

GLOBAL DEBATE: A CALL TO ACTION AND LEADERSHIP

by
Nancy Lauer

I have been involved in coaching Debate and Forensics for over 20 years, and I have been a Speech teacher and Debate and Forensics coach at Brother Rice High School for the past 13 years. Over this period, I have led my teams to multiple championships, and I have seen many leaders emerge from the ranks of those students entrusted to me. Last July, some of my debaters and I had the experience of attending a World Leadership Youth Summit at the United Nations in N.Y. as a reward for being named one of the 16 top schools in the world to compete in the Global Debates, sponsored by the United Nations Foundation and The People Speak during the Fall and Spring of 2007-2008.

The competition aspects of these global debates seemed least significant compared to what my students and I learned from the extra projects that accompanied these formal debates. What initially enticed me to sign my school up for the Global Debates came from my need as a coach and teacher to meet some of the new challenges of a 21st century



educational environment. I am always looking for new ways to extend the learning environment beyond the classroom and introduce our students to a new awareness of the broader community. In this case, it involved the global community.

Our school has also challenged us to utilize technology in the classroom and implement new ways that we can incorporate it into the learning environment. Our Global Debates project was able to support the missions and objectives of the school to improve student achievement in communication and

technology as well as incorporate the essential elements of a student-centered learning environment. Another important aspect of this project was to get the entire school involved as well as the teachers and staff and initiate a team effort in meeting our goals and objectives. These goals and objectives were partially set by the United Nations outreach called thepeoplespeak.org. In joining the Global Debate through the People Speak, we became a part of a special project that would involve students from all

around the world. **“The People Speak is a campaign to engage young people on the global issues that will shape their future. We inspire young people to be innovators and leaders in the world.”** (thepeoplespeak.org)

We had to set up our own Global Debates based on the topics that were of world concern and impact. These topics to be debated were given to us by the People Speak in the fall and spring. We had to organize the debate as a Public Forum event and invite elected officials and people

from the community to join us for the public debate and educational awareness of the topic. We filmed our debates and uploaded them to sites like YouTube so they could be viewed by others. There were many other activities besides the actual Public Forum debates that had to be completed for earning points in the People Speak Project. Some of these included creating Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on the topic, writing letters to the editors of local newspapers, and writing essays on the pros and cons of the designated world issue. Global warming, carbon emissions and water scarcity were the main topics debated last year. This year, we are debating action plans to combat climate change, and in the spring we will be debating the resolution: "Developing nations have a higher obligation to combat climate change."

As we continue in the Global Debates this year, we are looking forward to collaborating further with other teachers and students from around the globe debating and discussing important issues that impact all of us. When I began this project, I did not just give up my other duties or participation in competitive Debate and Forensic activities. I secured the help of a colleague in the Social Studies department, Mr. Scott Kuschel, to collaborate with me. He also is the moderator for our MUN team and seemed like a likely candidate to approach for help, since there are so many projects to complete as part of the global debate format. Mr. Kuschel has his AP History students working on topic-related blogs and letters to the editors of local newspapers. We asked members of both the debate team and Model United Nations team to get us started and do the actual debates. We also have students who are computer savvy working on creating video games that pertain to global climate change and

determining our carbon footprints. One of our debaters created a Web site to raise awareness on the global issues we were debating. I have included the Web site at the end of this article so you can see what they accomplished.

This year, our talented music students are creating songs about climate change and global warming. We are asking the Art students to do photo essays on climate change. My Speech students are creating PSAs which we show on closed circuit TV to the entire school community. Last year, our students sold t-shirts



and held a dress down day to raise money for water pumps in Africa as part of our service project to combat water scarcity in the world. I am very proud of the leadership skills that are emerging from our student body, reaching out beyond the roles of our initial team members debating the issues. Not only are my debaters researching and learning about gender roles and inequality in places like Africa, where women are expected to carry the water to their villages and miss out on their own schooling, but now our entire student body and community are also aware. We collected over \$2,000 for Playpumps International in one week as part of one school service learning project in the global debate campaign.

The students became engaged in their learning and actively

involved in their debating of world issues. Some of the leadership skills emerging in them were: A vision of what was necessary to secure the future for all and not just for a select group; the knowledge that leadership involves providing service to others, confidence that they could make a difference in other peoples' lives, and the desire to share their perspectives with other innovators like themselves and those with the most passion for the issues at hand. As we gather together to further what we have only begun to accomplish, we will be able to build trust and teamwork in a broader global community. We will experience working in teams outside of those we feel most comfortable with on a daily basis and the learning and leadership skills will continue to emerge on a different level. However, the leadership traits assumed will pull us to a higher level of learning, as we meet new faces and share our ideas together with strangers who have a common purpose in mind, and that is service to the world community. Teaching students that they are part of a broader community makes them responsible and empathetic citizens. U.S. anthropologist Margaret Mead once said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

One of my Global Debaters, Alex Tolksdorf, who has been involved in Policy Debate and Forensics for four years, had these reflections on what global debate has done for him.

The Global Debates have been an inspiring and enlightening experience for me. This is so because global debating breaks traditional mindsets and sets its participants on a world stage – something not seen before in traditional public speaking or athletic activities. When the global

debaters prepare, they prepare themselves to debate ideas across the globe (such as climate change or water-scarcity related issues); they seek to address some of the gravest concerns facing our planet today on a global platform. Yet, they do not just discuss and talk, but rather implement. Global Debating goes beyond tallying up scores and counting up the wins and the losses as seen in more traditional venues, but rather, seeks to act upon the words spoken. As it has been said “actions speak louder than words”, and that is just what the Global Debates are, actions over just words. Above all else, however, the Global Debates teach the power of one – what our actions and decisions can accomplish and how they can affect the entire world.

Jason Kline, in an article he wrote one year ago in the January 2008 issue of the *Rostrum*, “Public Forum Debating: An Inspiring Addition,” said, “In our global age, it is vital that a job seeker be able to demonstrate quick thinking and clear communication.” I think we could add to the Public Forum debate format, that the Global Debate, once researched and communicated orally to the broader community,

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“We can become the thoughtful group of committed citizens who can change the world.”

-- Margaret Mead

allows the debater the impetus and empowerment to leadership which in turn requires him/her to active involvement in the issues within that broader community.

Alfred Snider & Maxwell Schnurer, in their book *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum*, say “one of the chief benefits of debate is the transformation of knowledge into a useful form that students can operationalize” (37). Not only have my debaters and other students evolved in their learning process, but I have also. Involvement in the Global Debates has transformed my own identity as both a teacher and a Speech & Debate coach. It has moved me toward seeing debate as a

service to the public rather than just a competitive event. It’s not just about trophies and championships anymore. I see that we can use the public debate forum as a means to actually make a difference in our school and community, and get to share our actions with the world community. If debating in the public forum can create a climate of leadership and active involvement in our community and world, then I hope we will endorse it as “an inspiring addition” to our students and us as coaches and mentors in their lives. “We can,” as Margaret Mead inspires us with her words of wisdom, “become the thoughtful group of committed citizens who can change the world.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AEMz_pJeos (overview of the project)

www.freewebs.com/waterfortheworld (web site we created)

Snider, Alfred & Schnurer, Maxwell, **Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum**, International Debate Association, New York, 2006.

(Nancy Lauer is Director of Debate at Brother Rice High School, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.)

Attention Coaches:

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