

## Teaching Alternative Debate in Japanese University Contexts

### 日本の大学における既成概念にないディベート技術指導

by Tim Newfields

#### Abstract

After contrasting several connotations of the term "debate" and outlining the history of debate instruction in Japan, this paper highlights some of the limitations of traditional debate. An alternative discourse pattern based some concepts by de Bono is then mentioned. Each step of his debate / problem-solving procedure is explained and illustrated. This article concludes by discussing some of the problems of teaching debate in academic contexts as well as suggesting areas for further research.

**Keywords:** debate skills, argumentation theory, structured argument, critical debate, staged discussion

ディベート技術が日本の大学で一般的にどのように教えられているかについて述べた後、その限界の短所について幾つかを指摘します。そして、それに替わるデ・ボノ氏による別のディベート理論を紹介し、その理論に基づき、ディベートの手順の各ステップを、サンプルを使用して説明をしています。この方法の長所および短所を説明した上で、今後のディベート技術の指導の研究分野について言及しています。

キーワード：ディベート技術、論証理論、理論点、批評力のあるディベート、討論技術

Since debate is a central theme of this paper, let's begin by exploring what is meant by that term. The International Debate Education Association, an organization launched in 1999 under the aegis of the Open Society Institute of George Soros, defines debate as:

The process of arguing about claims in situations where an adjudicator must decide the outcome.

A limitation with this definition is that outcomes are often decided by many people rather than a sole adjudicator. In legislative debates, for example, many participants collectively vote on outcomes. Though some teachers prefer to adjudicate classroom debates (Conway, 1976, p. 32; Foreman-Takano, 1983, pp. 3-5) others favor a more "democratic" approach by allowing students to decide their own outcomes (Stoller, 1997).

The Japan Debate Association, established in 1986 and now with some 200 members, defines debate as:

. . . a competitive form of communication conducted according to specific rules, where two teams – the "Affirmative" and the "Negative" – oppose each other on an issue. The Affirmative team stands in favor of the proposition, called a "resolution", and the negative team takes a stand against it, in one of several ways. Each side presents its own case based on research and analysis of the resolution, and advocates this stand throughout the debate by responding to and refuting their opponents' arguments.

This paper suggests that although this is true for many forms of debate, is overly restrictive. An alternative form of debate that goes beyond the bifurcated notions which insist one is either "for" or "against" a proposition is outlined.

The working definition of "debate" this paper employs comes from a Wikipedia (2003) description:

Debate . . . is a formalized system of (usually) logical argument. Rules governing debate allow groups and individuals to discuss and decide issues and differences.

This description is broad enough to include a variety of debate formats; its only shortcoming is that it doesn't adequately underscore the role of emotions in shaping debate outcomes. Though logic is an essential feature of debate, let us not lose sight that many human decisions are influenced by emotional factors. Aristotle no doubt recognized this, noting how orators could rouse listeners to suit their needs (cf. *Rhetorica*, III.7).

## Historical Background

It is generally conceded that classical debate developed in the 5th century B.C. in Greece. Protagoras of Abdera, along with leading sophists such as Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus of Ceos are arguably the fathers of this craft. It seems that debate skills were taught to help citizens win courtroom battles. At a time when lawyers did not exist, prominent Greek citizens often had to defend themselves in civil litigation. Emerging from this tradition, it is easy to liken classical debate to verbal warfare. Alcott's (1872) well-known adage, "Debate is masculine, conversation is feminine." further attests that the goal of most debates is seldom a mutually agreeable consensus, but rather the triumph of a single point of view. In classical debate, participants are systematically trained to defend their positions while attacking divergent views. This process has a code of chivalry, with detailed rules about how vying opinions can be attacked.

For varied cultural reasons, however, this type of debate is a recent immigrant to Japanese soil. The Japanese word *touron*, which shares some of the same nuances as "debate", did not come into existence until about 1874 (Kojien, 2006). Fukuzawa Yukichi was one of the first to recommend western-style debating skills be taught in Japan. Co-authoring the first Japanese text on debate, he suggested that students study how to discuss topics such as voting rights and the death penalty. For a brief time, the Mita Speech Society he established flourished among young intellectuals, but in many ways Fukuzawa was a man ahead of his times.

According to Inoue (1996), it was not until after World War II that debate skills spread

throughout Japan. The loan word *dibaato* first entered the language when the Asahi Newspaper began sponsoring debate contests shortly after the World War II, though it took several decades for this word appear in Japanese dictionaries. About the same time, debate began to flourish in ESS societies throughout the country.

