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INTRODUCING A CONVERSATION ON ACCESSIBILITY, DISABILITY & DEBATE

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In November of 2015, the National Communication Association (NCA) held its annual conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. At this conference, a panel consisting of people concerned about disability and accessibility as they relate to debate gathered to discuss pressing questions about how (or if it is possible) to make debate a more inclusive space. The discussion focused on describing particular accessibility problems that need to be addressed, proposing specific solutions to remedy those problems, and conversing about the potential limits of incremental changes.

The following entries represent some of what the participants shared at this conference. The recent rise in discussion about disability and accessibility in debate, as well as the increase of debaters critiquing the debate space and debate communities at large, necessitates conversations about disability and accessibility. As panelists underscored at the NCA conference, creating a more inclusive space can include tournaments accounting for dietary restrictions; tournaments providing non-isolated quiet rooms, as well as rooms where students with mobility concerns can debate; debate camps crafting ways to increase accessibility at camp; judges and other debaters respecting requests from debaters about how to make rounds more accessible; coaches reflecting upon the concerns of their current and future debaters; and so on. This conversation includes a recognition, as Zach Richter points out, that certain inaccessibilities “are intractable.”¹

Each of the entries that appear in this issue provide important contributions and perspectives to the ongoing discussion about accessibility, disability, and debate occurring in rounds, between debates, at summer institutes, and over the Internet. Yet, these entries do not and cannot unpack all accessibility and disability concerns; they also cannot purport to represent all experiences with inaccessibility and disability in debate spaces. As such, members of debate communities must

¹ Zach Richter, *The Disabled Person's Struggle In Round & Beyond: Taking Back Formerly Ableist Educational Spaces in the Post-ADA Generation*, *infra*, at 12.

continue to discuss and address inaccessibility in debate. Hopefully, these entries provide an avenue for some to enter into the discussion and provide others some ground to continue this important and timely conversation.

DYSLEXIA & DEBATE

By NATALIE NELSON* & JOSHUA H. MILLER**

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This contribution to the conversation about disability, accessibility, and debate focuses on dyslexia—the most common learning disability. Dyslexia is defined as “a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.”² Dyslexic debaters may not be able to recognize instantly or automatically as many of the words in the text as others. They may struggle to sound out letters and words. In addition, they will stumble over words, try to memorize the way words should look, or guess at the pronunciation of the words. Failed attempts to identify words may result in error. Because of this, individuals with dyslexia may find it difficult to build their word-reading abilities and this may impact reading comprehension. As a result, certain practices in debate, such as speed-reading, may be problematic for dyslexic individuals. In this entry, we discuss how, in certain cases, speed-reading might be inaccessible and conclude by offering a few suggestions that could increase the accessibility of debate for dyslexic individuals. Certainly, this entry should not be read as attempting to cover all of the issues in debate in regards to disability and accessibility.

Emphasis on speed might deter dyslexic individuals from participating in policy debate. If dyslexic individuals do choose to participate, they may face barriers to being able to participate fully. According to O’Brien, Mansfield, Legge, the maximum reading speed of a dyslexic individual is less than a non-dyslexic individual.³ Tops and colleagues concur and indicate that dyslexia is associated with slower and more effortful reading than would be expected of someone who

² G.F. Eden & L. Moats, *The role of neuroscience in the remediation of students with dyslexia*, 5 NATURE NEUROSCIENCE, at 1080–84 (2002).

³ B.A. O’Brien, J.S. Mansfield & G.E. Legge, *The effect of print size on reading speed in dyslexia*, 28 J. OF RESEARCH IN READING 332–49 (2005).

is not dyslexic.⁴ Moreover, dyslexia is associated with phonological difficulties,⁵ which means that dyslexic debaters will have more difficulty speaking clearly than non-dyslexic debaters. Because dyslexic readers stumble over words, may omit words from sentences, and fail to identify the correct words in sentences, their speaking may be much less comprehensible than non-dyslexic readers,⁶ especially at high rates of speed. If judges value clarity, dyslexic debaters may not be able to satisfy judge expectations.

