Debating to Win

a discourse on dialogue with some techniques

prepared by Michael Andregg of St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, November, 2007
for the MBA program of Pusan National University in Pusan, Republic of Korea
mmandregg@stthomas.edu

First Principle: There is a vast difference between debate and dialogue, which should be thoroughly understood by people who want to make a difference on this earth.

Second Principle: The concept of "winning" has nuances. What, for example is at stake? What are you trying to win: a classic debate, a court battle, an academic argument, a contract, a boardroom dispute, hearts and minds, or a nuclear war? You should answer this question before selecting technique.

Third Principle: You are usually talking to multiple audiences simultaneously. All audiences matter, but differently. And many audiences use language quite differently.

Fourth Principle: How you say what you say is often more important than what you say. Body language and emotional tone convey more information in many debates than words, and are often more persuasive. But of course, words matter too.

Fifth Principle: Insults are often tempting but usually counterproductive. Whenever possible focus on the message, not the messenger, and avoid attacking critics or opponents personally. Humor is far more powerful, if you can do that well.

That noted, the difference between debate and dialogue is now essential. With dialogue you can be kind to your opponent and better enlighten the entire community. In debate you must "win," so you may have to destroy his argument or credibility.

Debates versus Dialogues and the meanings of "win"

In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.
- Thich Nhat Hahn

In debate one strives to win. In dialogue one strives for wisdom. There is a winner and a loser in formal debates, as in most athletic contests, political elections and legal disputes. In ideal dialogue parties strive to reach a higher understanding of some complex problem or truth. In ideal dialogues, ALL the participants win some lessons learned at least. Pure debate relies mainly on competitive principles, while pure dialogue maximizes cooperative principles. One results in win/lose outcomes, the other searches for win/win solutions to common problems. Therefore I much prefer dialogue, but there are times for debate as well.

Real-world situations often mix the competitive and cooperative principles. There can be serious negative consequences for failing to recognize when each apply. So the first thing prudent people do is to determine whether win/win outcomes are possible or practical from the current situation. When possible these are superior, but they are not always possible.

A contest for a business contract typically has one winner and one or many losers, so those kinds of debates are generally conducted more ruthlessly. In politics, one person wins the office and every other candidate loses. Ruthlessness and deception rule, the more so the higher the stakes. But for the community to prosper, ideal politicians must then set aside their competitive debating skills to find positive, consensus solutions to common problems. Community solutions benefit much more from dialogue than debate.

Thus debate is more like martial art with words. One must be prepared to be ruthless when a weakness is detected, and to destroy your opponent. Dialogue is more like philosophy club, where fine minds collaborate to achieve enlightenment or wisdom. Both are important in a real world of conflict and competition made harsher by adverse global trends.

Winning, for Self Only, or for Community Also? And the importance of Listening Deeply

Two scores of 99 and 98 on an academic test mean two "A" grades for excellent students. Two scores of 99 and 98 in sport mean an "A" for the winner and an "F" for the loser; they mean happiness, fame and maybe money for one, sadness and obscurity for the other. The stakes in business and politics can be even higher. In war, the slightest advantage can mean life for one side, and death for the other. All these arenas have debates and dialogue.

Context matters enormously, so the first thing one should do is determine very clearly whether win/win outcomes are possible from the current situation. The more they are, the more one should prefer techniques of dialogue. The more a context demands win/lose outcomes, the more likely you must debate to win. Gentle dialogue faced with tactical debate may lose like a child confronted by an older, bigger bully. But in all cases you must **listen deeply**, reflectively, to understand your enemy, your adversary or even your partner in a dialogue. And you must know who your audiences are, both practically and tactically.

Listening deeply seems like such a simple thing; it is tragic so few do it. Many people talk when they should listen, and even when listening in debate most are formulating rebuttals and arguments in their minds. So they listen with only half of their minds. Sun Tzu observed that you must know your enemy as well as yourself to be confident in battle. And in debate, the winner often knows his opponent's positions better than the opponent himself. By this habit one determines strengths and weaknesses, one anticipates attack to easily deflect it, and concentrates offense behind a shield of deceptions to strike decisively when the moment is correct. Determining that critical moment, and the correlation of forces, requires more than geometry and measures of strength. It requires knowing the most important audience in most debates, which is neither your opponent nor you.

