

Cooperation, competition & personal projects

by Gregory F. Rehmke

Resolved: That competition is superior to cooperation as a means of advancing excellence.

The Lincoln-Douglas topic, “Resolved: That competition is superior to cooperation as a means of advancing excellence,” provides an opportunity to advance one of my own personal projects – that of writing about personal projects – one step forward.

Personal projects are central to what is excellent about high school speech and debate. Further, some philosophers argue that human beings are by nature “project pursuers.” They suggest that the freedom to discover and pursue our own personal projects is central to understanding our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The following discussion draws from philosopher Loren Lomasky’s book *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (Oxford University Press, 1987). Additional discussion of the related idea of personal destinies draws from philosopher David Norton (*Personal Destinies*, Princeton University Press, 1976), and from psychologist Abraham Maslow (*The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Penguin Books, 1976).

I will argue first that high school speech and debate can encourage a far better atmosphere for learning than classroom lectures (though this may be perhaps painfully obvious to the average speech student). Second, I suggest the explanation for this is that speech competition gives students practice as project pursuers. And third, the “man as project pursuer” approach to human nature gives us a useful perspective on the competition-cooperation, and other LD topics.

Debate cases as personal projects

High school speech and debate not only encourages students to develop research, speaking, and advocacy skills, but also provides an excellent means to encourage the study of current events, history, and political economy. Stale

classroom exercises can be transformed into personal projects pursued by self-motivated students.

In most schools speech and debate participation is voluntary. Students commit themselves to participate, and thereby accept responsibility for directing their own research time and effort. After acquiring a basic understanding of debate practices and strategies, and of the current debate topic, students choose which proposals they want to research, which books and articles to read, and which arguments to advance.

Speech and debate takes place in a club, rather than class, atmosphere. Students work together – novice students learn from advanced students, and advanced students learn on their own and from each other, and also take on organizational responsibilities. Students are coached rather than just talked at.

Philosopher Mortimer Adler defines three types of teaching and learning: 1) didactic instruction in subject-matters (lectures), 2) the coaching of the language and mathematical skills, and, 3) the Socratic conduct of seminar discussions of the basic ideas and issues to be found in books assigned for study. Adler argues that the first predominates in our schools, and is “the least-effective kind of teaching and the learning that results is the least durable. In truth it is not genuine teaching at all, but rather indoctrination by the teacher, and not genuine learning by the student, but memorization for the sake of passing exams.” (*Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1988, p.VI).

Speech and debate participation better fits Adler’s much preferred second and third types of teaching. This is not to say that a knock-down drag-out debate round necessarily resembles a Socratic seminar on the great ideas (I wish it did). But the “thrill of competition” at the pinnacle of

the debate experience is the motivating force for the long hours of topic research and discussion that precede and follow. This is where much of the real learning takes place. Competitive debate tournaments provide an arena for students to test the quality of their own topic research and analysis against that of other students.

Such competitions would be unnecessary with mathematics or engineering, for example. Poor preparation and inadequate understanding in mathematics means problems simply can't be solved. In engineering it means bridges and buildings crumble, and planes fall from the sky. But understanding in the social sciences is hard to measure. There seems to be no discernible relation between the intensity of people's beliefs about public policy and values, and their level of understanding.

Without a reality check from science or nature, we rely on other people to point out the weaknesses in our arguments and ideas. We often think we understand an issue or policy until someone questions us closely about it. Buried deep such beliefs seem secure, but dragged out into the open they can be challenged. Debate competition helps us sharpen our own sense of what we really understand and what we only thought we understood.

Choice, relevance, and excellence

Speech and debate students are forced to make choices about which areas of a debate topic they pursue. These research and topic choices are made naturally as students uncover new knowledge about the problem area. Each choice expresses individuality, as students naturally gravitate toward topics, concepts, and styles of argumentation, with relatively more appeal than others. Debate research and argumentation become a personal project. And each weekend students stand up to personally advocate and defend their own proposals for value or policy resolutions.

