

If You Can Dodge a Wrench, You Can Dodge a Ball; A Discussion of Teaching and Coaching Techniques and Drills for Speech and Debate

Skip Rutledge, Ph. D., Point Loma Nazarene University
Originally for PSCFA Coaches Conference, Las Palmas CA, Sept 5, 2008
Revised November 16, 2016 for PLNU Teaching Workshop

I am laughing to myself a bit as I recall the scene in "Dodge Ball," the movie, where the coach is throwing huge metal wrenches at the team members from just a few feet away saying, "If you can dodge a wrench you can dodge a ball." I am not asking for anything quite that drastic. But some of you may have favorite exercises or drills that you learned when you were getting started, picked up at institutes, or have used to some success in your classes or at team meetings. Here are a few to get the discussion started. Please note that I do not necessarily advocate each of these, but they come from coaches for whom I have a great deal of respect.

DELIVERY DRILLS: We all have pet peeves that can become quite annoying, whether it is an oft repeated gesture or mannerism like rocking on our feet or waving our arms wildly, or repeating a silly phrase over and over again as a filled pause, allowing us to think of what we want to say next. These filled pauses range from the traditional "and"s or "um"s or "basically"s to the more elaborate "what we see here is" or "at the point where we", or "you would always/never want to." Such a phrase used once may be acceptable or even helpful, but when it begins each sentence audience members and critics want to shoot you. Different coaches advocate different techniques for fixing this. Some video tape and force you to watch yourself, others just tally it on the ballot or a note pad, others engage in more direct means of behavior modification from a dog training clicker available in most pet stores to the use of squirt guns or verbal stop/starts to draw the speaker's attention to the error. I have even heard of some coaches trying to physically restrain some movements, such as the flapping arms, with a belt to secure the arms to the body. Now some of these seem pretty cruel to me, but I would welcome your comments on how effective they might be. What other techniques come to mind. Obviously positive affirmation once the annoying habit has been overcome is good, though we tend to focus more on the annoyance at hand rather than the mistakes no longer made.

Debate Tag:

This drill is simple and can be engaging, and it might be better to begin with this drill than the yes, but, and drill as it is more geared to encourage participation, but does not require well formulated tour. A topic is announced and a prompt statement made, then the speaker gets to name a classmate who must disagree with that point and explain why, then they select, or tag, the next person who must then disagree with the statement they just made.

LISTENING, REFUTING AND EXTENDING DRILLS:

"Yes, But, And" is a drill that works well in a class room or team like setting, where the first person makes a point (hopefully supported by warrants and data). The next person must then confirm that they got the main point by repeating the thesis of that claim (the YES part of the exercise), refute that main point in some way (the BUT part of the exercise), and then make their own counterpoint, advancing their own side of the argument (the AND part of the exercise). The And part of the drill must support their main position, but need not directly engage the specific argument just lodged by the other side.

This is then repeated by others in the class using the last person's new point as their point of beginning. If done properly the Yes, But, And drill can chain around the room fairly quickly. Students enjoy it, and are learning critical listening, refuting, and extending skills.

It is led by the coordinator, or class leader, who attempts to bring in those that have not yet spoken, perhaps even making that a requirement of the drill.

FIND THE FALLACY DRILLS: Rather than just provide a lecture of the main fallacies to be aware of in debate, why not try to spice it up a bit. I cut and pasted the below from a note to a friend that is beginning a debate club in the Netherlands. This can be even more fun if the students have some advance notice and bring in clever commercials or video clips that showcase a fallacious argument.

I try to do several things. One is to save humorous e-mails or jokes that can tie into the various fallacies. Basically any joke or e-mail I save I can tie into some fallacy of reason, and if not then I dump it into the fallacy of using humor to take attention away from the logic of the point (admittedly not always a fallacy). This helps the students to lock in a bit on the explanation. Second I have them each take one fallacy to research and find examples for, and then report back to the class or team about. This makes them an expert on at least one fallacy, and gives the others a chance to hear it explained again.

Learning through repetition works. Then a third way to get more application is to have them read an advertisement, or editorial article or speech from a politician or celebrity making a point or denying culpability, and ask them to identify the fallacy being relied upon, and there will be many.

