

Position Papers

A series of position papers explaining the philosophical underpinnings of the Stoa organization.

I. Governance

In the speech and debate activity, there are myriads of decisions that must be made by those who organize competition. A small sampling of these decisions might include deciding: what we debate, how we debate, how we dress, how we judge, who judges, how many tournaments do we have, where do we have them, how many rounds do we have, how many outrounds do we have, how do we coach, and what do we coach. These decisions and hundreds of others, must be made by someone... but who?

A speech and debate league is composed of a number of components or entities. In homeschool speech and debate, we might identify these key entities as: competitors, families, coaches, clubs, and the league in which all of these operate. Each and every decision will be made by one of these five entities.

Before we begin to make the hundreds of decisions necessary for this competitive activity, we would do well to determine which entity should make which category of decisions. When multiple entities each think that they should have authority over a decision (or a class of decisions), there can be conflict. Most of these conflicts can be avoided with some forethought.

The philosophy of and management of Stoa might well be described as “federalism”. By this we refer to a decentralized system in which most decision-making is local and only a small and well-defined group of decisions are centralized.

Just as the federal government of the United States of America was created by the individual states who saw benefit from federation, the Stoa speech and debate league was created by clubs and coaches who saw the benefits of a league to create a common framework in which our students learn and compete.

Levels of government

Our philosophy is based on two premises. First, that there are, and of necessity, will be, levels of “government” in the speech and debate activity. Each of these governments, governs some aspects of the activity. We will refer to these levels as being lower or higher on the organizational chart, but we don’t mean to imply that lower or higher governmental levels equates in any way to importance, authority or power. Parental authority ought to be the most important government, even though it is not at the top of the organizational chart. The lowest level on the organizational chart might be the student or competitor; the next level would be the family; followed by coach or club; and last would be the League.

Second, for each decision, there is an ideal level at which that decision should be made. The amount of student time investment and frequency of tournament attendance is most likely to be

an issue for parents. Practice schedules and debate theory questions might be in the jurisdiction of the coach or club. Resolutions and matters relating to the national tournament would probably fall into the jurisdiction of the league.

Some decisions may overlap or fall under the purview of multiple governments. For example, the selection of an affirmative case or the selection of an interpretive piece might be subject to both family and club governance.

Too much centralization is undesirable

In theory, every decision could be centralized and made at the league level, but this would result in chaos. First, no league would be capable of making that many decisions, second, this system would usurp important local authority; and third, the quality of decision-making would be poor.

It is the objective of Stoa to “major on the majors” and not to micro-manage the minor issues. We would prefer that problems be handled at the lowest possible level on the organizational chart.

We recognize that the quantity of rules and regulations tends to increase over time. This seems to be true of all governments—even the government of voluntary associations.

We also recognize that there is a point of diminishing return when increases in the quantity of rules produces a reduction in the quality of those rules. It has also been observed, that respect for the rules will decrease as the quantity of rules increases. Although some rules are bound to be added as the league matures, it is our intent to keep these to an absolute minimum and to make sure that the rules are clear, simple and consistent.

As a league, we recognize that it is important to build strong local government entities. If clubs function better, the league will have fewer problems. If families function better, the club will have fewer problems. If competitors function better, families will have fewer problems.

When local governments/entities fail to do their job (to properly self-regulate), the result is often a call for more regulation from above. This regulation (or problem solving) from above can have several undesirable consequences. First, it may reduce local liberty. Second, it may have the unintended consequence of making problems worse in the long-term by weakening the local institutions.

Local governments are free to establish their own models of operation & governance.

It is not the intent of this document to define the relationship between competitor, family, coach and club. These relationships must be determined by these governments [or parties] themselves. The result is that different clubs will exercise differing levels of authority and decision-making

and families and competitors will choose to associate with those clubs that best fit their needs. Clubs, families and competitors are free to establish their own models of governance.

Some centralization is good and necessary

Despite the advantages of decentralization, there are some areas in which centralization of decisions can be beneficial. If we want our students to be able to compete against students from other clubs or other states, we need some common rules and practices. Here are three areas where centralized league decision-making is probably necessary and beneficial:

- 1) **Creating minimum uniform standards necessary for competition**
These uniform standards would include: event parameters and rules; speech times; and other practices that are necessary for competition.

- 2) **Creating standards that define who is eligible to compete.**
These eligibility standards (inclusion and exclusion criteria) serve an important purpose. Without an age restriction, for example, this writer would be tempted to quit his job and become a full-time competitor in the league.

- 3) **Setting standards that reflect the purpose, nature and goals of the league:**
This area of decision-making might include such things as: standards for ethics, dress, and behavior.

Conclusion

It is not the intent of this document to precisely define the exact roles of the different entities (or governments) in speech and debate. The purpose of this document is to explain the philosophical mind-set of the league. The practical aspects of this federal philosophy will be more fully codified in other places. It is our hope, however, that this document will cause every level of government to seriously examine its proper role within the entire speech and debate activity. Additionally, it is our desire for Stoa to allow as much local liberty as possible within the necessary general parameters of a unified league.

II. Problem-Solving (Philosophy of Rules)

To make a rule or not to make a rule, that is the question.
(With apologies to William Shakespeare)

If we observe a “problem” (or something that we perceive as a problem), how should we respond?

Years ago there was a widely syndicated comic strip called, “There Oughta Be a Law.” The title of the strip and some of its content made fun of the human proclivity to desire more and more regulation. In society, we hear frequent calls for laws to fix certain problems. Laws are used to modify every sort of behavior—from criminal law to regulatory law to the tax code, we stack laws upon laws, upon more laws.

