Chapter One
Debate as a Social and Educational Process

Argumentation, the primary method used in debate, is a form of human communication in which reason is used as a means of resolving conflicts. Each party not only expresses their own reasons for the positions they are taking regarding the conflict, but examines the reasons of the other parties as well. Reasons are examined from critical points of view with the goal of making better, more cogent, more well informed decisions.

Making Decisions Critically

Sometimes the words “critical” or “critically” are used in negative ways. For instance: “My professor seems to be critical of everything I say.” “My parents treat me very critically.” When the words “critical” or “critically” are used with respect to debate and decision-making, they have a different and more positive meaning. A critical decision is one that is made after considering many alternatives, not just the first one that comes to mind. Critically deciding means that the decision-makers are examining arguments for and against the decision; they are considering the evidence and reasons supporting each of the considered alternatives.

Of course not all decision-making situations use argumentation and thus all decisions are not made using critical methods. Sometimes, people simply make the decision that seems most obvious without examining alternatives. Sometimes, they make decisions without examining reasoning or evidence at all. Occasionally, these non-critical decisions may turn out to be as good as critical ones because the deciders simply luck into the best course of action or because the particular decision being made is not a very important one.

However, when circumstances arise and people need to choose actions that may have important consequences, argumentation and critical decision-making are preferred methods for at least two reasons. First, when subjected to critical argument, weaker ideas are less likely to survive than stronger ideas. Ideas that are not supported by evidence, that are not well reasoned, or are not cogent will not fare well when compared to those well supported, well reasoned, and cogent ones. Second, when two or more good ideas are compared to one another in a critical manner, even better ideas have the potential to emerge. In other words, critical argumentation can generate better ideas than either person had from the start. So, argumentation is a tool that people should learn to use in decision-making circumstances in which the outcomes of their choices have important consequences and in which they want to generate the best ideas possible.
Internal and External Decision Making

Argumentation is used as a tool of critical decision making in what can be roughly grouped into two categories: internal and external. Internal decision making involves members of a group arguing about a certain topic or problem then coming to a decision on their own, without the necessity of an outside party making or assisting in the decision. These situations may involve two persons who argue between one another then come to a decision that, to some degree, satisfies both persons. Internal decision making also may involve larger groups, committees, or councils who argue among one another then come to a decision by majority vote.

In internal decision-making situations, then, the participants themselves make the decision. In these settings, the decisions are made either by capitulation, consensus, compromise, or collaboration. Capitulation occurs when one of the parties, perhaps because they are convinced of the opposing arguments, retracts his or her original position allowing the opposing position to stand. Capitulation can occur when the original party is truly convinced of the wisdom of the opposing position or when that party determines that the gains of continuing to pursue his or her position is not worth the costs of the debate. Compromise occurs when each of the contending parties give up some part of what they originally proposed. Each of the parties modifies the original proposal so that everyone gets part of what they wanted and simultaneously gives up something else. Consensus results when, after a process of arguing, the contending parties come to agreement on a course of action that is supported by all. Consensus might occur when each of the parties agrees that part of their original proposal is not as good as they originally thought or when one of the original parties is convinced to go along with the wishes of another. In any event, consensus occurs when the parties come together in agreement on a particular position. Frequently consensus is the result of collaboration, a cooperative process of argument that produces a solution better than either of the original solutions proposed by the individual parties.

“Debate” is not a term that applies unambiguously to these internal decision-making cases. However, in some internal decision-making situations, debate may occur. For instance, in some committees and legislative bodies, the participants are charged with making collective decisions internally but they must do so by majority (sometimes by a super-majority) vote. Majority vote sometimes leads one of the parties to capitulate. Sometimes capitulation occurs when one party believes that progress can’t be made with concessions. In other cases, majority votes can lead to compromises of one kind or another. In those situations, actual debate does occur and the participants themselves decide the outcome of the debate not just by capitulation, consensus, compromise, or collaboration, but also by a majority vote. So internal decision-making situations do involve an activity that is like debate, but the kind of debate that occurs in those situations clearly is different because of the lack of an outside adjudicator.

