups. The trainers are generally drawn from the pool of adjudicators, who are made up of
the more successful high school debaters once they have left school. The training is focused on broad skills development, and so involves a number of theatre-type games that focus on getting students comfortable with being in front of an audience and thinking on their feet. The days also include brainstorming activities designed to teach students how to think creatively about arguments and how to structure their case.

These one-off interventions are generally supported by a longer term commitment from key teachers in different regions of the state. These teachers usually run the local competition and coordinate with neighbouring schools, as well as promoting debating and public speaking in their own school. There have been a number of key teachers around the state who have championed the cause, and this has been a key factor in the expansion of debating, particularly beyond the traditional heartland of the inner-city, northern Sydney and the selective schools.

Perhaps the most salient indicator of the success of these teachers, supported by the Arts Unit within the Department, has been the success of individual schools from outside the core zones of traditional success. Colo High School has twice won the Year 9 and 10 competition. Oxley High School in Tamworth won the inaugural Year 7 and 8 competition and Dubbo Public School has won the Year 5 and 6 competition. These are not the only examples, but they highlight the point.

More broadly there is a pattern of broad participation from around the state. In 2007 there were a total of over 1400 teams involved in debating competitions. The largest single group came from south-west Sydney (212). There are reasonable numbers from all regions of the state, the lowest being 71 teams from the Northern Tablelands region.

It is important not to overstate the trend. The high school representative teams remain dominated by a handful of selective schools, although this partly represents broader dynamics in the education system. There also remains a strong tradition of private schools paying for private coaches to assist their teams – a luxury very few public schools can afford.
Nonetheless, the trend appears positive. One of the concerns in recent years has been that funding to the flying squads has declined. It is an expensive line item – involving staff travelling and staying around the state, as well as leave for teachers to take students. But it is also demonstrably valuable to the process of democratising these skills.

Beyond the programs supported directly through the Arts Unit of the Department, which runs both the competitions and the flying squads, there have been other initiatives that have directly targeted schools outside the normal core of debating and public speaking.

I have been involved in a number of targeted coaching programs within the public system that in some ways mimic the private coaching offered within private schools. The main differences have been both that the students involved have fair less experience, and that the programs are generally targeted at a broader audience than those engaged in competition debating or public speaking.

The most notable of these experiences was in south-west Sydney. The district office, led by Kathy Rushton, began a speaking and listening program for students in a number of primary schools, supported by funding for disadvantaged students. The program ran for a number of weeks after school, and received strong support from a number of principals. Many of the students were from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly from Arabic cultures, although none had significant problems with understanding English.

The program helped to establish internal debating competitions in and between a number of schools in the region, driven particularly by Auburn North Public and the district office. This is a region that had no prior formal debating or public speaking tradition, and is now one of the most economically and politically marginalised parts of Sydney. Now it is one of the regions with the highest participation in debating. The feedback from parents about the program has been extremely positive. Parents clearly place a high value on seeing their children speak in public, particularly where they are engaging with big ideas and advancing an intellectual case.
The response of parents highlighted for me the cultural significance of speaking skills. Being able to make a case publicly, and engaging in argument, is highly valued. I think part of the reason for this is the cultural capital that comes with public speaking – it is associated with power and authority. But it also reflects that power and authority directly. Public speaking and debating are important tools in a democracy. They enable views to be put and people to be persuaded. It is particularly important for those groups who are marginalised from mainstream public discourse, and whose experiences are likely to be different from the experiences of those that dominate public debate.

Building a culture of debating and public speaking, normalising these skills, throughout our schools is an important step towards building a more inclusive and a more democratic society. The efforts of principals, teachers and those working in the Department have all contributed to a significant expansion in the reach of public speaking and debating. Of course, there remain limitations, but these efforts have had real results.

Changing the nature of debating and public speaking
Not only has debating and public speaking expanded in terms of the numbers and backgrounds of those involved, it has also changed in terms of the nature of the skills themselves. The way in which the main competitions are judged has been changing over time. These changes have been driven from within the public system and the leadership role that has increasingly been played by the Arts Unit, and its director, Lloyd Cameron, as the number of competitions and the number of participants has expanded.

The changes have been similar in both debating and public speaking. However, the issues are perhaps most pronounced in debating. Here, adjudication has traditionally focused on three broad areas. These areas are known as the ‘three Ms’ – manner, matter and method.

Manner is generally related to the way in which material is presented. It includes things like speaking clearly, modulating your voice and dressing appropriately. Matter relates to the substance of what is presented and
Method relates to the structure of the material – from simple things like ensuring you have an introduction, to more complex concepts such as ensuring your definition is consistent with your material and that you structure your case to allow the other side to engage appropriately.