Multiple Audiences and which is most Important

There are at least 3 audiences in any debate: your opponent, you, and the judges or external audience. Of these by far the most important are the judges or external audience. In academic or foreign policy debates, the external audience may be characterized as those inclined to favor you, those inclined to favor your opponent, and those with truly open minds who have come to form new opinions. Politics will determine which of these is practically most important, but in abstract terms one puts foremost the open-minded ones, because they are by far the easiest to influence. That, after all, is the purpose of skill in debate.

Your opponent (and to a lesser extent his supporters) may be remarkably stubborn, even pig-headed, and some will defend their ignorance onto death. But he is also usually an extremely articulate proponent of a view held by others. Some of his supporters will be more reasonable, and can be educated or seduced away by good logic, evidence, excellent data or facts and a polite style. This is why insults should be employed rarely and cautiously.

When you insult your opponent you also insult those who think like him, so you can turn potential allies into determined enemies at the very moment you think you are defeating your opponent the moron.

This tactical mistake is so common that it has a Latin label known to all debaters in the Western world, the "*Ad Hominum*" argument. That means 'attacking the man' instead of his message. I will discuss *ad hominum* arguments further in a section on techniques that follows. For now, just consider the importance of not insulting your audience or especially the judges. Thus one should generally direct criticisms toward the facts and logic of an opposition view, rather than toward the character flaws and general ignorance of your opponent (which is obvious to everyone anyway ;-)!

Some segment of the audience is inclined to support you. I will defer comment on them except to note that you should be aggressive in their defense without embarrassing them with bad technique or false information. They already support you; just don't lose them. It is the people who do not support you that you must win over. And of these the easiest to change are those with genuinely open minds looking for evidence to form new opinions. In theory, this is also the mind-set of judges.

This group is by far the most important, in a courtroom, in a board room, reviewing contracts or as voters in politics who will select leaders. So even as you are sparring with an opponent, your attention should be focused on the ones who really matter – in your audience.

Another feature of audiences which is quite important but difficult to deal with is the fact that many people speak different "dialects" even when using the same language. I do not refer to subtle variations in accent or tone, I mean that many have completely different concepts for key terms like "justice", "freedom", "honesty", "virtue", "value" or "good business practices." These dialect differences can be extremely important in political debates and courtrooms. An example may help.

In America I am constantly bridging groups in the military and peace movements, among law enforcement and social change advocates, between Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, libertarians and radical anarchists. Every one of these groups uses the English language differently, sometimes even to the point of opposite meanings for the same key terms, like "freedom fighter" or "terrorist," or even "good" and "evil." For some among these I use "national security talk," and for others I use the language of "progressive social change" or "justice." It is a great mistake to confuse the two linguistic styles.

This is one reason I know so little Korean. Each of my few remaining brain cells must carry many versions of apparently simple English words. Even the difference between "a" and "the" is profound. "A" religions work for peace; "the" religions wage war. "A" truth seeks wisdom; "the" truths try to enslave other minds to their ignorance. So there is little room left in my old brain for many other beautiful languages – I apologize.

The practical point is that just as you must recognize differing audience segments in debate, you must recognize dialect differences. Thus you can target your specific message to the specific group of judges or audience members who will decide whether you "won" the debate, and either reward you with applause and lucrative contracts, or punish you by sending you to obscurity, poverty or even death in extreme cases.

Telling a Good Story: Another component of most audiences is the marginally interested or lightly educated group. For that majority of human beings, it is far better to "tell a good story" than to be logically precise, data packed, grammatically correct, etc. More comment on this will be reserved for the final section on techniques.

How you say What you say: Body Language, Tone and Grammar

Some research indicates that ordinary people receive 70+ percent of their information from speech by watching body language rather than listening to words. Whether that large number is accurate or not is unimportant, because it is certainly true that body language and emotional tone have a great impact on audiences. The most important element of that is their effect on perceived credibility and on the perceived character of the speaker. All the logic and facts in the world will not usually save you if you are perceived as incredible, dishonest or a jerk.

Body language refers to how you use your body during speech. Good debaters use their bodies consciously; poor ones let the body run itself which reveals a great deal if one is deceptive, greedy, malevolent, lazy, stupid, crazy and so forth. These are not impressions one wishes to convey in debate. The face is obviously a very important part of the body in this respect, which is why so many people want to see the eyes of those who wish to sell them something. But the face is not the only important body part.