Unlike internal decision-making, external decision-making situations involve an outside adjudicator. Outside adjudicators are ordinarily required in situations where the internal decision-making process failed—when the people involved in the argument were unable to come to a decision. The adjudicator is ordinarily given the authority to make a decision and to impose it on the participants. For instance, in a court of law, one party may sue another for damages created by something that the first party did to the second. If the two parties are unable to agree on whether or not the first person is liable for damages, an outside adjudicator is given the authority by the court to make such a determination, to render a decision, and to impose it on both parties.

To illustrate the distinction between internal and external decision making, think of two groups of students in a dormitory trying to resolve a conflict regarding the use of a particular space in the dormitory. In some cases, they may successfully reach an internal decision. In other situations, no internal decision will be reached and they may have to appeal to a higher authority, for instance, a dean. In the latter case, representatives from each group of students would present their arguments to the dean and would criticize the arguments presented by the other group. Then the dean would make the ultimate decision.

Not all skills developed for an external decision-making situation can be automatically transferred to internal situations. Similarly, not everything related to internal decision-making is directly related to external decision-making. This point will be considered more fully later in the chapter. However, argumentation is one tool that is useful in both internal and external decision-making situations. But the purpose of this book is not to consider the entire breadth of the topic of argumentation. It focuses specifically on debate, which is only one of the many activities in which argumentation can be useful. For example, argumentation is useful when decisions are made in interpersonal relationships: between parents and children, between college roommates, between husbands and wives, and so forth. Similarly, argumentation is useful also in small groups of people including clubs, committees, etc. In all of these situations that involve critical decision-making, argumentation has an important role to play.

**Debate and Critical Decision Making**

Debate is a process whereby two or more persons present arguments about what they construe to be mutually incompatible positions in order to come to a critical decision about those positions. The clearest case of what is called “debate” occurs in the kind of external decision-making situations described earlier. In these situations, the participants are unable to reach an internal decision and must appeal to some outside person or persons who are designated and authorized to adjudicate the argument and to render a decision which all the parties agree in advance to accept.
This back-and-forth process of presenting and criticizing arguments before an outside adjudicator is the paradigm case of debate.

Although what is thought of as debate ordinarily occurs in external decision-making situations, a form of debate sometimes happens in internal situations when two or more parties argue to one another in search of a critical decision. Legislative debates are perhaps the best example of debate that occurs when the decision remains an internal one, usually decided by majority vote. This process is, however, significantly different from externally adjudicated situations. Certain skills of argumentation and debate can be useful to help people learn to debate in internal decision-making situations, but the skills used in externally adjudicated situations can't simply be transferred to internal decision-making situations. Although this book is limited to a discussion of externally adjudicated situations, serious students of argumentation and debate would be wise to study the differences between internal and external decision making in order to develop a complete repertoire of argumentation skills that will help them in other kinds of decision-making situations.

The Importance of Debate in Society

Most of us would prefer decisions to be made using the internal methods because those kinds of decisions have a greater chance of being supported by persons actually making the decisions. To the extent that a person feels that he or she has a substantial role in crafting a decision, that person may be more likely to support the implementation of that decision even if he or she did not get everything they wanted in the process.

On some occasions, however, internal decision-making simply does not work, and an external adjudicator must be called. These are frequently situations where internal decision-making was tried and failed. For instance, in some situations involving labor disputes between management and employees, an arbitrator may be employed to help settle differences. Because the management and employees have already failed to reach agreement, the arbitrator may be given the authority to impose an agreement.

Another example involves a civil case where two parties have been unable to settle their differences and one party decides to take the case to a civil trial. For instance, two persons may have a dispute over how much money is owed because of a traffic accident. Unable to resolve the dispute by compromise or consensus, one of the parties may decide to take the case to civil court. In this situation, a judge is empowered to make a decision about which of the two parties is correct and to render a judgment regarding who owes whom how much money.

