



## DECISION BY CONSENSUS: IDEAS ABOUT BEING THE CHAIR OF A WUDC DEBATE

Alfred Snider  
Edwin Lawrence Professor of Forensics  
University of Vermont  
[Alfred.snider@uvm.edu](mailto:Alfred.snider@uvm.edu)  
@asnider Twitter  
<http://debate.uvm.edu>

May 2012

I took a journey from one debate world to another, and in some ways it was shocking. I went from the American policy debate world of one team versus another, deeply prepared on one topic, intricately coached before every debate, filled with evidence from experts read into the debate, a decision on which policy would be better (not which debaters) with a ballot cast all alone to be counted among three to seven judges for a decision; and I arrived in a strange new world of

the World Universities Debating Championship format, which is very different in all these ways.

Perhaps the most startling difference, to me, was consensus judging. After more than thirty years of voting alone, I was now making a decision in cooperation with others. Because it was different and because I am also a student of human communication, it is one of the facets of this format that interested me the most. My interest in consensus judging is what had led me to author this essay. Forgive me if this is a “how to” piece, as I am constantly trying to teach myself.

This essay can serve as one person’s instructions for how to be the chair of a WUDC debate. Of course, there are many ways to do so, and this is just one. Feel free to adjust what I suggest in ways that work for you.

For those of you who have come from other debate formats, such as American policy, American parliamentary, Asian parliamentary, Lincoln-Douglas debate and many others, these changes require new realizations about the situation that a judge finds herself in.

### *Requires cooperation, not just tallying*

Whereas in other formats a decision was made in isolation and then announced; now it has to be compared and finally arrived at by cooperation. Previously a firm decision had to be made, solidified by the ballot and then stolidly defended to those receiving it. In the WUDC format it is appropriate to arrive at the time for the consensus discussion with only some ideas finalized, such as a first or a fourth, and then the discussion with the other panelists will guide the decision you will make. Previously, small distinctions had to be made in isolation and then adhered to, whereas now these “tough

calls” can be offered to the other panelists for discussion. One must learn to suspend the tough calls and call for other points of view.

### *Requires compromise*

Previously, the judge would hear a communication session full of disagreement and then arrive at a decision that was fully formed. In the WUDC format, you finish your personal deliberation with the idea that you are now open to compromise. To many, compromise in debate seems like a foreign concept, yet to me the lack of experience in compromise in many debate formats is one of the major weaknesses, as citizens are always called on to make some sorts of compromise, or at least be open to the possibility.

### *Those who disagree with you may be right*

In other debate formats, a judge can be shocked and embarrassed when a competitor says, “But what about this argument?” and the reaction is, at least internally, “Yes, that is a very good point. I have made a mistake.” With consensus decision making in the WUDC format there is the chance for your fellow judges to point out things you may have missed or assessed improperly before that error is passed on to the students. The result is better decisions as well as less embarrassment.

### **Before/During the debate**

Here are some things to keep in mind before and during the debate if you are new as a chair.

### *Check the speaker positions*

The ballot may have speakers ordered in a way that is different from the speaking order in the debate. To make sure you give the points to those who deserve them, check speaker order.

### *Have students check the spelling of their names*

Since this is an international activity, many times, especially at smaller tournaments, the names on the ballots are not spelled properly for whatever reason. Having the names of the students correct is very important and shows respect for their individuality. Help the tab room by asking the students to make corrections, especially in the early rounds.

### *Introduce the debate*

Once all the housekeeping details are finished, it is the job of the chair to introduce the debate. This is a question of your style, of course, but this should always include a reading of the motion. Additionally, in early rounds with less experienced debaters, it is a good idea to mention the mechanics of timing (“all speeches not to exceed seven minutes”) and the markers for when points of information can be offered and when they cannot (“there will be one knock at one minute to indicate that points of information may be offered and one knock at six minutes to indicate that no additional points of information may be offered”). The chair might also introduce the other judges on the panel. It never hurts to advise all in the room to turn their mobile phones off.

Some variants include (mix and match):

“I call this house to order to debate the motion X, (insert instructions as you see fit)”

“We welcome you all to this debate on the motion X, (insert instructions) and we look forward to a stimulating discussion.”

*Call the speaker and thank the previous speaker*

As the chair controls the debate by controlling who has the floor, speakers should not rise to speak until called. Some inexperienced debaters may do so, but please be gentle with them. There is very little time between speeches unless the judges are making adjustments to their notes. Many chairs have a brief pause for this purpose; others go immediately into the next speech.

Some variants include:

“I now call the prime minister (or name of position used) to open the debate for the proposition team.”

“I now call the first speaker for the proposition team to file the bill which shall bear her/his name.”

