**"Performance Debate" - Beginning a conversation about what it is, how its done, and how to defeat it - Teddy Albiniak**

Few issues spark real controversy in the debate community anymore. I think you would be hard pressed to find anyone who truly believes that kritiks are no longer a legitimate part of negative strategies, even if that is not really your preferred argument.  
  
  
  
Performance arguments come close though. I have witnessed (and coached) teams who shudder at the idea of having to debate "those stupid affs." If this is you, my suspicion is that you will only spend the amount of time it takes to pull out your framework file thinking about strategy.   
  
  
  
But, for better or worse depending on your proclivity, performance arguments are not a fading fad, but will only continue to grow in the coming years. And as they do, framework strategies will become as obsolete as the "wrong forum" argument did on the kritik. For this first blog post on performance arguments, I offer some questions that can help anchor your thinking and some helpful tips for how to handle these arguments.  
  
  
  
  
  
What are performance arguments?  
  
  
  
Contrary to popular belief, performance arguments are not about singing, dancing, or reading poetry. These texts may be part of the overall argument, but do not necessarily constitute it. Neither are they simply about suspending traditional "line-by-line" debate. While this might be part of some teams tactics, it is not the core of their position. In fact, there are many different types of arguments that people lump into the category of "performance."   
  
  
  
While this is not true for all performance arguments, usually the overarching goal is to research and introduce perspectives on the topic that a more mainstream or traditional approach to the topic is not necessarily concerned with. In other words, at their core, performance arguments tend to ask:  
  
  
  
1.What parties or ideas have a stake in the debate about resolution beyond the governments’ interest?  
  
2. Why are those interests not currently analyzed or included in the discussion?  
  
3. What is dangerous about their exclusion?  
  
4. What would policy discussion look like if their perspectives were included?  
  
  
  
There can be numerous answers to these questions.  
  
  
  
Research methods: This literature base is concerned with how we come to prove the arguments we know. While it is certainly acceptable to turn to think tanks, mainstream newspapers, even traditional academic literature bases to explore topics of contemporary policy, there is a real possibility that the real, everyday people effected by the policy are not included in those sources. Instead, teams may choose to explore qualitative, ethnographic, or narrative based literature to explore the effects policy has on people on the ground.  
  
  
  
\*Check out Walter Fisher's "Narrative Paradigm" in Communication Monographs (1985) for some other historical background  
  
  
  
Standpoint/perspective: This literature base suggests that traditional policy making does not encompass the interest of everyone, but rather one perspective or set of interests against another. These folks may draw from identity and cultural studies to describe how the history of policy making or its practices tend to represent the perspective of a privileged group either at the expense of or resulting in the exclusion of a traditionally marginalized group.   
  
  
  
\*Check out Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza for an introductory sample.  
  
  
  
Aesthetics/Presentation: This literature argues that persuasion has less to do with the number of pieces of evidence one reads, and rather with the practices of body and voice that happen in the actual exchange of the debate. Instead, their are non-quantifiable ways of moving an audience to understanding and will introduce mechanisms to demonstrate this process.  
  
  
  
\* Check out Michael Shapiro's Politics of Representation for more information.  
  
  
  
While these short blips surely do not encompass the nuances, it is merely meant to demonstrate that performance arguments are usually not just about representing, they are a kind of doing: drawing attention and focus on the relationship between research methods, power, and presentation as it is reflected and practiced in academic debate.  
  
  
  
So, what should we do?  
  
  
  
Three starting tips:  
  
  
  
1. Right now, you've still got your framework arguments. Obviously, this will not be a shock to performance teams. In fact, their arguments at the onset are designed to answer this position. Since so many teams will inevitably run framework, they will have spent many hours thinking and practicing answering this argument. But, all is not lost. If framework is your bag, then I would encourage you to defend the perspective of traditional policy making with as many specific example as possible. So, if you believe that policy making is "real world." Don't just leave it at that. Describe what that real world is to you, why it is important to preserve, and why that outweighs a risk of exclusion. If you believe that traditional debate creates the best form of communication, offer some examples. The point is: do not just sit on your ideology. The more detailed your defense of traditional practice, the better off you'll be.  
  
  
  
2. Consider what you agree with and what you disagree with. My guess is that these debates will not occur on the impact level. I think it is difficult to win that racism or patriarchy is good for example. Instead, you should ask if the affirmative offers a mechanism that effectively challenges those structures or practices. Could there be alternate ways of challenging those systems? Perhaps we ought to orient ourselves to a more traditional form of protest or organizing. Maybe we should be more radical in our strategy? Maybe we should consider a different starting point? Because the nature of these debates are still ambiguous, you have a lot more leeway to establish points of competition. Take that opportunity and redefine the stakes of the debate.  
  