Criminal cases also represent examples where an outside party adjudicates conflicts. In many countries, the state will bring a criminal complaint against a person accused
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of a crime. The lawyer representing the state (known as a prosecutor) and the lawyer representing the accused (known as a defense attorney) argue their cases before either a judge or a jury who renders a decision about the guilt or innocence of the accused. The judge or jury has the authority to make the final decision (although sometimes that decision can be appealed to a higher authority).

Although the above situations involve cases where internal processes of resolving decisions have failed, they are nevertheless important examples of why debate is an important social process. Sometimes groups fail to reach internal decisions because their members become so uncooperative that an external adjudicator is needed. In other situations, the members may try to cooperate to reach a decision, but for other reasons fail to do so.

**The Importance of Debate in Educational Systems**

As debate is important in society, it also has become important in educational systems, although sometimes for different reasons. One of the reasons that debate has become important in education is that it is believed to contribute to communication skills such as public speaking and language use. Debate became popular in the United States in the first decade of the 19th century. Intercollegiate debating became a popular activity in United States in the middle of the 20th century and was supported by colleges and universities including Harvard, Yale, Wisconsin, Willamette, and others. These debate societies had a hand in the formation of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. The goal of these colleges and universities was to promote debate as a method of teaching public speaking.2

In Asian countries, debating began to be promoted after the middle of the 20th century as a means to teach speaking in English. Those promoting debate believed that by asking students to conduct such a practical activity in a non-native language, they could learn to speak and write English more fluently. But debate is now promoted for more reasons than simply the practicality of effective use of language. It is also promoted because it is seen as a method to improve students’ critical thinking skills. In fact, solid evidence exists to suggest that participation in debate does enhance critical-thinking abilities. Debaters improve their critical-thinking abilities as they learn to use evidence and reasoning to come to critical decisions.3

Debate also is important because every society wants its people to contribute as good citizens. By being informed about ideas and by learning how to contrast ideas,

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we learn how to make our ideas better. Debating does not have as its goal the direct criticism or rejection of the institutional or governmental policies. The goal is to prepare citizens to be able to suggest improvements in the ways that their society works.

Educational Debate as a Laboratory

This book is about educational debate, the kind of debate sponsored by schools, colleges and universities to help students learn. The broad educational goal of learning inside the debate laboratory is to teach students to debate in the world beyond the laboratory. In the laboratory, students are taught “competitive debate” so that in the world outside of the laboratory, they might learn to engage in other competitive debates and perhaps learn to participate in what might be called “generative debates.”

In competitive debate, debaters present their stance on an issue, use arguments to support that stance, and continue unwaveringly to maintain that stance until the end of the debate. Competitive debate is the kind of debate discussed in this book and practiced in intercollegiate and interscholastic debate tournaments. It is a contest in which a Tournament Director assigns debaters to support or oppose some controversial issue. Many if not most debates that occur in the world outside intercollegiate contests still use a form that closely resembles the ideology of competitive debates, wherein both parties start with a certain position and continue to defend that position throughout the debate. Such is the usual case in debates where an outside adjudicator is involved. For instance, in legal debates, the defense and prosecution lawyers usually hold tenaciously to their positions (innocence or guilt) throughout the trial. Some forms of arbitration also follow the competitive debate model in situations when parties in a dispute fail to resolve their difference internally, and then agree to (or are required to) turn over the final decision to an outside arbitrator. These situations are closest in form to the competitive debate situation and therefore students of competitive debate can learn a great deal about these kinds of argumentative situations. In such competitive situations, the goal of debaters is to have the judge, the jury, or the arbitrator declare that they won the debate and that their side has prevailed. Only in rare cases will the two sides in an adjudicated debate generate an alternative solution that was not present when the debate began.

