

A Rhetorical Model of Debating

Stephen M. Llano

Introduction

To assign a debate in a course or class is to teach on two levels. The obvious level is that of our expressed and explicit content: We want students to gain a familiarity with the appropriate information for that subject or topic through that exciting, dynamic, and intense mode that only a debate assignment can provide. The next level is that of the discourse of appropriateness – learning how to think and speak like a member of a field of study. A debate is not just a ruse to get students excited and interested in the course material; it is also practice in sounding like a member of a scholarly field. And practice in speaking and arguing like such a member is practice in thinking as a member. It is practice in rhetoric.

These two levels of debate work hand in glove to give students an engaging educational experience. They get to see, hear, and feel themselves as something other than themselves. Engaged in embodied practice, they hear unfamiliar words and terms in their own voice. They express strong opinions on recently learned material. They get a glimpse of how they could be by developing who they are through the practice and power of oratory.

The success of debate as pedagogy is dependent on how it is modeled. Deborah Tannen offers an anecdote as to the dangers of poorly modeled debate through a description of a class debate she witnessed:

Only a few students are participating in the debate; the majority of the class is sitting silently, maybe attentive but perhaps either indifferent or actively turned

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off. And the students who are arguing are not addressing the subtleties, nuances, or complexities of the points they are making or disputing (Tannen 1998, 256).

This model of debate was brought into the school from the world. We instruct students to change their writing habits, and correct their views on history, but we don't think about correcting their views on debate when practiced. Educators can either reinforce the conception of debate students arrive with or question it.

All students enter the classroom carrying a suitcase full of ideological assumptions about discourse: Fact, opinion, argument, evidence, debate, speech, and writing, have well-defined limits and identities. Education should transform these firm conceptions into modalities of process. Likewise, debating is a process of instruction, but debating also instructs students what debate is meant to look like. Just like in other forms of rhetoric instruction, such as writing, students' view of writing influences the value of the practice beyond the campus.

Most often, debate is conceptualized as a game or contest, where the winner makes the best arguments. This model seems sufficiently interesting and can teach students about the topic. However, I argue that debate should be modeled rhetorically, as this process of speaking appropriately to audiences from the perspective of a field of study. Instead of a game metaphor, I argue debate should be conceived of as a maze, a labyrinth, where the choices in which way to go are equally as important as solving the maze, getting out, or finding out what lurks at the center. This metaphor concentrates attention on debate itself in a way that forces students to question normative assumptions about debating, and perhaps gets them to think about what debate should look like in their communities and government.

1. Debate as a Game

Debate has been present in the formal curriculum of the United States long before there was a United States. Colonial college education featured debating as both method and assessment in classrooms (Potter 1944). Most colonial colleges existed to train students for careers in the ministry or in law. In the 19th century, debate was removed as a regular feature from the curriculum, and became the foundation for so-called 'literary societies' where students would gather for extra-curricular entertainment featuring orations, dramatic readings of plays, poems, and literature, singing, and regularly scheduled debates¹. After the American Civil War, the late 19th century saw a return of debate to the formally recognized curriculum in the guise of inter-collegiate debates, which were first held in the 1880s. The popularity of these debates meant that specialized courses in politics and economics were created in order to provide students with every advantage to win these showcase events and make their home university look good.

¹ For more on what literary society debates were like, see Keith 2007 and Ray 2004.

The twentieth century saw the rise of formal speech communication departments on the back of this debate success. Typically taught by the local preacher or a well-meaning attorney, oratory courses were not taken seriously by most university faculty. Professor James Milton O’Neill, the first editor of «The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking» sought to establish credibility for early speech professors by arguing they were experts in debate. Debating was like a game, he argued, and like any game you need those versed in the rules, moves, and expertise of it to determine who really did the best job in debating. As he saw it:

Argument that is worthwhile has an intellectual basis. It is built upon facts and logical inference rather than on ardent convictions. Skill in the use of the facts and inferences available may be gained on either side of a question without regard to convictions. Instruction and practice in debate should give young men this skill. And where these matters are properly handled, stress is not laid on getting the speaker to think *rightly* in regard to the merits of either side of these questions – but to think *accurately* on both sides (O’Neil 1915a, 83).