  
  
3. Since the goal of the affirmative is to enact change, their entire speeches are open for interrogation. Are their phrases, depictions, stylistic practices or approaches that could or should be challenged? Did they make a claim about a root cause? Could you identify another possible root? Disagree with notion of "roots" entirely? The affirmative has introduced a whole range of possibilities for you, neglect them at your own risk!  
  
  
  
4. Don't get frustrated! Most teams turn to performance not because of some enduring hate for debate: they are, after all, at the tournament! Instead, they most likely find something alluring about the practice or find some solace in its content. The more frustrated you get, the more you activate the argument. If you approach the discussion with meaningful, well-thought out, and reasonable differences, you will already be ahead of the game.  
  
  
  
  
  
These are some helpful framing tips to help guide your thinking regarding performance debates. Join us at the UTNIF this summer to get strategic and technical training not just how to beat these arguments, but how to run them as well! Feel free to post below of email me [(albiniak@mail.utexas.edu)](mailto:%28albiniak@mail.utexas.edu%29) with comments, concerns, or rants.

Posted by executive homonculus at [11:14 AM](http://utnifdebate.blogspot.com/2011/02/performance-debate-beginning.html) [http://img1.blogblog.com/img/icon18_email.gif](http://www.blogger.com/email-post.g?blogID=5065734418082918745&postID=5333675634442173144)[http://img2.blogblog.com/img/icon18_edit_allbkg.gif](http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=5065734418082918745&postID=5333675634442173144)

**7 comments:**

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Claire said...

While I agree with a lot of these starting questions, I wonder if we could discuss what to do when performance teams sandbag their criticism or jettison the parts of their performance that link to the other team's offense. For instance, I have seen teams that rely on obfuscation of their argument until the 2NR or 2AR, then explain things clearly, often in debate jargon. I have also seen teams that will respond to many intuitive pieces of offense, such as Hip-Hop bad against a team that plays Tupac, by saying that they don't have to defend all forms of their type of performance. So what do you do when these issues occur?  
  
For those that refuse to make an argument until the end of the debate, you should make clear early that they do not yet have an argument and that if your defense of the resolution or the status quo is not responded to coherently, they ought to lose. Often, pairing this with critiques of jargon or academic language can be pretty effective. (There are marxist critiques of jargon as well as critiques from Critical Legal Studies)  
  
As for the "We don't have to defend X," I think you both have to make arguments as to why your offense DOES apply to their specific performance and perhaps make the theoretical argument that their proposal to transform what debate looks like has to be held responsible for the unintended consequences (sure they may not play the commodified and depoliticized forms of rap, but their method cannot exclude the introduction of such forms of advocacy).   
  
What have you all found as particularly effective strategies of dealing with performance?

[February 9, 2011 6:07 PM](http://utnifdebate.blogspot.com/2011/02/performance-debate-beginning.html?showComment=1297303659428#c5718718291974206800) [http://www.blogger.com/img/icon_delete13.gif](http://www.blogger.com/delete-comment.g?blogID=5065734418082918745&postID=5718718291974206800)

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[J.V. Reed](http://www.utdebatecamp.com) said...

This is a partial response. I think that neg's still have to win a specific link to their offensive turns. "Hip hop bad" may or may not link to Tupac. If hip hop is bad because it is a mega-commodity, there may be an argument as to why Tupac is subversive to capitalism in spite of its place in the process of capitalist production. Likewise, if the negative "hip hop bad" argument is premised on the notion of sexism in some lyrics, an aff can probably win "that's not our hip hop" by saying "this assumes dirty old school music like 2 Live Crew" not our music.   
  
I remember this being an issue with aff's from Towson who identified their affirmative project with the Black Arts Movement. The BAM pursued many of the goals of the Black Power movement through the arts. There is a lot of critcism historically of the BAM for advancing a sexist conception of black power. Some negatives would read "BAM sexist", and the Aff would typically respond with "that evidence doesn't apply to our project." In these debates, the negative needs to find a specific link to the aff by a. identifying sexist or exclusionary rhetoric in the affirmative's evidence or rhetoric. b. making an argument about how groups of people or individuals are included or excluded by certain aesthetic strategies. for example, it could be said that pursuing a debating style that is bombastic and confrontational is exclusionary because it privileges a masculinist notion of effectiveness, confrontation and clash. c. making an argument that the aff's explicit statement of alliance with the BAM is itself a link because it resuscitates a divisive aesthetic and rhetorical strategy.   
In these debates the negative has to go beyond reading a card that has some of the words spoken by the aff and calling it a "link". The negative has to apply the concept in their link evidence to the actions/words of the aff. Then, ON TOP OF THAT, the negative also needs to explain the specific impact of this link application. That is, the negative needs to explain why attaching the affirmative's project to the BAM revives an element of sexism and that revival of exclusionary sexism is so problematic that it means the aff can't solve and it has an impact that is distinct from what the aff has addressed. In other words, you've still got to use your DEBATE SMARTS to construct an argument that can win.