Altering the fonts, font sizes, and spacing used in evidence might help make debate a little more accessible for dyslexic individuals. Rello and Baeza-Yates found that a significant correlation exists between font type and the ability for people with dyslexia to read a given text.⁷ According to their study, Helvetica, Courier, Arial, Verdana and Computer Modern Unicode constitute the best fonts for people with dyslexia. Moreover, these researchers found that dyslexic readers can read Courier and Helvetica faster while maintaining their accuracy. Slightly increasing the size of the font used for debate evidence also enables dyslexic individuals to read more efficiently and accurately.⁸

Furthermore, increasing spacing between letters and words can improve the accessibility of debate for dyslexic readers. Zorzi et al. for example, found a significant correlation between increase letter spacing and improvement in the reading speech of dyslexic individuals.⁹ According to their study, the extra spacing between letters decreases the influence of crowding, which enables quicker and more accurate letter and word recognition. In addition, according to Evett and Brown, some dyslexics prefer to read black text on a yellow background or dark blue text on a light blue background.¹⁰ The use of 14-point font is generally viewed as more accessible for dyslexic and visually impaired individuals than 12-point font (or smaller fonts than that).¹¹ Producing evidence

⁴ W. Tops, et al., *Identifying students with dyslexia in higher education*, 62 ANNALS OF DYSLEXIA 186–203 (2012).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ C. Schatschneider & J.K. Torgesen *Using our current understanding of dyslexia to support early identification and intervention*, 10 J. OF CHILD NEUROLOGY 759–65 (2004).

⁷ L. Rello & R. Baeza-Yates, *Good fonts for dyslexia*, Proceedings from ASSETS 2013: The 15th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference of Computers and Accessibility (2013).

⁸ O'Brien, Mansfield & Legge, *supra* note 3.

⁹ M. Zorzi, et al. *Extra-large letter spacing improves reading in dyslexia*, 109 PROCEEDINGS OF THE NAT'L ACAD. OF SCI. OF THE U.S.A., 11455–59 (2012); see also K. Moll & M. Jones, *Naming fluency in dyslexic & nondyslexic readers: Differential effects of visual crowding in foveal, parafoveal, and peripheral vision*, 66 QUAR. J. OF EXPER'L PSYCH. 2085–91.

¹⁰ L. Evett & D. Brown, *Text formats and web design for visually impaired and dyslexic readers—Clear text for all*, 17 INTERACTING WITH COMPUTERS 453–72 (2005).

¹¹ *Id.*

with these guidelines in mind and researching best practices for producing accessible text is a simple step that debaters, coaches, and judges alike can follow to foster a more accessible debate space.

DEAF DEBATERS

By C.L.S. FERGUSON*

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My debate background is in National Parliamentary Debate Association and National Forensics Association-LD, but when I saw the call for a discussion at NCA about disabilities in the Cross-Examination Debate Association, I decided to join in. For the past couple of years, I have been the coordinator of the Speech and Sign Success Center at Mt. San Antonio College (SAC). This is a tutoring center for our communication and American Sign Language classes. Before that, I was a Director of Forensics at Mt. SAC and before that at Louisiana State University.

Forensics activities, particularly debate, have been passions of mine since I joined the Palomar College team as a freshman in spring of 2001. One of the most appealing attributes of forensics to me right from the start was its inclusiveness. I was impressed at how many incredibly talented people there were in this community, and from first time competitor to coach on the brink of retirement, most of us were quirky in some way. As I got to know people better I realized that in addition to our quirks, many of us had unseen disabilities or challenges.

Over the past couple of years, I have not only overseen our cross-cultural tutoring center, but I have taken nine classes in American Sign Language and Deaf culture. The more I learn about Deaf culture and Audism (the institutionalized and individual discrimination against the Deaf), the more I see it in our day-to-day culture. Given my passion for forensics (without it I doubt I would have become a communication major and eventually a communication professor), I started to think about my Deaf friends and what I have learned about their culture. I found myself and my confidence in forensics, particularly debate. Kritiks are gaining popularity in most formats of debate, and most of them involve some argument about how the judge should use the ballot as a tool to show how we should be more inclusive. I know I am over-simplifying kritiks, and they cover a variety of topics, but when it comes down to it, the debater arguing the kritikal position wants me to include an excluded group. Simultaneously, the speed and complex jargon in debate continues to become increasingly—dare I say—exclusive.