"Tone" is harder to define. In one respect this refers to the entire emotional effect of your speech or debate, which includes the words used and everything else. In another respect this refers specifically to the volume, pitch and modulation of your voice. At the very least it should be noted that "monotonic" delivery, where pitch, pace, timbre and sheer loudness of the voice seldom varies, should be strictly avoided. You should avoid this because it bores people, and because it projects a flat, unengaged, disinterested emotional tone. People prefer speakers to be interested in their topic, even passionate, and certainly committed to their conclusions in a debate. Good debaters modulate (vary) all those elements of their voice to project specific emphases, emotions, veracity and other tonal elements to their audience. At moments of truth in a high stakes debate where weakness is detected, the voice sounds like a sword cutting into the heart of his argument. And the victor's body may also be moving as a marital artist delivering the fatal blow. In this respect debate has elements of acting.

In general debaters are taught to use perfect grammar, syntax, diction and all elements of proper, formal language style. The reason is because formal debates are conducted before judges who are highly educated and some of whom are what we call "grammar-Nazis" who will pounce on the slightest technical flaw of language while totally ignoring the content or meaning of the words said.

In public speaking before diverse audiences one must still be aware of grammar-Nazis but less strict about perfect grammar, syntax, diction and such. The reason for this is because spoken language in ordinary life is almost never done in exactly the same style as written language. So perfect grammar etc. seems weird. Secondly, deviations from 'perfect' style can add to the dramatic impact of words. Deviations from 'perfect' style may convey many emotions, and emotional tone is quite important to victory with many audiences.

So while the expectation is to use good grammar, confident body language and a positive tone, a skilled debater has a repertoire of exceptions to this rule.

Techniques

(starting with, do not insult your audience…insulting your opponent is optional)

Respect your audience or audiences without assuming too much: You should never underestimate the intelligence of your audience, but you also should not overestimate their knowledge of the topic you are debating. They may be brilliant in many ways, in fact they often are, but few have spent as much time focused on your topic recently if you are a diligent professional. So find ways to educate your audience about relevant facts and recent developments without ever "talking down" to them (as professors often do).

Ad hominum arguments: Clearly distinguish between your opponent, his supporters, and his arguments or evidence. Unless tactical considerations prevail, focus your arguments and facts on his without criticizing him as a human being. Remember, when you insult him you will insult his supporters and you risk insulting the judges. That is a formula for failure no matter how good your "facts" or logic are. There are exceptions to this rule, especially in political

debates where ridiculing your opponent can be very effective. The same technique will usually fail in academic debates, because it insults the intelligence of your elite audience. Thus vary audiences.

Straw man arguments, or Reductio ad absurdum: A common, but flawed technique is to reduce your opponent's argument to a ridiculous extreme and then demolish it. This is called a "straw man argument" in English or *reductio ad absurdum* in Latin. It works well with lightly educated audiences, but it does not work very well with expert audiences who detect it as unfair and manipulative. For example an opponent might say that "Sometimes businesses are so frugal they endanger public safety, so some government regulation is essential." An extreme response would be to say "My opponent claims that all businessmen are crooks who should be put in jail! He wants to destroy our economy in the name of public safety!" That may get applause from your supporters, but will gain no allies from the objective audience and could easily insult the judges who are deciding whether to add new regulations or not.

Lay a solid foundation of essential and verifiable facts: There are a million "facts," "data" and ten million opinions about your topic, but you only have time to cite a few of them. So pick carefully the most essential, both for understanding your position and for defeating your opponent's. "Opinions" are much softer than "facts" and I will deal with them in a moment, but even "facts" vary in how hard and useful they are. A verifiable fact can be supported by citation of some authority who has written or publicly commented on the data in question. This external credential is quite important to many debates. The best of these verifiable facts are drawn from the literature of your opposition, and the most powerful quotes are from speakers known to come from your opponent's political or occupational subculture. Thus you protect against charges of political bias, and at best can establish some consensus on the facts you will later use to demolish your opponent's position.

Distinguish facts from opinions, including especially your own: In Western debate there is a saying: "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but no one is entitled to their own facts." Reasonable people often disagree quite profoundly about what facts mean. Reasonable people can often disagree about which policy is wisest to confront a social problem, or which strategy is best to fulfill a business plan. Those are opinions. But there is an external world of reality and facts which is less subject to those kinds of variation. Some debaters make up "facts" to suit their argument of the day, but those are not real, verifiable, factual evidence – they are figments of a debater's imagination. Be alert to people who toss out "facts" that cannot be easily verified, and be prepared to ask for the source of weird data thrown out to attack your position. People skilled in debate can source almost all of their data outside of their imagination or the internet. And those who can not are vulnerable to their arguments being torn to shreds by a skilled opponent in debate. Since we are all human we all make mistakes, so keep an eye out for this flaw in you when you are preparing. Thus you may detect things you were quite sure of, but cannot verify by external reference today. Be wary of using unverifiable facts, or of confusing your opinions with laws of the universe.

