THE PEDAGOGY AND POLITICS OF SOLIPSISM

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How could one not be moved by Alfred Snider's love for academic debate? Snider writes in his retrospective:

> I have trodden the dusty paths, driven the all-night vans, sought for lost luggage, struggled with language translations, engaged in the act of debate strategizing, expressed anguish because of the behavior of judges, watched countless students bloom, and more that I will not attempt to share. (Snider, 2003)

I do not question Snider's intentions or his devotion to academic debate. I too have "driven the all-night vans" and "sought for lost luggage." I continue to support academic debate, although now as an administrator. I am, however, a critic of Snider's gaming paradigm and believe it is the source of a fundamental misconception of the role academic debate ought to play in higher education. Snider's gaming paradigm sponsors a pedagogy and politics of solipsism that is strikingly conservative.

The Triumph of Conservatism

The University of Vermont's World Debate Institute's website declares Snider "one of the most widely published debate theorists in the world" and the "originator of gaming paradigm" (World Debate Institute, 2003).[1] Yet, Snider in his retrospective is more humble, noting that "academic competitive debate was already a game before my articles appeared. My articles merely served to explain what debating had become" (Snider, 2003). Either way, the dominant paradigm in academic debate is Snider's gaming paradigm, and it is a deeply entrenched outlook that Snider and students defend with religious zeal. Witness the manner in which Snider champions his game paradigm. In his exchange with Katsulas et. al., he does not retreat an inch or acknowledge the remote possibility that his paradigm might be problematic, and his retrospective is absent introspection on the flaws of gaming (Snider, 1987).

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[1] Snider is also listed as the "inventor" of the gaming paradigm in other settings. See: http://ndtceda.com/archives/200207/0002.html.

His pattern in responding to dissent is to demand that his critics read his work before they write. I have read his published work. Snider was kind enough to send me one long unpublished manuscript, his doctoral dissertation, three articles, and two convention papers. By itself, this is a remarkably slender foundation for a claim to paradigmatic dominance in academic debate. However, Snider is right that his version of gaming has been adopted, if not silently, then certainly without question by the vast majority of those currently in academic debate.

Some of us have actively and in print opposed the gaming paradigm on educational grounds. We have lost, and the gaming paradigm has left in its wake a version of academic debate that is disfranchised from its history and connection to the rhetoric and speech disciplines, a decline in the number of tenure-eligible faculty positions dedicated to academic debate, and a reputation for verbal violence, sexual harassment, and teaching tricks rather than careful habits of research and ethical argumentation.[2] Snider is a good judge, and he has treated my students well and with dignity. However, his gaming paradigm, steeped as it is in solipsism, leaves academic debate without a pedagogical or an ethical mooring, thus unleashing students to, in Snider's words, "use whatever paradigm they need to get the job done" (Snider, 1981). That job is to win debate rounds, at any cost.

The gaming paradigm, portrayed as rather innocuous and as cosmopolitan in Snider's writings, is very much the normative paradigm of debate. In his exchange with Katsulas et. al., Snider insisted that gaming is a "descriptive-internal" paradigm, which does not impose a model form the outside (Snider, 1987, p. 124). In his 2003 retrospective, his view of his paradigm is less humble as it is now "explanatory," producing an understanding of how debate does and should operate (Snider, 2003). Snider argues that the gaming paradigm is better than policymaking or other paradigms that force students into simulations of argumentative contexts outside the debate tournament (Snider, 1987). Snider has the

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[2] For a critique of gaming and other issues in academic debate, see Frank (1993). For a rhetorically grounded vision of debate, see Bartanen and Frank (1993, 1994). For the view that debate should be a simulation designed to promote rhetorical scholarship, see Frank et al. (1984). For a view that debate should feature evidence, see Bartanen and Frank (1999). For evidence on the strained relationship between the disciplines of speech and forensics and the decline of tenure-related forensic positions, see Frank (1997a). On the verbal violence in academic debate, see Frank (1997b).

prerogative to make an argument that his rendition of gaming is better than other paradigms, but that moves his argument beyond the descriptive to the normative. Indeed, in his response to a panel of debate coaches, Snider confessed:

> But in truth I have always been and will probably always be a closet Gaming Paradigm advocate (perhaps more of a meta-paradigm). O Come out of the closet! Gaming is not a meta-paradigm, it is a real paradigm. The others are semi-paradigms . . . . (Snider, 1994)

The unquestioned embrace of the gaming paradigm marks the triumph of conservative thinking in the academic debate community as it has trumped other perspectives, and there is little serious interest in change, reform, or in innovation as a stroll in the hallways of the NDT or Heart of America or other national tournaments reveals. The crises in policy debate, brilliantly detailed by Rowland and Deatherage (1988), is a function of the gaming paradigm's severing of the relationship between the debate round and realities outside the debate round. Former debaters and friends of debate, including Rowland, David Zarefsky, and others are deeply troubled by the turn to gameplaying by academic debaters. If the pedagogical touchstones of Snider's view of gaming were sound, I would be less concerned with its dominance. A close examination of his writings reveals a constricted view of gaming that founders on a pedagogy of solipsism.