The three Ms provide a definition of ‘good speech’. And until relatively recently this understanding was codified through a marking formula. Each speaker would receive a mark out of 100 – consisting of a mark out of 40 for each of manner and matter and a mark out of 20 for method. The totals for each speaker would then be added and the team with the highest score would be judged the winner.

This obviously defines good speech in a particular way. It gives significant weight to the way ideas are presented, because of the high mark for manner. More particularly, the definition of ‘good’ manner becomes very important. Including aspects of presentation like dress has a particular impact, but so too does ‘speaking clearly’. For many people, having an accent makes someone’s speech less clear. It can also tend to encourage more theatrical performances.

Both the construction of manner and the weighting of manner within the marking system tended to reinforce existing preconceptions about what classified good speech. Just as importantly, focusing on manner tended to encourage participants to learn material by rote, and to regurgitate, rather than to engage.

Debates happen fairly quickly. Speakers will talk for 4–10 minutes, depending on the level. There may be a minute or so between speeches while an adjudicator notes things down and to allow the next speaker to gather their thoughts. That does not leave much time to listen to what has been said, absorb it and then develop a response. Those who do attempt to engage will almost always make mistakes. They will stumble, they may repeat themselves, they may have to stop and think for a moment.

The construction of manner and the weight it is given militate against genuine engagement. Students who engage tend not to do as well at manner as those who just reiterate what they were always going to say –
sometimes in a form that attempts to anticipate what their opponents might have said and therefore feign engagement.

It is perhaps obvious why I might have a problem with such a marking system. It encourages a form of speech that I regard as less democratic, and it discourages speech that is far more democratic. The idea of debate, at least in the public realm of civil society and politics, is surely to contribute to what John Stuart Mill would call the ‘market place of ideas’ – to do the sort of job we imagine of science; to put forward propositions and to test them by looking for evidence and challenging their logic.

To focus on the way things are said, rather than on what is said, is to encourage a form of debate that lacks substance. Moreover, it is to define authoritative speech in ways that are almost entirely cultural, rather than ways that are based on more substantive and objective criteria. I am not arguing that debate necessarily leads to truth, but I believe there are clear benefits to defining good speech in ways that minimise attributes that are part of a person’s cultural inheritance and maximise those attributes that are part of a broadly scientific approach to knowledge.

Fortunately, this desire is exactly what has informed the changes in adjudication and the definition of good speech in recent years. Adjudicators, particularly at senior levels, increasingly mark according to a different system. Rather than awarding marks for each speaker and then calculating totals, debating is generally adjudicated accord to a principle of seizing the initiative – reflected in the manual for high school debating ‘Taking the Initiative’.

This is a less well defined measure, but it attempts to capture the way one might ideally wish people to participate in the public sphere. It rewards genuine engagement with other people’s ideas. It also encourages teams to structure their case to allow a real debate, rather than trying to define the other side out of the game or use clever logical tricks to prevent the other side having a fair chance. Of course it still takes account of the substance of what is said, it just encourages each speaker to try and engage with where the debate is up to and add their
new substance in this light, while also challenging what their opponents have said before them.

This style of adjudication specifically rewards those students who attempt to rebut their opponents. Adjudicators are even told, as are teams, that the odd umm or ahh is to be encouraged if it means that people are genuinely trying to engage with ideas. As a result, the traditional aspects of manner, while not irrelevant, are now far less significant than they once were.

Likewise the way matter is judged has changed. Where once quoting great historical events was considered the pinnacle of good substance, now debaters are encouraged to use material that is topical and current, drawing from popular culture, news and current affairs.

In public speaking competitions this has gone one step further. The main primary schools competition is explicitly focused on multiculturalism. The competition thus makes the lived experience of students a legitimate source of material, particularly for those from minority cultures. It encourages people to reflect on their experience and the experiences of others, and to engage in contemporary debates about identity and living together.

Together these changes have meant not only an expansion in who participates in speaking, but a transformation in how the parameters of speech are defined. The result, I suggest, is both a more inclusive and a more democratic practice. One that teaches students to listen to each other, think about what others are saying and genuinely attempt to engage with those ideas.

This is not to say that Bourdieu’s fears have been fully allayed. No doubt debating and public speaking, like most of the education system, play a role in reproducing, rather than removing, inequality. But these have been important steps in the right direction. Encouraging even greater participation, and continuing to encourage a reflexive and critical appraisal of the way competitions are set up and judged and how students are taught, must continue. Given the importance of these oral literacy skills to both the prospects of individual students and to our
democracy, we need to pay attention to how these aspects of education continue to evolve.

References