Perfect grammar, syntax and artful use of language: Grammar-Nazis are everywhere, and like mosquitoes they can distract your attention. More importantly in debate, they can defuse your powerful arguments by focusing on trivia. Since they are everywhere and love to vex us,

debaters try to use technically perfect language. This presents a different problem. Perfect technical language can be as dull as dirt, and it can also require very long sentence or paragraph structures that are confusing as well as boring. So some middle ground is called for. Specific fields of knowledge also have their own technical words which help to reduce the number of words required to say something. But jargon confuses those outside the field, and if you misuse jargon in front of a technical audience your credibility is gone. So avoid jargon and complex or technical language while being as close to perfect in grammar, syntax and diction as you can be. One last warning: NEVER use the term "Grammar-Nazis" in public. It irritates them, so they wake up and look for flaws in you to pick at.

Body and automobile metaphors, and sport analogies: Sometimes debate requires dealing with extremely complex topics very quickly using ordinary language as much as you can. Metaphors used properly can be very helpful in these situations. For one example, systems theory can be very complex and difficult. But observe that a human body is composed of many parts, like the heart and brain and arms and legs. These function as a whole quite differently than any part could alone. The whole body can run and write and love and do so many things, but an isolated heart or brain or arm or leg cannot do any of those things. It is all about how the parts are put together, their relationships, that make whole humans what we are. Thus can systems theory be reduced to a simple example which virtually any person can understand. You can use automobiles in exactly the same way if body parts annoy a particular audience. The point is that metaphors that rely on subjects we ALL know and understand (like bodies or cars) can help people in your audience to understand extremely complex topics quickly. Athletics provide another set of analogies of particular value in politics and business, where teamwork is essential and competitive goals the norm.

Either control definitions or at least do not let your opponent control them: Some skilled debaters will begin by trying to define selected words. Attorneys are the masters of this power technique. Do not let them succeed without a fight, because they are trying to win the debate before it begins. Definitions DO matter, in some cases, but in other cases they are just a distraction from the serious business. An example is the definition of a term like "justice." If you let opponent attorneys define this term, they will do so in a way that makes you a criminal, or at least the losing party in some legal dispute. So when definitions are essential, defend yours vigorously and reveal the ridiculous misconceptions of your opponent. But when definitions are not really essential, avoid long digressions into that pointless side show. Formal debaters are often trained in philosophy or rhetoric, where debates about the "proper" definitions of words can take centuries, even millennia. That is OK for some academics, but imprudent for those who must deal with real world problems of life or death or commerce.

Tell a good story: Good stories are metaphors for some of the most complex dilemmas of life, told in ways that do not use technical language but rather artful presentation of universal human themes. The art of story telling is well known around the world, and Korean artists now excel in Asian films. You can ask them how to tell a good story. The essential elements are universality, a tension between good and evil, romantic drama and a happy ending if possible. Some beauty and some humor helps. Whether you can apply those to your court battle or contract application I cannot know. But whenever you can apply a little drama, universal human themes, and a happy ending, this is good technique. If you can paint your opponent as evil incarnate – that's a bonus, so long as you don't insult his supporters too much.

Humor … without insulting your opponent or his sacred symbols: All debaters recognize the power of humor. But if you are weak in this area be wary, because humor depends greatly on timing and nuance and can backfire on you easily. In particular, most humor involves a small amount of pain inflicted on someone or some group, and you must avoid insulting your audience. On the other hand, humor can also diffuse moments of tension which can be very helpful. And humor can skewer your opponent's arguments more effectively than logic or facts with most audiences. If you intend to use humor it is also helpful to recognize sacred symbols of your opposition. They may forgive you insulting your opponent, but they seldom forgive insulting their sacred symbols. Finally, under no circumstances should you try humor in a foreign language unless you are quite fluent. Humor relies so much on nuances of language and culture that you are more likely to fail than succeed.

Monitor your emotions: Your emotions determine your body language unless you are very disciplined. More important, your emotions have a profound influence on which arguments you use how. A skilled opponent may goad you trying to get an emotional response they can then use to devour you like a piece of kimche. In particular anger leading to rash insults can destroy your position. But there are many other dangers of many kinds. So monitor your emotions at all times so you can retain your focus on winning the debate. On the other hand, do not repress them utterly because empathy is a powerful tool to monitor your opponent's emotions, and to influence audience mood. Remember that winning in public debate is as much an emotional thing as a logical, fact-based thing. So monitor your emotions first, to avoid losing the debate yourself, and second, to know when and how to strike to win.