The game of debate isn’t about getting the right answer, but an accurate one. For O’Neill, what is meant to be ‘right’ is the mode of engagement, the formation of arguments, and the method of speaking. Debate has a form that can be evaluated by experts in that form.

Since students didn’t come up with the topic, and had to defend one side or the other, figuring out who was right on the issue made little sense for debate contests. The side that was better at winning the debate, instead of being right on the issue had to win. This required evaluation of «the quality of the work done by the contestants in research, reasoning, and speaking» by «experts in debate» (O’Neil 1915b, 203). Experts can determine who did it right, who won the debate contest, distinct from what anyone might feel about the issue.

O’Neill had many detractors over the first three years of the new journal, such as Professor William Hawley Davis who argued teaching debate as a game replaces the most important pedagogical elements with training in tricks meant to sway judges. Davis suggested a form of deliberative role-play, where the audience and debaters took on the role of interested members in a body that has been assembled to vote on some important, controversial matter.

Select a certain number of individuals [from the audience] who can be trusted to *assume the attitude* of open-minded members of a deliberative body; conduct the contest with them in that attitude; then put the motion to them – and perhaps swallow the medicine they administer, as the minority in a deliberative body must do (Davis 1915).

Davis wanted students to have simulated experience in speaking to ‘real’ audiences in deliberative assemblies. For him the ability of debate to serve as a teaching tool relied on its connection to real-world application, and appeals to debate-rule experts interrupted that.

O’Neill’s response was that games are a common pedagogical tool, as long as instructors and students do not lose sight of the reason the game is played:

[...] just as similar contests between chess teams, glee clubs, track teams, and football elevens are artificial. But this is no indictment of debating. If we will just recognize it for what it is and treat it accordingly, we can get from it all the benefits of keen intellectual sport and thorough training in clear thinking and effective speaking (O'Neil 1915a).

When something is seen as a game it is no detriment, instead they are able to clearly focus on doing well and therefore get the larger benefits of participating. The game metaphor keeps everyone learning, by directing attention on the goals of competition.

O'Neill muses that if we evaluated debate with a non-expert perspective we would also support, «non-writers to judge contests in short story or essay writing; non-sculptors, contests in sculpture; non-painters, contests in painting» (O'Neil 1915b, 203). This comparison moves debate into the world of art and artistic practices, which makes it much more dependent on the audience rather than the rules. Chess, for example, does not change in strategy or style for the audience. But painting, writing, and sculpting do change, often long after they have been created, in the presence of audiences that artists could not have predicted would come around. But this nuance would be ignored. O'Neill is in a difficult position with his metaphor: Debate must be a game or we lose focus on evaluating the act of debate itself because personal preferences get in the way. I am not sure how having a painter or poet judge a painting or poetry contest avoids this, but perhaps it is because O'Neill conceptualizes the art itself apart from the action that the contest is evaluating. Is art best evaluated on the type of brushstroke used?

This conception is not the perfect metaphor, or even a desirable model. The game metaphor encourages one to see game success as mastery of the art rather than success in the moment. The focus of a game being winning, or beating an opponent also encourages a conception of debating that discounts process in favor of results. Instead of concentrating attention on method, participants look for ways to beat opponents haphazardly, looking for weaknesses in opposition cases rather than attempting to build strong positions for themselves. Furthermore, it is unclear if the positive educational benefits of O'Neill's conception of the relationship between the game and the practice of rhetoric/debate in the world outside of it would automatically relate. Without the presence of the game - the rules, the structure, and the discursive authorization of, «we are having a debate now, everyone get into place», would those who have been through debate training associate see the connection to the sorts of deliberative forums that they might be in one day?

O'Neill's conception of debate as a game that teaches good reasoning and speech skills continued on for the next 50 years of debate pedagogical scholarship, culminating in one of the most well-known debate books, *Decision by Debate*. In this book, Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede establish debate as a real-world game that is not designed to teach or practice an art, but one that is designed to provide training and practice in making good decisions. They de-

fine debate as a «co-operative testing device» that is meant to «test alternative means of achieving common end» (Ehninger & Brockriede, 1971). Seeing debate as a superior critical method of crafting solutions to problems, their model ‘bleaches’ debate of its richer possibilities, yet preserves the notion that it should be taught as a contest where one side wins.