The English Speaking Union of Japan (*Nihon Eigo Kouryuu Renmei*) now hosts an annual debate with thirty teams from across the country. It also regularly invites debate squads from overseas. To further promote debating skills, in 1996 a contest known as the *Dibeeto Koshien* was launched under the aegis of the National Association of Debate in Education (*Zenkoku Kyoushitsu Dibeeto Renmei*), an organization of some 4,700 school teachers that began in 1996, along with the support of the Yomiuri Shimbun. The Japan Parliamentary Debate Union, yet another group devoted to debating and launched shortly after the previous organization, holds regular debating seminars and tournaments.

Berwick (1975) and Atkinson (1997) suggest one of the reasons Japanese are often inept at debate is because direct verbal conflict is usually avoided. Rather than engaging in direct debates, Japanese often prefer *hanashi-ai* – a discursive structure that approximates the notion of "mutual consultation" (Sekiguchi, 2002). Moreover, as aphorisms such as 「巧言冷色少なし仁」 [tr: the honeyed-tongued are often gall-hearted] make it clear that those with too much verbal sophistry or skill in debate are often distrusted. In societies where top-down management styles prevail, debate may be viewed as counter-productive. Indeed, the fact that terms such as "constructive argument" or "critical thinking" are hard to render into natural-sounding Japanese suggests that such notions are still exotic.

## Limitations of Traditional Debate

Traditional western-style debate is an effective way to detect weaknesses inherent in many views. A main disadvantage of this approach is that it locks participants into "either-or" positions prematurely. Alternative possibilities are often quickly snubbed or squelched. So much energy is spent in attacking a rival and defending ones own proposition that creative solutions are often overlooked. In information-oriented societies,

however, creativity is one of the most important human resources. Is traditional debate outdated? This paper suggests it is useful in some fields, but overused. As Carl (1995) maintains, there is a tendency for traditional debate to polarize issues into right/wrong or good/bad categories. Traditional debate resembles a dialectic battle. Indeed, the word "debate" is derived from the Middle English term *debaten* and Old French *debatre* – expressions with distinctly pugilist nuances.

For issues in which bifurcated "either/or" outcomes are desirable, such discourse styles have merit. In courtroom battles where a plaintiff must be declared either guilty or innocent, for example, western-style debating is preeminently well-suited. However, this style of discourse has a tendency to separate winners and losers into distinctly different camps and it is not an optimal approach to consensus building or fostering unity. De Bono (1990) further suggests that traditional debating is seldom the best way of making most business decisions.

A final weakness of classical debate is that it requires participants to adopt many different operational styles in rapid succession. Effective debaters often must identify weaknesses of a rival's claims one second, then assert the strengths of their own claims the next. At one moment they must try to emotionally sway listeners, then seek to rationally describe an issue. It is very hard (if not impossible) to effectively concentrate on these tasks in rapid succession. Not surprisingly, when competing functions get jumbled together, the performance of some inevitably suffers.

## **An Alternative Format**

In 1985 Edward de Bono suggested a problem solving method employing five distinct perspectives on each issue, plus one meta-operational "managerial" mode. This paper discusses how such an approach can be used to teach debate skills in Japanese university classroom contexts. The structure of the alternative format is indicated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A suggested structure for an alternative debate format.

Before mentioning this debate system in detail, let me point out four adaptations to that system made for this particular classroom context.

### *1 Coexisting with the old model rather than supplanting it*

First of all, the classical debate was not totally discarded – it was taught along with this alternative format. Classical debate is simply too entrenched to ignore completely. One of the goals of this course was for participants to appreciate the value of traditional debate while also learning a viable alternative. Subsequently, half of the classroom participants debated the issues listed in Appendix 1 in a classical format while the other half debated the same issues in the alternative format discussed herein.

### *2 A slight change of metaphors*

Second, the metaphor underlying the alternative debate procedure was changed for cultural reasons. Whereas as de Bono, a native of Malta, used a *hat* metaphor to describe various parallel thinking modes, I opted for a *circle* metaphor to elucidate the same process. Japanese move in and out of circles frequently, and the language is rich with metaphors about rotundity. Moreover, expressions such as "wearing a green hat" have undesirable connotations among some Asians. For such reasons, a metaphor switch seemed appropriate.

### *3 Fixed roles per debate*

Third, the roles of the participants in each alternative debate were fixed in advance,

then rotated every two weeks as a new debate topic was introduced. In a typical class, five teams with three participants per team participated in this alternative debate format and the teacher fulfilled the meta-managerial “Blue” role. De Bono suggests that participants progressively switch roles when debating an issue. Since most of the participants in this classroom context had no prior debating experience, getting them to function in just one role adequately was enough of a challenge. Suggesting that they progressively switch into each of the five roles during a single debate seemed like an overly demanding task.