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[executive homonculus](http://www.blogger.com/profile/12163094378554378344) said...

One other thing to note- negatives have to find a way to not defend the status quo. As in any debate, one of the most powerful answers and affirmative has is "we're still better than the status quo." And, "the negative is stuck with the status quo." Negatives need to advance a K of the aff's approach that is avoided by some alternative approach (net benefits anyone?).   
A typology of a performance aff's answers to this kind of K will probably look something like this:  
  
a. squo debate is racist and classist   
  
b.sq debate is also sexist  
  
c. the aff approach has advantages from its 1.race consciousness, 2. the way it brings social location into debate, and 3. its aesthetic experimentation that 1. still solve, and 2. outweigh the negative impact  
  
d. the negative is defacto defending the status quo - 1.they don't have an alternative vision of debate aesthetic and argument practice, and 2. they debate high speed policy on the aff, which proves this criticism of our approach is disingenous. 3. this disingenuousness is worse than the squo because it is an active strategy of co-optation  
  
e. no link - their evidence does not apply to our specific project (that's not our BAM)  
  
f. the part of the negative's criticism of our project that is valid (e.g. the risk that we've revived some kind of movement that was historically exclusionary and sexist) can actually be incorporated into an evolving conception of our aesthetic approach. therefore, its not a reason to reject the affirmative. (sound like a permutation without the debate buzzword anyone?)

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[executive homonculus](http://www.blogger.com/profile/12163094378554378344) said...

Sorry - one last thing and then i'll shut up for a bit. I feel like the title of this whole post may be a little misleading. In my mind, GOOD "performance debate" is good debate. I am in favor of ANY and ALL good debate. Cooper and Love from Towson were great debaters, with smart arguments. Period. They also were very innovative and should be commended for that.   
  
Done well, performance debate is very engaging, strategic, and perhaps in some way transformational - If for no other reason than bringing an important literature base into a spirited contest situation. But i suspect that for the debaters involved there are reasons above and beyond that aspect of 'transformation' that are personal, political and very compelling.

[February 10, 2011 8:07 AM](http://utnifdebate.blogspot.com/2011/02/performance-debate-beginning.html?showComment=1297354078876#c2183550046371713894) [http://www.blogger.com/img/icon_delete13.gif](http://www.blogger.com/delete-comment.g?blogID=5065734418082918745&postID=2183550046371713894)

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Claire said...

While I agree it's best if you don't defend the status quo, I do think that winning offense (such as your method is sexist), combined with some arguments as to why that offense negates whatever benefits of their project (sexism makes racism inevitable because the underlying basis of racism is about biological stereotypes and the protection of the species and only with sexism does the maintenance of biological purity possible or some such thing) can mean that there is no benefit to changing from the status quo. As a believer in winning absolute defense and as one with her own status quo bias (as does most of the debate community when it comes to performance, I'd venture), I don't think you necessarily have to win a strong alternative to the status quo to convince a judge that the change the other team is advocating is not worth the risk.   
  
J.V.s point seems to be that for most judges, there is either a presumption that some change is better than no change (we have to challenge racism in debate or calling for inclusion is intrinsically better than ignoring the problem) or that you should not assume that winning an offensive argument automatically proves that the cost-benefit analysis falls on the side of cost. For instance, if you win their project reinscribes sexism, but you make no claim of sexism's place relative to racism and the team still successfully combats racism, arguments like "the status quo is sexist" does make your offense non-unique and probably means the eprformance team's strategy is net beneficial.  
  
This is a reason why, even if you choose the status quo, you need to either argue that the status quo is solving (racism or sexism or whatever the projects aims at eliminating is disappearing now) or why the persistence of that problem makes the project inevitably fail (hopefully with an external DA), or, in the best case, both.

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One other bit on how to prepare against performance teams. To be able to devise a winning strategy it is important to break their arguments down into their component parts. This allows you to better see how their arguments function and what you have to refute/outweigh/defeat in order to be able to win. Sometimes this is completely lost on debaters facing performance teams, because performance teams eschew the the flow in favor of a more fluid presentation. At the end of the day, though, that fluid presentation can still be outlined into its details and bullet points. An exercise like the one demonstrated above, where 2ac answers were catalogued is invaluable in figuring out what you need to say. Too often people are mystified by the performance and lose sight of the arguments. This issue may be compounded by a community wide diminishment of flowing skills. Flowing isn't just about writing down what the other team said, its about creating a document that represents visually what you need to answer/what you need to talk about in order to win.

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I meant to say this in the comment above...If you are losing repeatedly to performance teams, you really need to watch them compete in a debate you aren't participating in. Documenting and breaking arguments into the component parts is easier to do as an observer than a participant. So go scout a debate or put a video camera in a round if you can't be there yourself.

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