Although recent research supports the idea that debating is the most efficacious and efficient way to reach a quality decision in a dispute, this hardly calls for a reduction of debating to the role of potentially valuable tool for problem solving (Mercier and Sperber 2017, 203). Debate helps people make better decisions not by reducing debate to a series of steps in problem solving, but by contextualizing arguments within the situation being considered, and giving people practice in articulating those situational arguments.

Contrasting these two historically popular models of debate is what I call the rhetorical model, which is understood through the metaphor of the labyrinth. Debate is the practice of making choices of how to appropriately present material to an audience in order to change their motives. This should be the heart of the debate model, a focus on what choices the speaker has with the material given context, topic, situation, and audience. The metaphor to use to best understand this debate model is the labyrinth.

2. Labyrinthine Debate

The debate-as-game, or debate as a skill metaphor only consists of demonstrating an expertise, or a high-level skill in argument before a judge, or a panel of people who are also experts in argument. This model doesn’t include the difficulties of approach for a topic, and how one approach in one situation will not be effective in another. The rhetorical nature of argument requires the speaker to adjust, adapt, and refine claims based on the audience. To capture that in a debate model the pedagogy must be focused on what moves the students make, not whether or not they are convincing in the end.

Modeling debate as a labyrinth makes debate the complex, challenging, and rewarding pedagogical experience we know it can be. The etymology of the labyrinth has roots in words for ‘well-built’ or ‘well-designed’ as well as confusion, delusion, and deceit. How often have we thought about debating with these terms in mind? The rich history and conceptualization of the relation between the labyrinth and the one who walks through it is a powerful metaphor that allows us to open the conceptualization of debate into rich pedagogical theory.

Labyrinths can be either multicursal, where there are real choices involved in the pathways including dead ends and turns that send you back the way you came, or unicursal, where no matter which way you turn, you will wind up in the center of the maze. «Both designs are thus planned chaos, examples of artistic elaboration that baffles or dazzles according to the beholder’s perspective (and the architect’s skill)» (Doob 1990, 52). There appears to be a great difference here, but both models of labyrinth can blend into one another. «If one passes successfully through a multicursal labyrinth without retracing one’s steps, a

mapping of one's travels would describe a unicursal pattern: multiplicity still exists in the maze itself, but the correct choices of the maze-walker define a single path that others can follow» (Doob 1990, 53). Sometimes this metaphor is used to represent making a moral choice in the 'walk' through a life of temptations and wrong turns. In debate, we use it to indicate that representing good ideas before an audience is never a straightforward path.

Debates, like labyrinths can be seen as either multicursal or unicursal, or coexist as I described above. Of course, students see any debate topic as multicursal at first, trying to avoid the dead ends and false leads. After some time, students who are perceived as good or having 'gotten it' or 'figured it out' become envied by their peers, transforming the massive possibilities of the multicursal debate into a unicursal one. It is the job of the teacher to continuously remind students that there might be other ways to get through the topic, find good arguments, and persuade.

More importantly, we can work toward preserving the benefits of the multicursal perspective - having students concentrating on discovering different ways, turns, and moves through the topic - by making the criteria for evaluating the debate not successful navigation of the maze, but the quality of each choice while in it. This would mean that judges would evaluate the ways that participants argued, the choices they made in presentation, and not just whether they had an argument that beat another one. Getting out of the maze, or getting to the center of it doesn't matter if the labyrinth is unicursal.

Labyrinths also encourage multiple perspectives, which makes them a good metaphor for a debate model. The labyrinth tempts us to enter it, to see if we can figure it out, move through it on the plane that it exists. At the same time, we long for the bird's-eye view, looking down at all the twists and turns, and seeing all the possibilities at once. This dual-vision desire was not lost on the ancient builders and designers of labyrinths, they often constructed images that would appeal to us from both perspectives. Penelope Reed Doob writes, «A process of moving from one point of view to another-a kind of convertibility-is implied» (Doob 1990, 52). Viewers were meant to think of the labyrinth as a place of change, of conversion, of a moving between points of view. Like debates, labyrinths are formal structures that are designed to get you to think about change itself while you entertain two simultaneous perspectives. When designing debates we should strive to keep the idea of perspective unfinalized and alive for students.