“Generative debate” is the highest and most complex form of debate in which debaters oppose each other on issues and present their ideas in an open-minded way hoping not simply to “win” the debate, but to use the process of debate to generate better arguments and better positions on the issue. In generative debate, the debater is always looking for the best choice or the best solution to a problem whether or not that is the position they took initially. So a city council member debating what to do about the city swimming pool might start with the position that the pool should be closed because the city simply did not have the money to keep it
debate that exist. For instance, legislative debate is usually more competitive than debate, these are only gross categories and do not exhaust all of the various forms of debate that exist. For instance, legislative debate is usually more competitive than

As stated earlier, generative debate is not the norm for debate outside of intercollegiate debate contests. Unfortunately, generative debate is rare even in situations outside of intercollegiate debate. Debates that involve an outside adjudicator normally follow the competitive mode whether or not the setting is or is not an intercollegiate debate. Although the generative debate model is the highest and most complex form of debate, the competitive debate model is still useful in certain situations.

The goals of intercollegiate debate competitions as well as the goals of this book are such that students will learn to participate in competitive debates inside and outside of the arena of intercollegiate debate tournaments. Following the competitive model raises many ethical issues, several of which will be discussed in the next chapter. Students of competitive debate also will gain some skills that will be useful in potential generative debate situations, outside of debate tournaments. However, students should be wary of trying to apply all of the competitive debate skills to generative debate. Competitive debate skills do not automatically transfer to generative debates. Many of the skills used in competitive debates can be modified so they can be used in generative debates. However, those modifications are necessary because the direct transfer of competitive debate skills to generative debates can interfere with or even destroy the very goals of generative debate.

The intercollegiate debate tournament is a laboratory, wherein students learn competitive debate skills that can be transferred to other competitive-style debates beyond the laboratory. The most thoughtful and reflective intercollegiate debaters will also want to study the process of generative debate, so that they can learn to modify the skills learned in competitive debate to become useful in generative situations. Examples of competitive debate skills that are applicable to other arenas include creation and presentation of arguments, use of evidence, avoidance and detection of fallacious and otherwise weak arguments, as well as others. But these skills need to be modified so they will be workable in generative situations.

One arena of debate not involving an outside adjudicator is debate in deliberative or legislative situations, where members of a group present arguments to one another and a decision is then reached by a majority of the members of the group. This situation has important differences and similarities to the kinds of debate in which an outside adjudicator is required.

Although this text has used the categories of competitive debate and generative debate, these are only gross categories and do not exhaust all of the various forms of debate that exist. For instance, legislative debate is usually more competitive than
generative but still is different from debate with an outside adjudicator. In legislative debate, members of a legislative or deliberative body argue with one another and in the end must make a collective judgment even if only by a majority vote. Many persons enter the legislative debate with a competitive mindset but hopefully they can learn to temper competition with a generative urge. Legislators must argue and collaborate with one another repeatedly during their terms in office, therefore issues of personal relationships among members are much more important than they would be between an advocate and an arbitrator (since the arguer and arbitrator will not likely be engaged in an ongoing relationship). Thus, debaters in legislative situations need to focus on how to engage in debate, whether competitive, generative, or a combination of the two while simultaneously protecting those relationships.

Another situation where people use argumentation and debate to try to solve problems or reach mutual decisions involves what we might call interpersonal argument. In these situations, family members, work colleagues, roommates, etc., argue with one another about mutual problems they face. These are situations in which the participants must find mutual solutions to problems rather than expect the disputes to be settled externally. In interpersonal arguments, issues of personal relationships are even more important. These are situations where involved parties have an ongoing relationship that they want to maintain. Argument must be conducted in a manner that strengthens, or at least does not weaken those relationships. Interpersonal argument is the situation where the risk of using competitive debate skills is the greatest for the parties engaging one another. Certain competitive debate skills may not only fail to reach the goals of the two parties, but could also harm the relationships they were intended to maintain and improve.

Although the skills learned in competitive debate most clearly involve those situations involving outside adjudicators, legislative and interpersonal situations above require skills that all persons should try to develop; skills especially related to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Even though these skills may not be central to helping students win competitive debates, student debaters should cultivate them in order to assist in personal development. Therefore, they are very important skills for students to learn and we would be remiss if we did not discuss them; they will be revisited in Chapter 2 (“Ethics and Debate”) and Chapter 24 (“Maintaining Personal Relationships in Debate”).