During a six-week winter intersession of my argumentation class, two advanced interpreting students, who were a month away from graduating and highly capable, mock interpreted my class as a part of their graduation requirements.

After the first day they were overwhelmed with vocabulary, and even their professor wasn't sure the best way to interpret some of the vocabulary. In fact, most of the interpreters on campus say that the forensic events, like individual event showcases and demonstration debates are incredibly challenging to interpret. This is not due to a lack of skill, but the fast pace and specialized lexicon of forensics. As it stands, a Deaf student would have an enormous challenge to compete. I know some schools won't pay for an interpreter for competitors, and I have yet to personally experience a tournament that provides interpreters. What we need is a class of specialized interpreters and note takers to enable our Deaf students to participate in forensics. It's not just the right thing to do, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that we do this. I'm pleased to have been a part of the conversation and to learn that CEDA is leading the way for forensics to expand how inclusive it already is.

ACCESSIBILITY & DEBATE CAMPS

By KIRANJEET KAUR DHILLON*

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Summer high debate camps play a vital role within the debate community. Every summer, members of the CEDA/NDT community teach high school debaters throughout the country. In addition, members of the CEDA/NDT community run these debate camps.

Given the connection between CEDA/NDT members and summer debate camps and that high school debaters may become or think about becoming CEDA/NDT members after they graduate from high school, it is important that accessibility is discussed and implemented in these spaces. Furthermore, some may argue that the primary purpose of summer camps at intercollegiate CEDA/NDT schools is to pay for the CEDA/NDT's school travel during the year based on what camps earn during the summer. However, summer camps have an ethical responsibility to ensure all spaces facilitate the health and safety of all campers. In order to do so effectively, camps should consider the following six suggestions to begin to move towards accessibility within summer debate camps.

First, camps should brainstorm and develop accessibility guidelines/policies. Then camps should ensure accessibility policies are viewable (perhaps a link on a camp webpage) to campers, their parent(s)/guardian(s), their coaches, and all summer staff. One example of establishing published accessibility guidelines is the proposal for CEDA hosting accessibility guidelines.¹²

Second, camps should include space on their application that allows for campers to disclose their accessibility needs, if they so chose. Furthermore, camps should also include language that informs campers that disclosure of accessibility needs will not hinder them from being considered into their desired summer program.

Third, similar to harassment and/or diversity training at higher education institutions, camps should require all summer debate staff to undergo a mandatory training/meeting in accessibility resources and services. Part of this training should inform all staff members that, while campers are provided space on their applications to disclose any disability or accessibility needs, many may choose

¹² Vik Keenan, Proposal for CEDA Hosting Accessibility Language, College Policy Debate Forums, Dec. 2, 2015, <http://www.cedadebate.org/forum/index.php?topic=6708.0>.

not to. As a result, all staff members should be prepared to professionally address disability and accessibility needs as they arise.

Fourth, camps should hire a staff member whose sole responsibility is to supervise and coordinate a quiet room for campers. Supervision is important because high school debaters are minors whom camps assume responsibility for while campers are away from their parent(s)/guardian(s).

Fifth, camps should coordinate with professional counselors with whom campers can see and speak to. Counselors may be sought either through a non-profit or may be associated with the university.

Sixth, camps should hire at least one accessibility coordinator who is responsible for arranging any necessary appointments, coordination with parent(s)/guardian(s), accessibility of food, and other accessibility concerns. Some requirements for being an accessibility coordinator may include knowledge in mental health studies, disability studies, and accessibility. If possible, camps should hire two accessibility coordinators (a day accessibility coordinator and an evening accessibility coordinator).

**THE DISABLED PERSON'S STRUGGLE IN ROUND & BEYOND:
TAKING BACK FORMERLY ABLEIST EDUCATIONAL SPACES IN
THE POST-ADA GENERATION**

By ZACH RICHTER*

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My part of this dialogue has been to add, what has been lacking in discussions about disability and accessibility, a dimension of the historical political struggle within institutions. In my analysis, I first place disabled people in the policy debate world in the context of a wider movement of disabled people in the West who have been activated at least in the 1950s or 1960s, but have proliferated and been more or less in successful in institutional ways since the 1980s. The disabled struggle in debate mimics the struggle of people like Ed Roberts who fought for educational equity in universities. The disabled person's movement in debate is just one more node of a spread-out disabled person's movement to end ableist segregation on an institutional level and to point out and oppose the lesser funding received in disability ghettos condoned by the government.

