81

Negotiating Symbolic Capital in Argument Fields: An Empirical Study of Discursive Struggle

Danielle Endres, *University of Washington*
Theodore O. Prosise, *University of Washington*

Introduction

The study of argument fields has waned in recent years. Attempting to reinvigorate such study, Prosise, Miller & Mills (1996) proposed a critical theory of argument fields. Addressing what they considered limitations in field theory they sought to encourage analysis of discursive struggles within argument fields. However, little empirical work on argument practices from a field-theory perspective has followed. While Prosise et al. proposed to strengthen field theory, they did not provide a case study of argument practices within a field. The present essay attempts to address this limitation by applying their recommendations for study to a specific argument field where standards of "good arguments" are supposed to account for participants' relative success in the field.

Merging Argument Fields and Social Capital

Prosise et al. (1996) identified three limitations of argument field theory. First, there is confusion over what constitutes an argument field. Second, argument field theory tends to adhere to an evolutionary model of development that ignores dynamic discursive struggles. Third, there was concern over description versus normative analysis of argument fields. In response, the authors argued for incorporating concepts from Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of social practice and application of a new methodological approach to the study of argument fields.

Social agents inhabit fields, negotiating them either successfully or unsuccessfully depending on the agent's habitus, a product of socialization, and the forms of capital that are celebrated within the field. The field, then, has particular rules that act as constraints on those agents operating within the field. Argument fields, as Willard (1982) points out, function in a similar way, enabling as well as constraining argumentative practices. According to Prosise et al., forms of capital that count as authoritative within a field are negotiable. This struggle may be ongoing, but each participant within a field does not necessarily exert the same influence. So, power becomes an important element if field research is to go beyond cataloging the types of arguments that have

currency within a field. With this in mind, Prosise et al. concluded their essay by calling for empirical examination of argument practices within fields to understand the dynamics operating within them.

To apply this perspective, we offer a qualitative case study (Philipsen, 1982). We argue that by considering discursive struggles and employing the ethnography of speaking, argument field research is still germane because it offers a way for researchers to understand how situated social agents interact and how power functions in the negotiation of legitimate practices within a field.

Research Perspective

The focus of empirical argument field analysis should be the particulars of ordinary and everyday practice. The study of argument fields can be enhanced by "in situ, non-manipulative, exploratory, and participatory" research methods (Philipsen 1982, p. 14). The ethnography of speaking (see Hymes 1962, 1972, 1974; Philipsen, 1992) emphasizes ethnographic observation of how people use language in actual social settings (Hymes, 1962). According to Philipsen (1992), the ethnography of speaking assumes that speaking is structured, distinctive and social. Ethnographers of speaking seek to understand the knowledge that members of a speech community share in order to use language in social life. Argumentative practices in the field of intercollegiate academic debate are a way of speaking that not only defines the field, but may also reveal discursive struggle over what constitutes a "good argument."

Research consisted of recording extensive field notes while participating as an observer and as a judge at a prestigious intercollegiate policy debate tournament in the Pacific Northwest.[1] Both researchers examined the field notes through open coding, using the following questions derived from the Prosise et al.'s essay as guides: (1) What are the argumentative practices in this field?; (2) How are argumentative practices in the field sustained and challenged?; and (3) Is there evidence of discursive struggle over the appropriate practices in the field?

Academic Debate as an Argument Field

Most communication scholars are familiar with the various types of intercollegiate academic debate and the activity offers a fascinating area of study not just to understand debate but also to understand argument practice. This is an activity where students, graduate assistants and coaches immerse themselves into a system of explicit and implicit rules. It is an intellectual activity aimed at developing critical thinking and communicative skills, where success within the field is supposedly based upon criteria for what constitutes good argument. Individuals are socialized into the field, moving from novice to advanced levels of competition as they acquire knowledge about the field and the skills of practice that promise relative success within it. In his study of high school academic debate, sociologist Gary Fine (2001) explains "some truth claims carry more weight than others and the novice debater must learn the rules for the truth as defined by the debaters, coaches and judges" (p. 9).