#### *4 Fixed sequence of discourse modes*

All alternative debates were conducted in the same sequence. De Bono points out that the order of the five suggested perspectives can be modified depending on the task at hand. However, to enhance simplicity and reduce confusion, a fixed debating sequence was maintained throughout the semester. The precise order is described in the next section.

### **A Sample Debate**

Now let us see how this suggested debating procedure works in an actual context. Students were presented with the list of possible debate topics mentioned in Appendix 1. They were then asked to select the three topics they felt were most interested in debating. The five most popular topics then selected for debate during the semester course.

One week prior to each debate, the topic was introduced and roles assigned. To make the debate process clear, I went through all of the steps of a traditional debate as well as the alternative debate method described here with an easy debate topic in the first lesson. A good introductory topic recommended by Lubetsky, Le Beau, and Harrington (2000) is "Which animals are better pets: cats or dogs?" After illustrating how this could be debated in a classical format, I showed how to debate it in the alternative format described below. Since the steps involved in a classical debate have already been explained by authors such as Flynn (1999) and Krieger (2005), there is no need to outline them here. Let me instead

mention how this topic would be discussed from an alternative "parallel thinking" format.

### *1 White Circle Perspective* 「客観的な立場からみると」

A good way to begin a given debate in this format is to start with the known facts about a topic. The participants in this team should present objective facts about an issue without interjecting any opinions or suggesting solutions. Their only task is to state the facts.

If the cats vs. dogs topic were under discussion, the White Circle team should mention pet ownership statistics, the average cost of owning each pet, and other factual information about household pets — all without suggesting which pet is "better".

### *2 Green Circle Perspective* 「想像的な立場からみると」

Instead of considering only two possible solutions about an issue, the Green Circle team suggests other possibilities. Their task is to come up with at least 3-5 creative solutions to the issue at hand. They should refrain from pointing out the merits or demerits of any possibility; that task will be addressed later on by other teams. For now, the goal is to simply to brainstorm creative alternatives.

On the pet debate, for example, alternatives to the cat vs. dog formula might include goldfish, computer-generated pets, or simply using the money to help starving children in other parts of the world.

### *3 Yellow Circle Perspective* 「楽観的な立場からみると」

Now the task is to focus on the logical benefits of each possible outcome. The Yellow Circle team should consider the advantages each choice mentioned previously entails. They should not suggest new choices: that task has already been accomplished. Nor should they mention problems – that task is soon to come. Here are some Yellow Circle statements for the pet debate:

- \* CATS: Toilet trained and usually require little space
- \* DOGS: Loyal, they are often good for protection
- \* GOLDFISH: Inexpensive, they take up minimal space
- \* COMPU-PETS: Never actually "die" and occupy only virtual space
- \* CHARITY: Ethically sound and socially responsible

#### *4 Black Circle Perspective 「批判的な立場から見ると」*

Now that many ideas have been generated and their merits have been made clear, it is time for some critical concerns. The Black Circle team should systematically consider the potential problems or limitations that each choice entails. At this point the focus is on the disadvantages of each of the option. Here are some Black Circle statements about the pet debate:

- \* CATS: Sometimes scratch furniture and/or persons. Often shed fur.
- \* DOGS: May disturb neighbors & require frequent walks. Smelly at times.
- \* GOLDFISH: Can never touch or interact closely with aquatic creatures.
- \* COMPU-PETS: Never actually "alive" or exist beyond virtual space.
- \* CHARITY: Generally unable to see those one is helping.

#### *5 Red Circle Perspective 「涇情的な立場から見ると」*

Finally, after all the previous steps have been accomplished, it is time for a gut-level reaction to each possible outcome. At this stage, participants simply state how they feel about each choice available. Statements do not need to be justified or logically supported – they simply represent emotional responses to a given issue.

Here are some possible Red Circle statements about the pet debate options:

- \* CATS: Personally, I feel they are too selfish and they lack warmth.
- \* DOGS: Cute in some ways, but a hassle to take care of.
- \* GOLDFISH: Nice to look at, though I feel sad when they die.
- \* COMPU-PETS: No interest in digital creatures.
- \* CHARITY: Deep down, this feels like the right thing to do.

## *6 Decision Making*

At the end of the debate, a decision must be made. In the classroom context described here, I asked participants to cast secret ballots about which option they felt was best. The reason for this is most college students, at least in Japan, feel reluctant to vote against a close friend or peer group. Confidential ballots add a touch of legislative realism to the task: many high-level executive or legislative decisions are made confidentially.

### **Discussion**

This paper has outlined some of the characteristics of classical debate and suggested an alternative approach which highlights different perspectives on a given issue, one at a time.