The LD resolution claims competition is superior to cooperation as a means of advancing excellence. It is not clear what "advancing excellence" is meant to refer to, but it strongly suggests advancing individual skills and abilities, or the quality of workmanship and service. Excellence seems intrinsic, and not externally im-

posed. Excellence is more a process than an end-state – it is something we pursue or advance not something we have or own or buy or sell.

People advance excellence.

An obvious place to start in comparing competition and cooperation in advancing excellence is high school speech itself. Fiercely competitive debates can blind students to the higher goals of discovering truth and achieving wisdom (rather than the lower goals of crushing opponents).

Overly competitive debaters tend to view opponents at obstacles in the march forward to victory – the epic struggle to break into the final tournament rounds. Evidence and arguments become like medieval weaponry – jousting poles to dislodge the enemy and armor worn to defend against the enemy's attack. The educational substance of debate argumentation at tournaments often seems inversely proportional to the intensity of the competition.

Aristotle counseled for moderation in all things, and so it is with competition. A dose of competition adds excitement, encourages study, and rewards preparation.

Without the prospect of competition there is little to motivate students to invest the many hours in research and in developing speaking and organizational skills. And without competition students are more likely to become wedded to the initial impressions formed when they begin their research. In a sense such competition is an advanced form of cooperation. In one sense the phrase "it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game" means that it is appropriate to abide by the rules. But in another sense it means that the purpose of competitive sport is to become better players – to improve our own skills through experience gained over time. Toward this end we cooperate with our opponents to become better players by means of occasional competitions.

If the purpose of debating the space exploration topic, for example, is to better understand U.S. space policy and to actually craft workable proposals for increasing space exploration, then each debate round becomes an exercise in strengthening arguments.

Congressional debate over the merit of

particular policies is the model for high school (cross-examination) debate. Affirmative debaters present their legislative proposals at each tournament round and four individuals carry on the full debate before a silent fifth “congressmen” (the judge), who always casts the deciding vote. But the higher goals are to pass good legislation, and to prevent poor legislation from becoming law. Winning or losing an individual debate (as determined by the decision of the judge) is not as important as the proposed legislation’s merit (or lack thereof).

In this sense the affirmative debaters who see their affirmative cases effectively countered by the negative should be grateful, first that such legislation (or values in Lincoln-Douglas debate), which are now revealed to be ill-considered, are not passed in the make-believe world of the debate round (where the terrible consequences predicted might actually come to pass).

Insightful and compelling arguments and evidence from the negative should suggest to the affirmative that repairs to their current position are in order, or that alternative position to carry out the debate resolution be considered. In either case it has been a cooperative venture on the part of all involved to advance excellence – as well as a competitive exercise.

Freedom, competition, and personal projects in the real world

Competition and cooperation together advance excellence in speech and debate, but what about the “real” world. An interesting precondition is added to our pursuit of personal projects in the real world. Each day of our lives we consume food, wear clothes, use shelter, and perhaps drive cars, that none of us individually have the slightest idea how to produce. The goods and services we consume or use daily are produced by the cooperative efforts of thousands of people we’ve never met. Yet each of these farmers, textile workers, carpenters, factory workers spent from a few minutes to a few hours of their time to help produce goods that we use.

The precondition for our own projects is, that at least part of our day must be spent producing goods or services that we provide to others in exchange for the goods and services we use. Other people are willing to bring their skills and

knowledge to the production of things for use only if we do the same for them. The more people we can satisfy with what we produce, the more people who will be willing to produce things for us.

Millions expected to enjoy Bruce Willis die hard (twice), so they were willing to voluntarily pay \$5 to \$7.50. By pleasing these millions Mr. Willis earns millions, with which he can purchase cars, planes, vacations, houses, and other expensive products that thousands of people spent thousands of hours producing. Willis produced more, therefore he can consume more. And the value of what he produced is not measured by the time and effort he expended producing it, but by the desire of consumers to purchase it. Movie stars make more money than stars of Broadway plays simply because the distribution system for their product allows millions to consume it, instead of thousands.

Oddly it is precisely the competitive nature of the market economy that most efficiently coordinates the voluntary action of these thousands, or millions, of workers. The market economy provides incentives to work efficiently, and sets out rewards for discovering new and better ways to do things. Competition, within the Rule of Law (which establishes clear rules about property rights and contracts), is the only means advance excellence in modern complex economies. Competition is a means to bring about the cooperation necessary for modern economies to operation.