While there are several types of intercollegiate academic debate (i.e., CEDA, NDT, NPDA), we focused on policy debate, where participants argue

over public policy. Debates take place at tournaments held between September and April,[1] and each tournament includes a series of "rounds" in which debaters either affirm or negate a public policy related to the yearlong resolution.[2]

In each preliminary round, two two-person teams argue in front of an assigned judge, each representing different colleges. The debate commences when the judge renders a decision and "speaker points," an assessment of individual performance. Debate teams are ranked (win/loss record and speaker points) after preliminary rounds and the highest ranked teams proceed to single elimination bracket. The measure of success in the activity is whether a team wins a debate and ultimately the tournament.

Data Analysis

The research took place at a prestigious "open" division policy debate tournament falling at the end of the debate season, but just before the national championship tournaments. While most tournaments divide competitors by level of experience and skill, this is a regional championship where no such distinction is made.

Although a tournament may not be an exact representation of the standards for the field as a whole, it is a unique event in which a set of debaters, coaches, and judges converge to determine the best debaters at the tournament. It is one instance in an ongoing negotiation of argument practice in the field, and this snapshot helps us understand more about discursive struggles in this particular case. Thus, our findings provide insight into how argument practices, standards for good argument, and power are negotiated in moment-by-moment interactions.

In our analysis, we first describe the argument field. Then, we provide data-driven arguments that highlight the manifestations and mechanics of discursive struggle over argument practice in the field.

Description of the Field

Success in the field depends on winning debate rounds. Gordon Mitchell (1998) argues that the purpose of debate is to win rounds and arguments are developed with that in mind. But what makes a good argument in this field? In general, academic debate follows a western model of argumentation that favors deductive forms of reasoning, causal argumentation, argument by testimony, and evidence in the form of published materials (Stepp, 1997; see also Gehrke, 1998; Mitchell, 1998; Ziegelmueller, 1996). Claims that are supported by researched published materials tend to be valued over an individual debater's reasoning or use of primary research (see Mitchell, 1998; Ziegelmueller, 1996).

At this tournament, good arguments were supported by thorough research and evidence, and offered a causal chain of events culminating in "big impacts." Political arguments that suggest that a policy will result in a loss of political capital or bipartisanship, for example, and policy choices that lead to adverse impacts, such as war, are considered good arguments (field notes, March 7-9, 2003). Judges compared the advantages of policy implementation with unintended consequences of that policy offered by the opposing team.

Though the decision calculus was complex in each round, decisions at this tournament generally followed this model.

The field also consists of extra-argumentative practices, forms of symbolic capital. These extra argumentative factors are manifested inside and outside of "rounds," and include codes of competence and reputation. For example, the researcher went into several debate rounds with a preconceived perception of the reputation, or "rep" held by a particular team. The perception of "rep" came from watching rounds, discussions with other coaches and judges, conversations among debaters in the lounge area, and knowledge of schools that traditionally field good teams (field notes, March 7-9, 2003). Good teams are those that win frequently and are seen as exemplars. The reputation of a team is a form of symbolic capital that influences the ways in which members of the field interact with each other. This influence can be explicit, such as discussion of which teams are the good ones, or it can be more implicit, such as use of jargon in rounds to signify a debater's knowledge of the field.

While it is possible to empirically observe argument standards in a field, these practices are not static. Both researchers have extensive experience in the field and noticed differences in argumentative standards from their time. The focus of this study is to explore the ways in which standards of good argument practice are negotiated, displayed, challenged, and reinforced by participants. This discursive struggle may be discernible in challenges to existing practices, reification of existing standards, and newcomer socialization into the field. These elements were observed both in and out of "rounds" and through argument choices and extra-argumentative factors.

Though there are undoubtedly many ways in which the field reproduces and maintains the standard argumentative practices, we observed newcomer socialization and the role of the ballot as means of normalizing and reinforcing certain practices. There were clear differences in competitive skill level. Debate teams closer to novice level were less aware of the jargon, structure of the debate, and types of arguments than more advanced debaters. We observed the attempts to socialize less experienced debaters into the field during judges' oral decisions. In one instance, a judge told a team how to use their evidence and better their arguments in future rounds, offering sample statements, such as: "Voting negative is a political choice. You should say no to the idea of arms control and affirm the idea of alternatives" (field notes, March 7, 2003). In a subsequent round when the same team argued the same position for a different judge, they used arguments similar to those offered by this judge (field notes, March 8, 2003). Because the judge holds symbolic authority through the ballot, comments and suggestions made in oral decisions serve to uphold the standards of argument in the field.