The critical importance of deep listening: Debates are usually interactive affairs, so it is obvious that you should listen to your opponent's arguments in order to rebut them. But that is just the surface of deep listening. Ideally, we should suspend all the normal chatter of our minds to listen very, very carefully to what he says without excessive judgments, just to understand him. Maybe one point of his is very valid, and should be acknowledged rather than attacked (topic of the next section). Maybe his words mask a much deeper motivation for his position, and it would be better to reveal that emotion than to deal with superficial argument. None of these assessments is easy to do at any time, much less in the heat of an emotional debate before judges of high stake issues. Furthermore, you should be listening just as hard to what the audience is muttering. Sometimes they are allowed to speak, but more often you must judge their mood from body language and facial expressions. Remember, you are very unlikely to win your opponent over (today anyway). His job is trying to defeat you, and his changes if any usually come much later after reflection. Your job is trying to defeat him, but what matters is the opinions of the audience or judges. So learn to listen deeply, deeply, and if possible use this skill long before the debate by listening to others who do not share your opinions. Thus you may come to truly understand them which is a key to victory.

Acknowledging strong points of contrary opinions: Some of your opponent's arguments may be ridiculously weak; observe that for attack. Some of your opponent's data may be full of errors or his evidence or logic flawed; this helps your position. But often your opponents have some very valid reasons behind their conclusions, reasons that are shared and respected by some segment of the audience. An effective tactic then is to acknowledge those strong

points, even to agree enthusiastically with them, but then to show some other evidence or other reasons why you have reached a different conclusion even though that point is true, and despite the fact that your opponent is wise and kind. By this method you may actually educate an opponent, and still win. When fate is kind you may learn some useful things yourself.

Focus decisive facts and arguments (logical or not) to break your opponent's weak points: Having thoroughly assessed your opponent's strong and weak points, the mood of the judges and the correlation of forces all around you, it is time to win. The variety of circumstances is infinite as are the combinations of words used in debate. But the principles of martial art are eternal. There are always time constraints, attend them. At the moment of truth, break or expose your opponent's weak points 1, 2, 3, rapidly, and take him down. Point out how completely hopeless his position is as quickly as possible, so that onlookers understand they cannot help him; he is doomed. Remember that your judges are among the audience so you should not be cruel. They may react against that. But you want them to see that his argument was gravely weak or his data deeply flawed, so that they may come to your side.

Reconcile after he is defeated: Reconciliation is valuable because done properly you have learned things from your opponent also and the entire audience has been elevated to higher and richer levels of understanding. This is an optimal goal even in competitive debate.

Like a partner in martial art, if he has done his job well you are stronger because he has sparred with you, and you want to be able to learn from each other again. This attitude puts a limit on ruthlessness and cruelty, which are seldom attractive features in debate over the long run anyway. Certainly for the transitions of politics and business it is important to reconcile whenever you can. Politicians need allies tomorrow who may include the defeated today. And business may profit from contracts tomorrow that were lost today to another.

Or, you may have to recognize that YOU are defeated, and salvage the best you can of a failed debate. The same logic applies to you. Better to survive to fight another day, your credibility intact, than to so poison a relationship that you can never spar again, or work together on constructive things.

Conclusion

It is an honor to speak to students at Pusan National University, and it is a joy to know some Koreans who have survived thousands of years in a neighborhood of aggressive giants like China and Japan. To me this says that you must be an incredibly tough people, who love their culture dearly. Since I came 10,000 kilometers for this opportunity, I will take just one minute to warn you of the great crisis of human civilization.

Global warming and adverse environmental changes are real, and really serious.

War saps the strength of nations, and drains everyone's treasury. But war does nothing to solve environmental problems, or the larger issues of energy and sustainable development.

My country, which I dearly love, has become greedy and arrogant, and our leadership clinically insane. This presents danger to all human civilization.

There is little you can do in Korea about my country's leadership or culture. That is our problem – my apologies to you all. But there is very much you could do to restore nature and natural balance in Korea. Elders remember how much Koreans loved nature, back when you had some. And how much nature sustained you during times of national crisis.

So I urge you to recognize the twin crises of war and ecological disaster in time to save your own culture, communities and families. I thank you for your precious time today,

Kamsamneda.