You can even do a game where you split them into two groups and have one pair off with another and the first to spot the main fallacy wins a point for his or her team. Then bring up two more contestants, etc. . .

Games are always fun ways to learn. If you wish you could list the fallacies on the board or on a handout for them to review while they are listening to the essay or argument. Eventually have them spot the fallacy in each other's arguments or even in the instructor's claims if you are brave enough. J Good luck. By the way the exercise where they choose one fallacy to research and explain is better if you have them bring real world examples from magazines or newspapers or internet blogs or sites, rather than just look up a hypothetical example in a site on fallacies. I ask for three examples, and allow one to be hypothetical and require that two be real world.

FLOWING (Systematic Note taking for debate) DRILLS: One of the best I have seen for teaching flowing skills (the systematic means of note taking in academic debate) is done with a deck of cards. The group leader asks the students to Flow, or to take notes of each card and their connection to the previous cards, as they are flipped over and incorporated into a particular thread or stream. For example, you randomly flip four cards in a row:

Four of Hearts;
Ace of Diamonds;
Seven of Diamonds;
Queen of Hearts

This would in essence become the first affirmative main points (all on a large table top), for the purposes of the drill. The flipper then continues to flip cards, announcing where he or she is placing them as they are flipped, for the 1st negative. "on the 4 of hearts, I place the 2 of spades and the 5 of clubs. On the Ace of Diamonds I place three cards, (again just naming the next three cards to be flipped)

the 7 of clubs, the Jack of spades and the 2 of diamonds. . . and the same is done for the last two cards (the seven of diamonds and the Queen of hearts), or you might choose to not place cards on one of these, meaning the argument thread ends there. Now you begin the third speech (the 2nd affirmative constructive) or sequence of card extensions, all the while students continue to flow the cards where they are told they go. You can vary the number of cards you play on any given cards, just as an argument in a debate flow or round might have any number of responses on it. This can continue as long as you wish, but need not take up the entire deck for each exercise. You then check the students' flow sheets with the actual board to gauge for their accuracy. You can even provide a prize for the closest to the actual board. You can change around the callers too as this helps students to realize the importance of the first step of the four point refutation process, identifying where the argument should be flowed, or where the card should be flowed in this case. You can go quicker for the more experienced students. This drill can also be done with just two students, if you wish partners to help one another on flowing skills.

TOULMIN ANALYSIS LOGIC DRILLS:

For those wanting to stress the importance of learning the elements of the Toulmin layout of argument from Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument*, I can recall in graduate school, in a Rhetorical Criticism class, being assigned to take an Opinion of the Editor piece from any major newspaper, the Sunday editions had the best to choose from, and we were asked to identify each of the main elements that Toulmin advised should be present in informal arguments. Or the class could all use one essay handed out at the beginning and discuss the elements together, followed by an assignment to find their own article and do the same analysis.

TONGUE TWISTERS: What are your favorites? There are many good internet sources for these, including:

<http://www.uebersetzung.at/twister/en.htm>

<http://www.engvid.com/english-resource/50-tongue-twisters-improve-pronunciation/>

[http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/funny tongue twisters.html](http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/funny_tongue_twisters.html)

SPEED DRILLS: First a caveat. Anyone who knows me knows that I am not an advocate of the hyper speed rate of delivery in debate, however I also know that quick, clear delivery can be a big help in the activity when competing against others that are quick and clear. The drill I recall from my former coach was learned by simply reading Lincoln's Gettysburg address aloud, and with proper intonation. Then reading it again and again, more and more quickly. It worked too as a tongue twister. Obviously you could use newspaper articles as well.

PLEASE SHARE YOUR IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

What drills do you use, or do you remember being helpful to learn basic or advanced debate skills? By the way IDEA debate publications has a collection of such learning exercises in one of their publications. Perhaps someone more familiar with that source could provide its name and how to access it for those wanting to purchase it. Please do not mention any ideas that you do not want shared with others as I hope to gather some of these together for a writing project I am working on to share with others, in addition to generating a quick discussion on this site, and perhaps others. Thanks in advance for your help and participation. If you have ideas you would like to share please send them to me at skiprutledge@pointloma.edu.