The initial framing that my analysis draws upon is the language of the social model of disability that explicitly indicts institutional segregation for suppressing disabled public presence and disabled accomplishment, as well doing violence regularly to disabled people of all different types. Debate as an enterprise has been un-reflexive about the level of accessibility at events and has only recently enjoyed several controversies beginning in debate rounds that have challenged the systematic inaccessibility that plagues the inter-collegiate and inter-high school leagues. This panel was organized to offer solutions, but many of my fellow panelists have noted that some issues with debate, such as the lack of American Sign Language options, are intractable—the debate world has systematically and routinely refused to act on or consider possible solutions.

These issues are particularly revelatory in terms of what Charlton describes as the “hierarchy of disability” that structures which types of disabled people make it into which spaces.¹³ By and large, those able to access debate are those disabled

¹³ See JAMES CHARLTON, *NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US: DISABILITY OPPRESSION AND EMPOWERMENT* 97–99 (1998).

people who have had invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities or psychiatric issues. Disabled people impaired in other ways, such as blind and deaf debaters, are present in lesser numbers, receding down to developmentally disabled people who are never present in the debate world. Due to debate's existence, enveloped by a culture of high achievement, there is an implicit expectation that debaters who are too disabled should not debate. This type of suggestion ignores the centrality of a forensic education to the necessary self-advocacy that disabled people must undertake in order to receive education, medical help, and often to interact with the public. In-round advocacy has a similarity to plying your case to a superior; this interaction with power is very basic and is key to life within the current systems.

I frame the battle for accessibility in policy debate as part of a wider battle for accessibility in education and, wider than that, a battle for accountability for the harms that the modern nation-state and corporation has dealt to the disabled person. In many educational institutions of higher and preparatory learning, the communicative situation of the classroom is organized such that order is favored over wider inclusion. The field of educational studies has been a driving influence in disability studies because of the effort of enlightened educational thinkers, such as Doug Biklen and others, to support alternative mediated forms of communication as well as those involved in the inclusive education movement. People involved in debate have long placed the activity as intended for the elite and, as a consequence of that decision, have felt no need to include impaired people. However, in the contemporary ideology connected to disability rights of self-advocacy, one finds a way of being disabled that is indeed more involved in argumentation and advocacy than nondisabled existence. In the agreement that is classroom accommodations, the education system places an onus upon the disabled person to persuasively engage their instructors in order to receive needed access.

My presentation must call upon a recent example of organizational policies in the debate world in which the National Debate Tournament (NDT) posted an accessibility statement that harmed both disabled and black debaters. It took significant lobbying on the part of a wide coalition of debate people across the nation to correct the problematic language. Even then, the language of the NDT's access statement was oriented around reacting to the possibility of inaccessibility, not to build debate in such a way that disabled people were considered and included in their full capacity from the start and in advance. In the concept of universal design, gleaned from the work of Mace,¹⁴ we are offered an image of

¹⁴ See Wolfgang Saxon, *Ronald L. Mace, 58, Designer Of Buildings Accessible to All*, N.Y. TIMES July 13, 1998.

what might be considered a crip optimism: redesigning the world for all body types, mental, psychiatric and health statuses. This concept is preferred over the tendency for institutions to be in a defensive posture fearing disabled response.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has been passed for 20 years but we have not seen the time of enthusiastic compliance yet. At this time, disability activists must repeatedly threaten various institutions with continuing demands and protests, and a few nonprofits must support several cases. But overall there will be more cases of inaccessibility and architectural exclusion than can be possibly compensated for. Disabled people wait too long at the door of policymakers, for their lack of strictness and of local businesses, developers and municipalities to increasingly build in ways that include a wide diversity of types of bodies. The time is now for those reading this to strike against the educational, political, social, business and all other types of organizations that are not actively experimenting with ways of being more accessible.