Participants in this argument field simultaneously reproduce, challenge, and struggle over the standards of practice. Moreover, there is a complex web of symbolic authority in the field. Just as the judge in the previous example socialized the less experienced debaters, the reverse can also be true when judges are socialized by or present challenges to the "top" debaters in the field.

Discursive Struggle

Considering discursive struggle is important because the researcher recognizes that argument fields are negotiated in situated contexts and that

underlying assumptions or practices can change (Prosise et al., 1996). Discursive struggle can come through argumentative or extra-argumentative means. Argumentative struggle refers to the choice of arguments. Debaters may choose to make particular arguments that conform to or challenge standards. An example is the recent influx of "performance-based" arguments and "critiques" that challenge standards of argument in the field. At this tournament, a debate team attempted to challenge the conventions of argument by arguing a critique position every round. This position suggested that working through a system of international treaties is founded upon patriarchal assumptions and that only by challenging these assumptions can we hope to move away from patriarchy.

Extra-argumentative struggle refers to non-argument factors of discourse that are inextricably linked to a participant's role and performance. One particularly important extra argumentative aspect is a judge's power to make a decision in each round. While the judge holds power over the ballot, one determinant of success in the field, this power is also negotiated and open to struggle. We observed instances of participants discussing whether or not a judge is competent, challenges to judges' decisions both directly and indirectly during or after the oral decision, and mechanisms of formal judge ranking through "mutual preference judging" (field notes, March 7-9, 2003) If a judge's decision falls outside of the accepted standards in the field, debaters may attempt to socialize the judge. For example, in a round with two "top" teams at the tournament (both went on to elimination rounds and had "rep"), the losing debaters challenged the oral decision of the judge, interrupting him with questions and comments (field notes, March 8, 2003). A judge's power to reinforce or challenge practices may ultimately be constrained by extra argumentative factors, such as their reputation in the field.

Newcomers' interactions within the field are also a valuable source of examples of discursive struggle. Before they are socialized into the acceptable (winning) practices of the field, novice debaters often unknowingly violate norms of practice in the field and are disciplined by judges, coaches, and other debaters. As a previous example illustrates, in rounds with less experienced debaters, judges may "teach" these debaters to argue according the standards of the field.

Judges and coaches, those who have control over particular resources, are not always in agreement with the perceived norms in the field. For example, a coach discussed his objections to "politics" arguments that have become standard in the field. He said that debaters like politics arguments because they allow them argue nuclear war "impacts" easily. The problem, he maintains, is that the positions are internally inconsistent and miss many steps (field notes, March 8, 2003). Nonetheless, these flaws are accepted in the field. It is likely that such a judge would lose status for the majority of debaters because he or she celebrates marginalized standards for good argument.

We maintain that descriptive ethnographic practices allow a researcher to attend to both the argument practices of a particular field and the dynamic, constantly negotiated nature of such fields. Rather than normative and evolutionary models of field discussion, we argue that our study indicates that argument fields are areas of antagonistic struggles over argument practices. Moreover, argument fields, and practitioners within those fields, can simultaneously sustain and entertain challenges to legitimacy and authority in a field. Discursive struggle can come in the form of argumentative struggle or

extra-argumentative struggle, both of which are intertwined in complex situations, relationships, and norms in a particular field of argument. Our findings suggest that discursive struggle plays a role in the negotiation of argument practices within a particularized situation and that ethnographic methods provide the tools necessary for an investigation of the dynamics of argument fields.

Implications

A more detailed study could explore these issues over the course of a debate season, but we argue that delimiting our study to a regional but highly competitive tournament offers useful data from which we can understand the field better. The tournament represents a particularized community of individuals who come together to struggle over, among other things, good argument practices. Though our findings of what makes a good argument at this tournament may differ from what would be found at other tournaments in other regions and other years, our findings offer insight into the ways in which the standards of the field are communicated and challenged. Our purpose is not to make generalizations about the field of intercollegiate academic debate, but to present our findings to support our claim that argument field theory, when studied from a critical and ethnographic perspective, remains an interesting and potentially valuable avenue of study. We argue that the ethnography of communication merged with Prosise et al.'s critical field theory allows us learn about a particular instances of discursive struggle and about how argument practices are socially negotiated.

