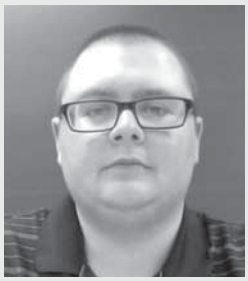

NDCA COACHES FOCUS

Learn by Watching: The Role of Film Study in Debate

by Bill Batterman

"You can observe a lot by watching."

~ Yogi Berra

One of the best ways for students to improve at debate is to watch themselves in action. While coaches, judges, and teammates can comment on a student's performance and provide helpful suggestions and feedback, there is no substitute for seeing oneself debate—warts and all.

While debate coaches have long understood the power of film study, it has only been recently that accessible and affordable recording technologies have made routinized film study practical for most high school debate squads. Despite the ubiquity of recording tools, however, the vast majority of debaters are not taking advantage of opportunities to record and review their speeches.

Based on a lecture delivered at this summer's Georgetown Debate Seminar, the goal of this article is to help students (and coaches) make the most of film study. Those wishing to learn more about the application of observational learning to high school debate are also encouraged to view "How To Learn By Watching," a recording of a lecture delivered at the Spartan Debate Institutes that discusses the value for students of watching (and judging) debates.

What To Record

Students are strongly encouraged to record all of their debates. Be sure to ask the opposing team for permission to record their speeches; most students are happy to do so, especially when offered a copy of the video after the debate. If they say no, just record one's own speeches. Do not post videos of debates on the public internet unless explicit permission is provided. Even then, legal restrictions may apply. Always be mature: some people really dislike video recording and will feel uncomfortable about it. If that is the case, live with it.

How To Record Debates

Once the decision has been made to record debates, there are several steps that need to be taken.

1. Get a camera. Some schools have video cameras that students can check out for tournaments. If a student does not have access to an actual video camera, many laptops have built-in microphones and webcams that can be turned on to record speeches. If neither of those is an option, digital video cameras can be purchased on e-Bay or in closeout specials for very reasonable prices; functional

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cameras are available for less than $100. If acquiring a camera proves too difficult, students should still try to get a copy of videos that other teams record—this is better than nothing. For the vast majority of students, however, video recording technology should now be (at least reasonably) accessible.

2. Set up the camera. Tripods are essential. Make sure the camera can be powered externally with a power cable and ensure that a power strip and extension cord is available. For many students who are already debating paperlessly, this will require no additional investment. Set up the camera in a location where it can be plugged in and where it can clearly record the debate. Audio quality is more important than video quality so it is important to make sure that the camera's microphone picks up the debaters' voices loud and clear.

3. Don't forget. Students need to train themselves to make recording a part of their pre-round routine. Once one gets good at it, the process doesn't take very long. The biggest issue students have is that they forget to set up their camera or forget to press record; if this is part of the pre-round routine, it is more likely to be remembered.

4. Pack everything up. Even inexpensive cameras are valuable pieces of technology that can easily be lost or stolen. Labeling each component with a name and contact information will help locate lost items, but it is important that debaters make packing up their equipment part of their routine.

5. Upload to a computer. This is very easy: many cameras have built-in USB capabilities while others connect via USB or Firewire cables. Once the video is transferred to a computer, rename it according to a naming convention (e.g. "2011-09-01 Round 1 vs. Central High AB") and save it. Video files are huge, so an external drive just for debate videos might make sense. A high-definition video of a Policy debate requires about one gigabyte (1 GB) of storage space, so space is at a premium. Once the video has been transferred to a computer, delete it from the camera's hard drive or memory card.

How To Use Debate Recordings

Getting the videos is the easy part; making use of them is harder. The following tips will help students make the most of their film study.

1. Assess. Watch debates with a critical eye; instead of passively observing, students should approach the process as active critics. Students are naturally their own harshest judges—they care more than anyone about their performance, after all—and will often pick up on small things that never come up on written ballots or in post-round discussions. If an issue *was* raised on a ballot or in a post-round discussion, students should explicitly watch their performance with that comment in mind. Coaches can assist students by providing them with a set of guided questions.

2. Correct. Once an area that needs improvement has been identified, students need to work hard to fix it. If it is a speaking or physical presence issue, students should commit to a set of drills to correct the problem. If it is a content issue, arguments must be reworked. The goal of video study is to see what others see and thereby improve a student's ability to debate. If a student is not constantly making corrections based on video study, they are wasting their time.

3. Revise. Video recordings are great tools for supercharging the value of speech revisions ("rebuttal redos" in the common vernacular). Students should watch and flow the debate up to the point where the speech that they are reworking occurred. Adding video to the revision process keeps students in the moment and offers a more realistic simulation of game conditions than does a blind redo. If students are fortunate enough to have a coach with whom to work on speech revisions, a video of the original speech should be shared with the coach and the student should identify the components of the speech that they are attempting to improve upon in the revision (i.e. speaking fluidity, argument selection, efficiency, etc.). Reworked speeches should also be recorded so that students can assess their improvement.

4. Compare. Students should periodically revisit earlier videos in order to track their season-long progress. This technique works particularly well when the areas needing improvement involve skills—speaking, physical presence, ethos, cross-examination, evidence comparison, rebuttal efficiency, etc.—rather than arguments or in-round decision-making. It is important that students be honest with themselves when assessing their progress. If improvement is slow or non-existent, a new game plan needs to be established so that a student's investment in practice pays dividends in competition.

5. Get specific feedback. Students routinely underestimate the time investment required of their coaches to review speeches and critique revisions. In order to reduce the coaching burden, students should clip small parts of a video (or reference a specific time marker) and ask very specific questions about that aspect of their speech. If a student is working on improving a final rebuttal overview, for example, they can send their coach a clip of only that part of their original and revised speeches with specific questions about the improvements they were attempting to make. If students can reduce the burden required of coaches to provide feedback, they will be more likely to get that feedback. In many cases, the feedback will be more specific and therefore more helpful.

Specialized Techniques

There are several specialized techniques that students can use to improve by watching videos of their own debates:

1. Flow. Students need to know what it is like for judges to flow their speeches. What is hard to flow? Are tags, cites, and cards crisp and clear? Are arguments front-loaded with helpful labels? Is the speech powerfully projected toward the judge or focused downward and into the speaker's laptop or podium? Often, debaters' perceptions of their speaking is dramatically different from the perception held by their judges. Flowing one's own speeches is one of the most powerful ways to use video to improve as a debater.

2. Don't flow. Instead of flowing, students should watch themselves throughout a debate. Are they focused or distracted? Are they confident or intimidated? Do they come off as arrogant or respectful, aggressive or passive? Are they steady or inconsistent? Are they making good connections? Are they enjoyable to listen to? Are they in control of the debate? Students can learn a lot from non-verbals and from simply watching and listening to themselves in a debate.

3. Watch during prep time. This technique is especially helpful for students who struggle to manage their preparation time. If this is an issue, students should set up a camera that is aimed at their preparation area (either the table they are sitting at or their laptop screen). By recording the debate from this perspective, students can listen to the debate while focusing exclusively on how they spent their preparation time. To make this even more effective, students who prepare their speeches on a laptop can download and install a screen-recording program that captures a video of what they did during preparation time. This technique, while specialized, is underutilized and potentially powerful.

4. Watch during opposing speeches. Another specialized technique, this approach is particularly helpful for students who struggle with flowing, prep time issues, and in-round presence. If a student constantly looks distracted, frustrated, exasperated, or frantic, the judge will notice. Film study offers students a unique opportunity to correct flaws in these areas. ■

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