

Debate and the Appeal of Opposing Views

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The art of debate has been in the spotlight of late as U.S. presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump square off in the remaining weeks leading up to the November 8 election. Katie Smith, a senior at George Mason High School in Falls Church, Va., has a personal stake in the dialogue around national debate culture – and has become an advocate for the benefits of reasoned argument.

It all started when Smith's eighth grade class watched "The Great Debaters," a 2007 movie starring Denzel Washington as a professor starting a debate team in 1935 at a predominately black college. The team becomes skilled at harnessing the power of knowledge through speech, ultimately challenging even Harvard's elite lineup of arguers. Smith and her classmates were then given the assignment to do a mock debate on marijuana legalization. The debate was supposed to be low-key, but Smith's interest was sparked, and she spent hours collecting in-depth research on the variations in hallucinogenic content between strains and plants. "I finally felt like I had found myself," says Smith. "I know that it sounds cliché, but up until that point I hadn't really had an outlet for my thoughts."

That one activity spurred Smith to start a debate team at George Mason the following year. The only problem was that she did not have access to experienced debate coaches or the funds necessary to compete as part of the National Speech and Debate Association. "The national dues are \$300 per year and the local dues are \$150 per year, which is a problem when your school calls you a club and provides you with \$650 a year to cover all dues and to pay the coach," notes Smith.

Smith never gave up on her debate dream, though. She worked tirelessly to get her debate club recognized as a team by her school, which increased the financial support she received to \$2,000. While getting her own debate education along the way, Smith noticed that teams whose schools couldn't afford briefs and expensive database subscriptions would often lose to wealthier schools that had access to those materials.

Smith decided it was time to level the playing field. In December 2015, she launched Open Access Debate, a free database website where professors and experts post their work online for public use, and high school debaters can access this research as evidence to help build their arguments. She says that she has been working with Chicago Debate League, California High School Speech Association, Georgia Coaches Forensics Association and the Alabama Forensic Educator Association to eliminate the wealth gap in debate.

Deepening the Discussion

So, what's all the fuss about? Many would argue that debate is a fundamental tool for developing one of the most desirable skills for the 21st century economy – critical thinking. Smith says she got involved with the debate team because she "fell in love with the academic challenge" and wanted to "examine concepts in-depth and go beyond the yes/no discussions that occur in the classroom."

Smith has since identified three additional benefits of debate:

1. Conquering Public Speaking Fears

Public speaking is a critical competence to have for college and many careers, yet 74% of people suffer from speech anxiety. The more you practice speaking in front of others, the better you will become. It is like a muscle you have to train and exercise, which a debate club encourages you to do. "As I look forward to attending college next year, I know

that I will be miles ahead of my non-debate peers in my ability to conduct and assess in-depth, scholarly research and present my ideas in a coherent and persuasive manner,” says Smith.

2. Listening Critically to Other Ideas and Opinions

On a debate team, you are not always given topics or positions that you agree with, yet you have to research and present them as if you do. Smith says, “I have learned to see both sides of an issue and not automatically assume that my position is the correct one.” Debate has been described as a shared journey toward the truth. In college, you might have to research and write on topics you do not agree with, and understanding how to argue from both sides helps you think critically and present your findings in a balanced, eloquent approach.

3. Thinking on Your Feet

Debating can help develop keen insight and expertise in responding when you are put on the spot. Sometimes you will debate a topic for which you researched and prepared, and other times you will have to debate subject matter with very little preparation time. Experience helps you to not just blurt out the first thing that pops into your head. Many careers, particularly working in business settings and with teams of professionals, require clever thinkers who can provide clarity and reason during high-stress situations.

If your school doesn't have a debate team, why not start your own? Smith says that you need patience, especially since many schools “are hesitant to fund a new endeavor at the level that a debate team requires.” But start dominating your debate competitions, she adds, and you will likely also win the support of your school and your community.