Debate benefits from being conceptualized in a similar way. Designed like a labyrinth, there is value in observing a debate, walking through the moves, participating in that way, but also in considering all the possible moves involved, or the design of the maze. Creating a topic makes us take these two different positions on debate: Will it be challenging and interesting? Will they lose interest? And will they learn something - will they make it through *and* learn something? Such questions become the center of debate design with the labyrinth in mind.

Labyrinths have often been used as educational metaphors because of the contrast they present. They give the student choice, but offer a guide through the choices in the form of the designer, who serves as a teacher. Doob explains:

Intrinsically, there are countless paths, innumerable ways to approach the goal of specific knowledge. At the same time, the path selected by the teacher from so many possibilities may seem unicursal: he knows where he is going and how to get there. But to the pupil, the same mental journey may appear multicursal, with one series of questions and choices superseded by another series, leading to an as yet unimaginable goal (Doob 1990, 90).

This understanding of the labyrinth is similar to the model of education suggested by Jacques Ranciere, who argues that the best education is when teachers avoid ‘stultification’ of minds and allow both student and teacher to share constructed meanings, where points of view are verified through a shared capacity for thought: «This power of equality is at once one of duality and one of community. There is no intelligence where there is aggregation, the binding of one mind to another. There is intelligence where each person acts, tells what he is doing, and gives the means of verifying the reality of his action» (Ranciere 1991, 32). Modeling debate in this way allows for the student to explore various turns and choices, and forbids the teacher from merely saying ‘this way’, as the pathways suggested by the labyrinth of the topic will look all equally interesting to the student and demand some justification.

The key feature of the labyrinth, no matter the design, is the *ambage*, which can be understood as the deliberate insertion of circuitous pathways that favor twists, turns, and passageways over efficiency or directness in reaching the middle, or the exit. The element of the ambage is what makes a labyrinth such a good pedagogical metaphor, as it is a continuous confrontation with choice that requires the student to return to their method in order to decide which way to go. Doob describes the ambage as follows:

A labyrinth must be circuitous in process; it must have ambages; those ambages may be simply roundabout, as in a unicursal design, or they may involve doubleness, choice, uncertainty. Anything circuitous – a multi-episodic quest, an ornate and highly amplified text, a complex piece of logic – is labyrinthine in this sense, and since neither model permits straightforward access to the center, both partake of labyrinthine ambages. How a maze-walker copes with ambages, and whether there are directions, will determine what he learns, whether he emerges successfully, and what his final perception of the labyrinth will be – order or chaos (Doob 1990, 54).

The ambage is the pedagogical heart of the labyrinth, and why the labyrinth might exist in the first place. At the center might be something good, or the exit could stand for liberation or freedom. The maze-walker must face only their own mind when they confront a turn. Whether that choice is a real decision or not, the encounter shapes the mind and the thoughts of those walking the maze.

The ambage creates a path that is designed to be long for the purpose of placing process over result. «Whether the labyrinth consists of a single path or many, whether choice is paramount or ignored, the course from entry to center is profoundly circuitous, turning to and from and covering much more ground than is

necessary to get from one point to another» (Doob 1990, 54). In teaching, we can imagine the instructor who gives lists of dates, terms, theories, or figures to memorize, and expects the reconstruction of those lists at a later date to be evidence of learning. But this teaches nothing; it's an exercise in obedience. In the labyrinth metaphor, the teacher is often said to 'walk' the student through difficult material to help them discover, articulate, and overcome questions themselves. The teacher makes the journey from ignorance to knowledge longer, often much less efficient than simply telling the student what they need to know because confrontation with an ambage produces practice in ways of knowing as opposed to rote memorization.