The main disadvantage of this alternative debate approach is that it does require significant research and preparation to do well. The White Circle group in particular must engage in time-consuming research to unearth information about a topic. Regretfully, many students are not conscientious enough to take the time to research their topics adequately.

As a result, they merely state obvious clichés and the subsequent debate never gains any depth or momentum. One possible solution might be to grade micro-performance during the debate procedure: persons who do put in the effort to debate a topic fully should receive more points than those who simply go through the rituals without actually learning anything.

This study has two salient weaknesses. First, no formal diagnostic tool was devised to measure student reactions toward the debate procedures outlined here. Second, this procedure has so far been used in only one class of thirty students; it is not clear how well this would transfer to other contexts. For such reasons, the procedure described here should be regarded as work in progress rather than a final verdict.

Subsequent research studies on this issue should address three issues: (1) validity, (2) reliability, (3) transferability. Let me briefly highlight each point.

### *1 Validity concerns*

Were the concepts about alternative debate outlined during the course useful to students in examining research tasks? Did it confuse students to study both alternative debate and traditional debate? Such questions merit further research.

### *2 Reliability concerns*

This report has outlined how debate skills were taught in a single Japanese classroom context. How would different students react to these procedures with different teachers and/or in different contexts? The procedure mentioned here should be replicated in a variety of classroom situations to ascertain whether consistent results are found in different contexts.

### *3 Transferability concerns*

Many claims have been made about the value of debate and parallel thinking procedures. Van Eemeren (2002), for example, sees debate as a tool in fostering democracy. Khalid Hamza and Alhalabi (1999) posit that parallel thinking procedures promote the same goal. Stewart and Pleisch (1998, p. 32) suggest it promotes general language proficiency. Conscientious educators should try to substantiate the merits of such claims. To what extent will students actually apply the discourse or problem-solving principles suggested in this class? Longitudinal research is needed to answer that question.

## **Conclusion**

A common criticism of Japanese students is that they are poor at debating. Evidence suggests that this is not just a foreign language issue: even when discussing issues in Japanese, most university students lack the passion and zeal to achieve persuasive

eloquence. If students are to assume positions of leadership in business or government, however, they may need to become more proficient at debating and creative problem-solving. Although Japan is recognized as an economic leader around the world, in most forums of intellectual debate it is on the sidelines. For example, a Japanese team has never been listed among the top 25 teams worldwide in the World School Debate Championships, although teams from the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia have achieved this honor (WSDC, 2003).

In all fairness, a general decline in debating skills appears to be occurring in many countries around the world. As television becomes more widespread and attention spans shorten, interest in debating seems to be waning. Instead of full-length debates on many issues, we now have 30-second info-blips that emphasize style more than content. Since access to information is available more readily now than ever before, the issue boils down to engaged caring. In a culture of cynicism, many young people question the value of debating issues which will be decided by powerful elites regardless of their views.

Let me conclude by mentioning a recent comment by Coyne (2001) about this disturbing trend towards less debate:

. . . the decline of debate is not only a symptom of institutional sickness, or of the talents of particular MPs. It bespeaks a culture that is fast losing its ability to reason collectively, to argue things through to a logical conclusion, at least so far as this requires paying attention to what is being said.

Though Coyne's statement was made about Canadian society, it may seem to ring true for Japan as well.

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## Appendix 1: Some suggested debate topics

Instructions: Please select any three topics that you are most interested in debating from the list of topics below.

- a 日本の消費税は増税をするべきですか？  
[Should the retail sales tax in Japan be raised?]
- b 日本の小学校では英語は必修科目にするべきですか？  
[Should English be a required subject for elementary students in Japan?]
- c 日本は過過去に関して、中国や韓国に謝るべきですか？  
[Should Japan apologize to China and Korea for events during the last century?]

- d これから民営化はどこまで進めるべきですか？  
[Should more government functions be privatized?]
- e 自衛隊を外国に派遣するべきですか？  
[Should Japanese troops be dispatched overseas?]
- f 日本の死刑制度を廃止するべきですか？  
[Should the death penalty be abolished in Japan?]
- g 参議院を廃止するべきですか？  
[Should the House of Councilors should be abolished?]
- h 日本の首都を直接国民投票で選ぶべきですか？  
[Should the Japanese Prime Minister be elected by direct vote?]
- i 日本は遺伝子組み換え食物を販売するべきですか？  
[Should genetically modified food be sold in Japan?]
- j 日本は原子力発電を廃止するべきですか？  
[Should nuclear power be abolished in Japan?]
- k 同性愛者同士の結婚の権利を認めるべきですか？  
[Should gays and lesbians have the right to marry?]
- l その他： \_\_\_\_\_。  
[Other: \_\_\_\_\_?]

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