The Pedagogy of Solipsism

In his writings, Snider draws heavily from the field of simulation/gaming. He does so with selectivity, and his definition and implementation of the gaming does not reflect the scholarship in the field. Most scholars in this field yoke simulation and gaming. The consensus of scholars holds that simulation/gaming offers the possibility of creating a "structured representation of reality (simulation-game) to understand and change society (i.e. to relieve it of ills of underdevelopment, sickness, cultural conflict, racial discrimination, illiteracy and welfare)" (Law-Yone, 2000). Duke (1980), an authority cited frequently by Snider, pairs simulation and gaming and works for clients who face serious local and international problems, including railroad deregulation, geothermal energy, banking, nutrition, housing, etc. The ultimate objective, Duke (1980) notes, is for clients to use games as simulations of problem solving and that they apply the lessons learned in the simulation in the field. In his dissertation, Snider summarizes Duke's work, acknowledging that simulation/gaming depends on the use of what Snider (1982a) calls an "advanced

analogy" (p. 108). The analogy is between the simulation/game and contexts outside the simulation game, with the context of debate shedding light on the future and potential futures. Snider writes:

> Any regular witness to academic debates over the last five years would have to notice this process at work - - with students discussing the merits or demerits of economic growth, the population explosion, the mathematical probabilities of nuclear war in differing situations, and any number of examples. Academic debate is operating, within the gaming format, to allow students to explore these alternative futures. (Snider, 1982a, p. 109)

The issue is not, at this point, if students are learning in the Snider's gaming paradigm, an issue I will consider below, but in his adherence to the advanced analogy. Five years after his dissertation, Snider abandons the advanced analogy, jettisons simulations and writes:

> The game of debate I have outlined [citations omitted] is a freewheeling game, and not a simulation of some other advocacy situation. Baseball, poker, and television shows are examples of games that are decidedly not simulation games. (Snider, 1987, p. 125)

The deep analogy is now between academic debate and the games of baseball, poker, and television shows.

Snider's solipsism is best on display in his 1982 convention paper:

> Since debate takes place purely in the realm of symbols, it would seem fruitless to discuss the difference between what IS 'really happening" and 'what is happening in the debate only.' Rather, the two seem to be together – what is really happening IS what is happening in the debate. (Snider, 1982b, p. 16)

I am uncomfortable when talk of purity is in the air, and the capitalized IS doesn't inflate the strength of the argument. Regardless, Snider sets forth a view of debate that excludes realities outside the debate round, producing a strikingly impoverished view of the activity.

Stripped of its connection to simulations and the possibility of audiences outside the activity, the pedagogical assumptions under girding Snider's version of the gaming paradigm are revealed as barren. Initially, Snider equivocates on the educational objectives the game of academic debate ought to achieve. At the end of reading his written work, I can't detect a coherent pedagogy as the solipsism enveloping his paradigm produces this tautological justification for debate: the game of debate is good because it is a game of

debate. In his *National Forensic Journal* contribution to the editor's forum, Snider draws from a 1955 Karl Wallace article to suggest that the "only prescriptive standard of ethics in the game should be HONESTY" (Snider, 1984, p. 121). Again, if one can persevere through the capital letters at the end of the sentence to the end of the article, one is left with the conclusion that Snider truly does need Wallace and his Aristotelian ethic, imposed as it is from outside the debate round, to secure the integrity of debate. The significance of this argument is demonstrated below.

Even if Snider had specific and consistent educational objectives, he could not establish them as according to his version of gaming academic debate is designed for the enjoyment of the players, and the judge exists to operate the game, becoming part of the scenery. In the quotation from his retrospective I use in the introduction he reports expressing "anguish because of the behavior of judges" but does not seem distressed by the behavior of students. Indeed, the players rule in the Snider gaming paradigm. In his *New Debate*, which is an earlier version of his doctoral dissertation, Snider writes:

> In most theoretical respects, and in many aspects related to academic debate, the students are far in front of the teachers. While respected forensic intellects argue about appropriate paradigms, debaters don't waste their valuable time on such pursuits. They use whatever paradigm they need to get the job done. (Snider, 1981, p. IV:1).