The ambage appears consistently in theories of rhetoric. The sophistic notion of rhetoric of possibility evokes the idea that presenting choices to the audience is the mark of successful rhetoric (Poulakos 1999). The sophist Prodicus was famous for his orations on the myth of the «Choice of Heracles», which told the story of the famous demigod blessed with superhuman strength – as a judge in a debate between virtue and vice, both using all their persuasive powers to convince the young man which type of life was best for him to pursue (Sprague 1972). In modern rhetorical theory, Richard Vatz critiqued Lloyd Bitzer that rhetors are addressing an 'exigence', or an event that calls for an oratorical response (Bitzer 1968). Vatz argued that the rhetor has the power to create such a call, choosing from a number of exigences that are occurring all around us (Vatz 1973). Kenneth Burke's theory of the pentad indicates that our understanding of an event can change when we change which set of terms we rely on to figure out what 'really' happened (Burke 1969). Rhetoric is the articulation of choice, making it appear or disappear, indicating one choice superior to all others, or simply leaving the audience with a full slate of considerations for the choice they will have to make on the issue after they leave the venue. We always have a choice on how to argue material before audiences. The labyrinth metaphor focuses debate instruction on the way students argue, encouraging them to reflect on the way they handled each ambage. The result is that all topics become unicursal, winding up at the central question of rhetoric: What could I have said differently in order to get the audience to believe me?

Debate seen as a labyrinth becomes the opportunity for students to encounter the ambage as rhetorical practice. They must choose when they research, when they construct their case and each argument within it, and when they choose what arguments to make against the other side in rebuttal, when disagreement must be articulated. The ambage is a key feature of the rhetorical model of debate, providing the student all the freedom, and all the horror, of choosing what way to turn in the maze.

The ambage is the long process of research, preparation, and practice for the debate event. But there are always unexpected turns. The debate itself might not conform to the preparation, confronting the students with a whole new series of turns to make. The student might not win the debate, but this is when the instructor turns the rhetoric of debate to the unicursal, encouraging the students to reflect on the choices – the turns and decisions – that they made throughout the whole process. This is reaching the center of the maze, as one always does in unicursal design. No matter what the choices the students are able to reflect

on presentational, evidentiary, and argumentative choices of the information they are learning in class.

Doob's research indicates that the labyrinth was meant to be a place to transform perspectives and attitudes through movement: The movement through the labyrinth, as well as the attitude one takes toward it. «Many maze metaphors focus on this process of conversion from confusion to admiration, or vice versa» (Doob 1990, 52-3). The movement between both attitudes is pedagogically beneficial. The student becomes confused at the difficulty of the material, then gains admiration from watching a peer negotiate it in an excellent debate speech. In the traditional labyrinth, the design was this way to teach things that could not be easily taught; things that required individual experiences and reflection. Many Labyrinths, «involve the idea of the maze as perpetual process», something one returns to even after finishing one's wanderings. For debate, this is the essential goal where we wish and hope our students to take lessons learned and apply them to their political and community lives (Doob 1990, 72).

Often, the center or goal of the labyrinth was for participants to enjoy a garden, or some other design from nature. Sometimes labyrinths were designed to protect a garden, or special retreat, from unwanted visitors. The garden labyrinth was exceedingly popular in medieval times, but none survive, and must be understood only through descriptions of them (Doob 1990, 107-12).

Having the labyrinth as a garden, or a garden within the labyrinth further connects debate to rhetorical pedagogy. Jeffrey Walker argues that the declamation exercises of the classical teachers of rhetoric blended 'civic theater' in performance with creative, practical philosophical ideas to practice producing arguments (Walker 2011, 199). Approaching student pedagogy with the idea that arguments are grown out of a combination of performance and responses to the challenging situations that would appear in a *declamatio* seems like very fertile ground to grow, fertilize, or train a vine of reasoning on the trellises to get students familiar and comfortable with the arts of argumentation.

Thinking of debate as a labyrinth one moves through that is a garden, or as a garden, or leads to a garden communicates that debate is primarily about growing and tending to arguments through a process of facing intractable choices. Whichever way a student turns, they encounter a reflective process that helps them tend to their own arguments, pruning and weeding as they see fit. After the topic is over, the student will continue to reflect on the moves they made and continue to curate the arguments they think of as they move through life.