We hope that our speech and debate rules will never rival the income tax code, but we do often hear calls for more and more rules to fix a litany of “problems”. Laws and rules are certainly necessary and important, but not always. As a league, it is important that we ponder our philosophy toward problem solving—and toward rule making.

When we encounter a potential problem, there is a series of three questions that we should ask. First, “Is any action necessary?”; second, “who should take action?”; and third, “what action should be taken?” Let’s take a look at each of these questions.

Is any action necessary?

Not every problem or offense needs corrective action. The party committing the offense may recognize the error and in some circumstances, no other action may be necessary. Or the error may be minor and does not justify a response or reaction. (Matthew 5:39 may be applicable in some circumstances.) In still other circumstances, the reaction may exaggerate the negative event.

Who should take action?

If it is determined that a problem needs attention or corrective action, it is important to ask, “Who should deal with this issue?” This consideration is often skipped in our decision-making process. In the speech and debate activity, there are a number of levels at which a problem can be confronted. These might include: natural consequences; one-on-one conversation; peer group action; parental action; coach action; and league action.

Generally, there are numerous advantages to dealing with problems in the most personal and decentralized manner possible—“local action”. Only when it is determined that a problem, or set of problems, cannot be adequately solved through other mechanisms, should it become an issue for the entire league.

What action should be taken?

A speech and debate league (or any other volunteer body) has a number of tools at its disposal for dealing with problems. These tools can include things as simple as having a league leader engage someone in a personal conversation or sending explanatory communication to members of the organization. These tools can also include more significant measures like the creation of a rule. It is important that we treat rule-making as one of our last tools of consideration.

As Christians, it is always important for us to remember the biblical principles of dealing with conflict or other “problems”. Specifically: Matthew 18:15-17; James 5:19-20; and I Corinthians 6:1-8.

If it is determined that there is no other way to appropriately deal with the issue in question and if we determine that the issue in question is a matter relevant to the whole league, then we may decide that it is appropriate to make or alter a rule.

Most of us have an understanding of what constitutes a rule, but we seldom stop to study the science of rule-making. There are two essential questions to ask about rules. The first question is: “when should we make a rule?” The second is: “what are the characteristics of good rules?”

When should we make a rule?

We should make rules to define the absolute parameters of an activity. These parameters may be necessary to distinguish one kind of activity from another. They may be necessary to make the activity uniform and just (to create an almost level playing field). Uniformity may even be necessary to prevent chaos.

We should make rules when we universally want to require or prohibit something. This may include things like dress code, evidence falsification or other important issues.

Rules should be used to define the absolutes of an activity. In most speech and debate activities, few rules are needed. As mentioned above, rules are needed to create a just format but they can never guarantee absolute fairness. Some examples of necessary rules would be speech times, speech order (in debate), items allowed in an event (such as a 3X5 card in extemporaneous) etc. In each case, it is easy to know what the rule is and it should be relatively easy to know if the rule has been violated.

The timing of rules

Unless there is a compelling need for immediacy, rule changes should not be implemented mid-season. Mid-season rule changes may create an uneven playing field and are likely to create a great deal of frustration among coaches, parents and competitors.

We should be cautious with the term “rule” and guard it for these few and unique instances. We should not call a rule a “guideline” as that implies a less absolute definition.

What are the characteristics of good rules?

Ideally, rules should be minimal, clearly defined and enforceable.

Minimal. This has been previously addressed in this article. We must remember that rules are only one of our “tools” for dealing with problems. Suffice it to say that an over abundance of rules will devalue all rules.

Clearly defined. A good rule should be clear and easily understood. It should be written. The best rules have clear “brightlines”. A brightline is the defining point that clarifies the exact point of violation. It separates the permissible from the impermissible. To the best of our ability, our rules need to identify clear brightlines. If we cannot define the parameters of the violation, we will have a rule with inconsistent interpretation and enforcement.

Enforceable. A good rule should specify either the consequence of the rule’s violation or the method of determining the consequence for its violation. When we have rules in society such as speed limits, most drivers understand that if they drive faster than the speed limit and are caught doing so, there will be a consequence to that action. If there were not the threat of consequence, how many people would actually follow the traffic laws? A policeman could stand on the corner and tell you that the rule is a 25 mile per hour speed limit, but if he never enforced the rule, what good would it be to have the rule?

The result of violating a rule should be a part of the rule. If we are not willing to attach a punishment or consequence to a rule, then we may be dealing with something that ought not be a rule. Some of the consequences of violating the rules in debate and speech have included the loss of a round or being docked points in speech events. More severe punishments could include expulsion from an event, a tournament or the league. As a league, it is important that the consequences of any rule violation be clear, fair and proportional to the offense. We want to offer grace and show Christian love, but if we don’t follow through with the enforcement of our rules, we will only encourage their violation.

Difficulty can often arise when people try to make rules to deal with character issues. Of course we want to develop good character in students and adults alike, but it is often difficult to make rules about character that meet these three standards. When rules start being implemented as a result of improper action of an individual, the new rule often is not minimal, not definable and not enforceable.

Some matters of character do need to be regulated by rules, but these instances should be limited to those that meet our three standards for good rules.

Conclusion

In speech and debate, like all other activities, problems and frustrations are unavoidable. It is incumbent on both the participants and the leadership to find the best way to deal with each of these difficulties. By asking ourselves the three important questions discussed in this paper, we can make better decisions about which tool is best suited for each particular problem.

When we determine that rules are necessary, we need to make sure that we produce good rules, keeping in mind that good rules are: minimal, clearly defined and enforceable. By dealing wisely with the challenges that come before us, we can promote Christian character, good will, and consistency. And with God's blessing, we hope these tools can help us respond appropriately to any challenge.