Some economies have tried to ban market competition and instead enforce cooperation as a means. Many political philosophers, not understanding the abstract nature of market economy, considered competition a wasteful (and amoral) chaos. They proposed instead a planned economy where central economic plans guided all economic activity. In order to get the control needed to carry out these plans all property had to be owned by the central authority. The poverty of China, the U.S.S.R., and Eastern Europe are the direct results of the unfortunate belief that centrally planned cooperation would be superior to the unintended cooperation or market competition.

But there are other powerful reasons to prefer

economies that allow competition over those that enforce cooperation. Loren Lomasky argues that people are by nature project pursuers. Yet in the grinding poverty of third world economies, or in the pre-industrial past of western Europe, little leeway was available for personal projects. The vast majority in poor countries past and present pursued the avocation of agriculture – farming is the major occupation in poor countries.

Loren Lomasky

The following are excerpts that relate to the above discussion of personal projects:

One acts in order to attain some end that one values. It may be a remote consequence whose fruit will not be enjoyed for many years. The end also can be the performance of that very action and thus secured immediately. The two are not exclusive; the action may be chosen for its own sake, for the pleasure of doing that very thing, *and* it may be done for the sake of valued consequences that will flow from it. One who swims does so for the delight of slicing through clear, cold water, of for the health benefits that swimming provides, or both. Bodily movements like a twitch or a knee jerk reflex can occur without there being any purpose to them, but action is inherently purposive.

Although all action is to secure some end or other, not all ends are equally valued. They range from the satisfaction of transitory desires assigned little weight – pausing briefly on one’s walk to sniff a rose – to the pursuit of momentous goods to which one is wholeheartedly devoted. Were we unable to evaluate ends differentially, then there would be no prospect of rationally deliberating among alternative possibilities. Also, if an agent could simultaneously pursue all the ends he values without one interfering with another, then again there would be no place for deliberation... Almost always, though, when a person pursues one good, it is at the expense of others that could have been secured in its place. One who stops on his way to smell the rose will arrive at his destination a little bit later. If an earlier arrival would have been more advantageous, then one end has been sacrificed for another. If you spent your money to buy this book, then you were unable to use those funds to purchase delicacies at the local supermarket. (Even if you borrowed the book from someone else, you expended effort in securing and reading it, effort

that could have been applied elsewhere.) To appropriate a handy term from economics, the employment of a scarce resource, including one’s own time, has an *opportunity cost*, which is represented as the next most highly valued use forgone. Only if a resource has no other uses valued by the agent is it free of cost.

It is because (1) action is purposive, (2) ends differ in assigned value, and (3) actions are costly in the opportunity sense that choice is a matter for rational appraisal. The rational chooser is one who, not being able to secure everything that he values, selects his actions in a way that gives precedence to more highly valued goals over those held in lesser regard. If lives were either infinitely long (so that all pleasures would eventually be enjoyed) or momentary happenings (so that causal connections could be disregarded), then the problem of rationality would be less involved. But since lives are neither of these, rational calculation involves both satisfaction and satisfaction *over time*, with no assurance as to how much time that will be. Uncertainties abound, but they are the uncertainties that each human being meets on a continual basis. One weighs the disagreeability of going to the dentist today against the pleasure of playing tennis instead, but also against the misery of the toothache that might or might not eventuate in the future. Luck is involved – but also skill. The skill involved in juggling possibilities for action in the light of their opportunity costs and probabilities of future goods and ills in the virtue of *prudence*.
from *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community*.

Abraham Maslow

Facts just don’t lie there like pancakes, just doing nothing; they are to a certain extent signposts which tell you what to do, which make suggestions to you, which nudge you in one direction rather than another. They “call for,” they have demand character... I get the feeling very frequently that whenever we get to know enough, that then we know what to do, or we know much better what to do; that sufficient knowledge will often solve the problem, that it will often help us at our moral and ethical choice-points, when we must decide whether to do this or to do that.

From *Abraham Maslow, Toward the Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, p. 26.