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PERSPECTIVE

What I Really Learned From Being on the Debate Team

BY SERENA PUANG



When I was in high school, I was the captain of the debate team. This meant I spent weekends living out of suitcases, traveling to competitions where I would spar with opponents over the best ways to solve deeply rooted issues such as homelessness and the complex relationship between the United States and China.

In addition to the opportunity to discuss vital topics, I also liked that, when I stood up to give a speech, other people had to listen and even take notes, whether they liked what I had to say or

not. In a time of divisiveness — when voices are too often drowned out or ignored — debate felt like an important stage.

It's no wonder debate is marketed as an empowerment tool and pathway into politics — especially for marginalized people. At its best, it can help young people find their voice, and teach them about organizing and politics; it gives some, who otherwise may not have had the chance to go to college, the opportunity, resources, and training to succeed there.

At first, I loved the experience. I learned to

evaluate arguments, and it exposed me to philosophers such as Foucault and Nietzsche, whose work later proved relevant to my college studies. I was finding my voice as a writer, and learning to advocate for myself and others both in the classroom and outside of it.

But the longer I stayed in debate, the more I saw its gaping shortcomings. I was critiqued for my mannerisms and vocal quirks — apparently I say “like” too much and talk “like someone from the Valley” — but those comments never threatened to push me away. What did was the constant questioning of whether women were winning debate rounds through argumentation or because the judge was trying to hit on them, as well as the creepy guys, also participants in the competitions, who followed me from round to round. And then there were the racist comments and microaggressions I constantly encountered from competitors and adults alike.

Despite all the talk about debate empowering young people, the truth is that people from marginalized groups experience all manner of discrimination when participating. In an activity built around discussion, there's no established mechanism to talk about the toxic aspects of the activity's own culture.

Ultimately, debate taught me an important lesson about society: Sometimes the very institutions we look to for change are themselves perpetuating the problem.

When it comes to debate, you don't have to look far to find this hypocrisy. According to studies of high school debate, women are statistically less likely to win than their male counterparts, less likely to stay in the activity throughout all four years, and less likely to compete at the highest levels of debate tournaments.

After allegations made against a high-ranking debater, an Instagram account launched in 2020 shared over 400 anonymous stories claiming abuse, ableism, and racism in debate. The organization behind most high school debates, the National Speech and Debate Association, said it was taking "these allegations very seriously." But, according to one debate coach I spoke to recently, such problems persist.

Institutions outside of the debate world are not immune, either. In 2018, the *New York Times* highlighted accusations against organizations such as Planned Parenthood (which is expected to champion reproductive rights) of discriminating against pregnant employees. Despite corporate responsibility statements, companies making clothes and sneakers have been linked at times to serious problems such as sweatshops and forced labor.

Sometimes the very institutions we look to for change are themselves perpetuating the problem.

It's easy to blame such hypocrisies on either a few toxic people or some faceless institution, but that fails to capture the complex reality. It's rare for institutions and companies to maliciously lie to the public, says Magali Delmas, a professor of management at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied greenwashing, a practice in which companies

market themselves or their products as eco-friendly while doing little for — or actively undermining — environmental protections. Most of the time, "social washing" of issues is caused by factors such as external pressure, people who are overly optimistic about what can be done, and constraints associated with institutional structure or the bottom line.

"It's cheaper to write a good sustainability report," Delmas says. It's much harder and more expensive to fundamentally change an institution or business's practices to align with its morals or mission.

The good news for the world of debate is that there are participants fighting for change by, for example, empowering young BIPOC and queer debaters to rap, perform poetry, and ditch long-established debate norms. These efforts go beyond traditional inclusion methods — which often focus on assimilation to the status quo — and work to support and advocate for participants both during a debate tournament and outside of it.

We need to foster this kind of radical openness to change within debate, and in wider society. Calling out the toxic aspects of climbing the ladder to success shouldn't fall solely on those who are still on their way up. Institutions and the people within them, especially those who espouse progressive values, need to constantly reassess whether they're actually leaders — or just part of the problem.

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