3. The Rhetorical Model of Debate

Debate should be modeled as a process of choices that lead one to a place of curation, growth, seeding, and reflection. What is to be reflected on is the encounter with the audience. Much like the turns and choices of a unicursal labyrinth, the debate student should be given the opportunity to choose how to present, and what to present, to the audience(s) they have in mind. Each choice is low stakes, as they do not lead to dead ends, false doors, or confusing dou-

ble-backs. Instead, each turn changes the duration one spends in the inevitable walk toward the center.

Other metaphors conceptualize debate as a tool. The rhetorical model of debate challenges this assumption, equating debate with the process of walking the labyrinth. In debate, growth occurs after the result of the event, when the choices of how arguments were advanced is critiqued by the audience. This audience can be the audience in question, the teacher, a critic of argument (perhaps a professional rhetor of some kind), or a judge brought in for the event. Most often this will be a teacher who will seek to evaluate how well the student did at synthesizing and understanding the material. Being able to articulate the principles of the material for a unit, or a concept, to a variety of audiences might be one of the best modes of assessment available. It's contextual, productive, and places the student in charge of demonstrating their knowledge.

Each debate modeled this way is repeatable. Instead of seeking the perfect, or best argument to shut down the conversation, the rhetorical model of debate encourages the development of future conversations. By orienting the evaluation of the debate around appeal to various audiences, other arguments are always possible to invent. Every journey through the labyrinth is unique. Instead of finding the perfect argument, or the correct conclusion to a question, this model of debate seeks communicative effectiveness with an always-changing audience. More than just one winning argument is possible when different kinds of approaches are being evaluated. Even walking the path of the 'best' argument can give rise to doubt, as doing it yourself can often feel unsatisfying away from the particular moment of that speech.

This metaphor changes debate from a reductive activity meant to find the best arguments on a topic to a practice that is designed to continuously generate discourse. Although all paths in the unicursal maze lead to the center, the choices made and process of the walk to the middle are generative of justification. The choices debaters make become elements of further articulation later about the kinds and types of audiences they imagine being receptive to their discourse. Each time the debate is had, the students can reiterate their positions in terms that both appeal to and constitute potential audiences.

The end result of the labyrinth is to move through it; the game's goal is to win it. Solving the labyrinth can be different each time. Debate as labyrinth makes all topics evergreen; there is always something else to try out, a different way to encounter the ambages. The labyrinth garden encourages a perspective of growth and curation, the continuous maintenance of a living thing, which responds differently to different kinds of care. The planting and growing of possible arguments through practice gives students encounter with the idea that debate creates ways of knowing instead of just helping us evaluate different sets of knowledge.

4. Conclusion

In the Zen Buddhist monasteries of Japan, often the monks will keep two gardens. One will be perfectly curated, without a weed in sight. The other will

be left alone, for the plants to do with what they wish. The existence of these two gardens remind Buddhist practitioners that perfection and imperfection are only possible because of one another. Perfection is only able to be articulated because of the existence of the imperfect. In a similar way, the rhetorical model of debate reminds students that there are only perfect arguments because of the existence of imperfection. In front of one audience, the perfect argument would be ineffective, just like how someone entering the unkept Zen garden would feel the term 'garden' was wildly inappropriate. Growth is a term crucial for understanding rhetoric, and students must be given practice in tending to arguments, and making decisions about how they persuade.

The way we model debate does a lot more than structure a class assignment. It communicates metaphorically the good and bad, the expectations and assumptions that students bring in and carry out with them about the function, structure, and feel of debate in society. By modeling debate as an exercise that is meant to provide reflection on articulating ideas to different audiences, we model debate as the art of adapting messages, ideas, and information to audiences. When we plan our structure of debate it should be well structured to consist of these ambages, forcing students to take the long way around. The process of choosing and moving through the topic as they develop arguments can be communicated as one of wrong and right choices, multicursal, or one of choices alone, unicursal. In the end, all debaters will end up in the garden, brought there by us who value the study of debate as a living art of continuous reflection on the choices we make in offering reasons to audiences in hopes they will listen to us.

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