This is an astonishing set of statements. First, there is the obvious performative contradiction involved in Snider's subsequent claim that gaming "is a real paradigm. The others are semi-paradigms . . ." (Snider, 1994). Snider argues that "students will utilize whatever paradigm they feel they need for a specific situation and a specific judge, because they know it's all a game and they need to make the proper play in order to win." Either paradigms are real, semi-real, and important, or gaming is useful only to the degree that it can help students win debates. If the latter is true, and if Wallace's ethic of honesty stands in the way of victory, it will be trampled and ignored. Second, Snider inverts the student-teacher relationship. If we accept Snider's claim that "in most theoretical respects and in many aspects related to academic debate, the students are far in front of the teachers," what is the rationale for paying forensic educators, or for listening to the opinion of a coach, or for vesting much faith in "one of the most widely published debate theorists in the world"? If Snider is right that students are far ahead of their teachers as theorists, wouldn't they be better served if they judged themselves? Students have taken over the activity, and in search

of debate victories, at any and all cost, they have little reason to be concerned about the educational consequences of the gaming paradigm.

Academic debate should cultivate contrarian thinking. Debate educators and their students should, by habit, question preconceived notions. Here, Snider is unable to imagine the plausibility of a case against simulations/gaming as a pedagogical tool.[3] The empirical literature is a best mixed (Randel et al., 1992). Educational games have not been found to be demonstrably superior to more traditional pedagogical approaches. While I believe carefully articulated simulations and games can be educational, I do not see evidence that games are intrinsically educational or that academic debate is an unmitigated good.

Snider rightly insists that critics of his gaming paradigm should read before they write. Yet, this dictate does not apply to him as in his retrospective he writes, without footnotes, "Some said that debate was too important to be 'just' a game. It did not occur to these persons that games could be important. Perhaps they had never seen the World Cup" (Snider, 2003). Who are these "some," and where are the citations to the published and unpublished criticisms of gaming? Who has said that games are not important? What does Snider mean when he refers to the World Cup? He seems to think it ends the discussion. Without explanation, I am left to my own devices, and I draw the opposite conclusion than the one Snider anticipates. The World Cup is a game, and to some it is important and is a significant event. Yet, it is a game that has spawned racism, sexism, xenophobia, and violence. I will grant Snider his unpacked claim that the World Cup is important, but consider how it has expressed its importance in Europe:

> For the past several years, deadly violence in the stadiums, galloping corruption in a growing number of countries (Brazil, Russia, China), growing use of illegal drugs (in ltaly and elsewhere), the fixing of matches, and, above all, the regular shenanigans of hooligans all over the world, particularly in Europe, finally revealed the true face of the soccer empire: a multinational with false consciousness, a degrading populist enterprise, an ideological justification for social violence against the disinherited. (Brohm & Perelman, 2002)

The French, who won the World Cup in 1998, illustrate the importance of the World Cup:

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[3] Snider's footnotes are replete with newspaper accounts that celebrate academic debate. His research ignores other reports in the press that represent the dark side of debate. See McGough (1988).

> The resurgence of interest in soccer has gone hand in hand with the rise of the National Front, which has managed to attract young voters by recycling the nationalist ideology of the 1998 victory: warring spirit, intensified chauvinist propaganda, the cult of the uniform (all in blue, all behind the chief or the totem), order and discipline, national populist aggregation. Thus, soccer has become a source of support for the National Front, as the National Front relies on real soccer values to grow: the myth of the superman, the ideology of sport war, the justification of physical force, the twilight aesthetics of the gesture and of the domain of sport, fanaticism. (Brohm & Perelman, 2002, p. 192)

The gaming metaphor has also had a detrimental impact on higher education in America. I will not rehearse the well-known criticism that higher education has been co-opted by an "arms race" in intercollegiate athletics and that undergraduates are pacified, in Murray Sperber's (2000) language, with the circus of intercollegiate athletics and beer. We do not need more games in higher education, and we suffer politically when we conflate games with academic debate.

The Politics of Solipsism

David Zarefsky (1994), an authority cited by Snider, observed a few years ago that:

> The area of our field which most directly bears on public affairs, the study of argumentation and debate, we too often have treated as an intellectual backwater of programs staffed by paraprofessionals and undeserving of our support. And our colleagues in this area have defined their own professional concerns with such insularity that they deprive the rest of us their insight into the conduct of public controversy.