Academic debate is a complex network of social relationships, power, and capital exchange, where standards and practice are constantly negotiated within the field. Despite instances of discursive struggle, socialization and normalization forces are strong factors reproducing the forms of authority holding currency within the field. Importantly, those with the ability to control symbolic capital were able to successfully exert more influence in the field. Less experienced debaters who engaged in discursive struggle in the process of learning to debate were identified by judges who took opportunity to "teach" the less experienced debaters how to argue in the field. There were also instances of intentional discursive struggle made by advanced teams. The success of these moments of struggle often depended upon extra argumentative factors such as reputation and use of jargon, forms of power. This meant that changes within the field might more likely come from participants who hold high status in the activity. The extra-argumentative factors such as power and other forms of symbolic capital are important elements in negotiation of the argument field.

This qualitative case study also has implications for the study of argument. The stature of argument field theory seems to have fallen, but we hope to offer a means to reinvigorate this type of research. Through the ethnography of speaking, we can explore argument fields in a way that reveals more than a mere listing of types of arguments in a field. This move allows researchers to focus on moments of struggle and change within a field. Few would deny that standards in fields change, but our perspective exemplified in this case study, allows research to focus on the processes through which change occurs or does not occur. Attending to extra-argumentative factors in a field allows for a discussion of what forms of symbolic capital constitute power

660

within a field and how that power is negotiated. We end this paper with a call for the revitalization of argument field theory. Further qualitative case studies in discursive struggle in argument fields may reveal important insights into the relationship between power and argument practice.

Notes

[1]Both researchers were former debaters, familiar with the field of academic debate, though neither has been extensively involved in the activity for several years.

[2]Tournaments are held at various colleges and universities across the country and most weekends during the season there are one or more tournaments. These tournaments may be regional tournaments, that tend to be smaller and draw squads from a particular region like the northwest or national tournaments that tend to be larger and draw squads from across the country. Regional and national tournaments vary in the level of competition. A highly competitive tournament is one that draws large numbers of good teams from successful squads.

[3]The 2002-2003 resolution was Resolved: that the United States Federal Government should ratify or accede to, and implement, one or more of the following: The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; The Kyoto Protocol; The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; The Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming at the Abolition of the Death Penalty; The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Offensive Reductions, if not ratified by the United States.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*, (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fine, G. A. (2001). *Gifted tongues: High school debate and adolescent culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gehrke, P. J. (1998). Teaching argumentation existentially: Argumentation pedagogy and theories of rhetoric as epistemic. *Argumentation and Advocacy 35*, 76-86.

Hymes, Dell. (1962). The ethnography of speaking. In T. Gladwin, & W. C. Sturtevant (Eds.), *Anthropology and human behavior* (pp. 13-53). Washington D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington. (Reprinted in *Readings in the sociology of language*, pp. 99-137, by J. Fishman, Ed., 1968, Paris: Mauton)

Hymes, Dell. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. J. Gumpertz, & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 35-71). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Hymes, D. (1974). Linguistics, language, and communication. *Communication, 1*, 37-53.

Mitchell, G. R. (1998). Pedagogical possibilities for argumentative agency in academic debate. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 35*, 41-60.

Philipsen, G. (1982). The qualitative case study as a strategy in communication inquiry. *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association, 12*, 4-17.

Philipsen, G. (1992). *Speaking culturally: Explorations in social communication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Prosise, T. O., Miller, G. R., & Mills, J. P. (1996). Argument fields as arenas of discursive struggle. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 32*, 111-128.

Stepp, P. (1997). Can we make intercollegiate debate more diverse?
Argumentation and Advocacy, 33, 176-190.

Willard, C.A. (1982). Argument fields. In J. R. Cox & C. A. Willard, *Advances
in argumentation theory and research* (pp. 24-77). Carbondale, IL:
Southern Illinois University Press.

Ziegelmueller, G. (1996). The National Debate Tournament: Through a half
century of argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 32, 143-151.