The gaming paradigm explains, in part, how it has come to pass that academic debate has become provincial in its vision and why forensic educators do not earn the respect they deserve. Within the debate culture, many agree with Snider that the activity is and should be run by students; stories of mistreatment of judges are common. The source of this mistreatment, I believe, is that students share Snider's anguish about the quality of the judging, believing that they, the students, are far superior in their understanding of debate theory and practice. Students are known to berate judges for their "stupidity and ignorance." Outside the debate culture, forensic educators are viewed as coaches rather than scholars. The game paradigm, with its premium on winning, joins academic debate with

intercollegiate athletics, as trophies and debate victories rather than evidence of learning and scholarship, become the primary justifications for the activity. The discipline of speech and rhetoric, which hosts the vast majority of forensic programs, has become increasingly disaffected from academic debate, leading to a decrease in tenure-eligible faculty positions dedicated to forensics.

I received Snider's retrospective on the day I had a meeting with my Provost to request a budget increase for our forensic program. Imagine if I had used Snider's gaming paradigm as a rationale for the increase. In so doing, I would have celebrated my role as a "gamemaster," citing Lost Tribe as my inspiration. I would have noted that academic debate allows students to "Embrace the goddess energy." When pressed, I would deny the link between debate and realities outside the debate round, suggesting that academic debate IS what it is, that it is like poker, baseball, television shows, and important like the World Cup. My role, I would say, is to follow behind my students, who forge far ahead of me in their theoretical insights and command of debate.

I did not use Snider's gaming paradigm as a rationale. Academic debate, I argued, is a form of rhetorical scholarship, preparing students to become informed advocates. Debate is a simulation in which students learn to solve societal problems with reason. We expect our students to do primary research, under the guidance of educators. Students learn from expert critics who are well versed in the study of argument. Students learn the science and art of adjusting arguments to audiences and audiences to arguments. The Provost was receptive to my arguments.

I share with Snider the desire to spread the benefits of debate, but I cringe when I imagine students in the inner cities and other countries learning the habits of research, speaking, and argument on display at our major academic debate tournaments. I will seek out evidence to challenge my perception. I do note Brent Farrand's concern about Urban debate leagues:

> We need to ask whether a great deal of the "heady" argumentation flowing from debate theorists and accomplished lab leaders has produced deep learning or shallow knowledge. Speed does not disturb our new coaches. That is something which can be learned. What is most disturbing is the cascade of factual errors and conceptual inconsistencies which pass unchallenged as good coin when repeated in the script of sophisticated structure and erudite terminology. That should not be learned. (n.d.).

Another supporter of debate outreach programs offers this caution as well:

> When weaned on an exclusive diet of tournament contest round competition, debaters tend to develop a spectator mentality regarding political affairs. From this vantage point, the political landscape resembles a whir witnessed through the windows of a speeding train. There is a risk that UDL debaters brought up through such a pedagogical program will be steered away from opportunities to develop and apply their argumentative skills in organic projects of democratic empowerment that are focused on pressing local issues in their communities. (Mitchell, 1998)

This caution is well warranted if Snider's gaming paradigm is exported to other debating contexts. Snider's gaming paradigm, a free floating game, similar to poker, baseball, and television, becomes a spectator sport of unchecked facts and equivocating logic. Debate in these contexts, which in many tournaments can strike one as the verbal version of the World Cup, may turn out to undermine attempts at problem solving.

Conclusion

Alfred Snider and Maxwell Schnurer's (2002) new book, *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum,* is a basic and good introduction to debate. The book captures the importance of debate as a civic activity, illustrating how citizens can benefit from robust argumentation. Chapter one, titled "Introduction to Debate as Educational Method," is a splendid, although indirect, refutation of Snider's gaming paradigm. "There is a crisis of citizenship," write Snider and Schnurer (2002), "as well as education. This [book] believes that using debate as a classroom technique is valuable in addressing these issues and how citizens deal with them" (p. 17). I am at home with their book, and while it does not pay tribute to the rhetorical tradition that gave birth to academic debate, it certainly does recognize the civic foundation of American argumentation.

Snider was at his best when mining the simulation/gaming literature for insights into how academic debate might produce better educational results. Unfortunately, he became a true believer, the "inventor" and "originator" of the gaming paradigm. He ended up expanding a pedagogical technique into ideology, holding that his version of gaming was the "real" paradigm among semi paradigms. The Snider of *Many Sides* is the one I prefer, and I am hopeful that it reflects his turn away from games and to the classroom in his thinking. There are realities outside of debate, and in the spirit of Duke and other scholars of simulation/gaming, our efforts should be to design pedagogical exercises that will give

students the habits of mind and argument to solve the problems through and with argumentation.

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