“I now call the leader of the opposition to begin the remarks for their side of the house.”

“I now call on the government whip to conclude the debate for their side of the bench.”

“I now call on the opposition whip to conclude the debate for their side of the bench and for all of us.”

Quite often these remarks are preceded by a thank you to the previous speaker, such as “I thank the speaker for those remarks and now (introduce next speaker).”

It is your job to keep order during the debate. The idea here is to defend the speaker’s right to communicate openly and not be disturbed by others. These disturbances might include loud talking between those who do not have floor (often in preparation), noisy reactions to what the speaker

has said (“that is so wrong”), and other behavior. I have also acted when it seemed as if one of the debaters was using an electronic device to connect to the Internet, which is not allowed before or during the debate.

One particular type of disturbance is a “flagged” point of information. Usually, someone requests to be recognized for a point of information by saying, “on that point,” or “but sir,” or something like that indicating they would like to offer a point. Any version of this that indicates the substance of the point, such as “on the cost of your proposal,” or “questioning your example,” or anything like this is not allowed. Generally you should mark down a speaker for this type of behavior, though it is not a voting issue by any means.

When such things take place in a seriously disruptive way, the chair generally says, “order, order” which should be a clear signal to the offender to cease. If it is a repeated problem, between the next speeches you should say, in a cross tone of voice, that you will not allow such behavior. That should take care of it, and for me has never failed.

### **After the debate**

Generally you thank the speaker, thank all of the debaters, and then encourage them to “cross the aisle” (they do not, according to parliamentary tradition, have permission to do so until you give it to them) and congratulate each other.

Then, you excuse the debaters, and mention that you will recall them when the decision has been made.

### **The consensus discussion**

Set a timer. The tournament should have indicated the amount of time you have to deliberate. You need to use that time wisely and not delay the tournament (not to mention angering the tournament administration). Watch the timer during your discussion so that you can guide the process in a timely manner.

Take some time to think. If you need it, you should certainly take it, but even if you are ready to begin the discussion, others may not be. It is often good to ask, "Would you like some time to think before we begin our discussion?" Do not let this thinking time go on too long.

Do not dominate the discussion, moderate it. As the chair you are often the most experienced judge, so it can be easy to intimidate your panelists. Do not try to ram home your own thoughts, but bring out their thoughts and then model the discussion based on a merger of their thoughts and yours. Often it is clear, but the better the debate is the more difficult the discussion can be.

Get panelist reactions first, save yours. Given your higher level of experience panelists may often just fall in line behind yours, but that may not create the best decision, nor will it cause you to be viewed in a very positive light by your panelists. If you can discover what their ideas are, then you can identify the differences and focus the discussion there, thus saving time and energy. Some chairs ask for a ranking from the panelists and then reveal their own as a start to the discussion. This can be useful but then it becomes a trading shop instead of an open discussion about what the best results would be. Thus, I might suggest a different strategy.

Ask for "stand outs" or "strong feelings." I often ask if anyone has a clear idea of who is first or fourth as a way to begin. If

there is broad agreement on either of these, then the discussion is automatically narrowed to the other teams. However, if there is a complete difference of opinion (one panelist gives a team a first and the other gives that same team a fourth) you know your work is cut out for you. What you are doing is separating out areas of agreement so that you can focus on areas of disagreement and thus use your adjudication discussion time more wisely.

In disagreement, ask panelist to explain why they rank X over Y, specifically comparing teams. In this comparative process we are asking someone (perhaps a minority on the panel) to justify why they have ranked a certain team as they have, and thus new information other panelists had not thought of may be revealed, or else the weaknesses of that judge's opinions and criteria may be revealed. Recognizing unique insights by that judge may cause you and or another panelist to adjust your rankings, or your reaction to bad criteria they are using might cause them to shift their view. In trying to persuade recalcitrant panelists to agree with you, I suggest reading from your notes to prove a point you are making. This has been useful for me partially because it calls on my thirty years of experience taking notes in American policy debates which are much more difficult to follow through notation.

Encourage movement, even by yourself. Try to depict the process as coming to a good conclusion, not having some panelists "win" in an adjudication contest over others. Just because you are the chair does not mean the opinions of your panelists will fail to persuade you. If you are willing to show movement, the panelists may be willing to do so on this or other points. It is often useful for the chair to ask questions of a minority panelist such as, "So, based on these ideas, would you be willing to give this team the second?" If

they do agree to move their ranking, give them positive feedback about their willingness to compromise.

One of the major things that you as the chair should try to avoid is the use by panelists of simplistic decision rules that do not represent the true nature of the debate. Remarks such as, “their style was better,” “they had more examples,” “their extension was not new,” “what they should have argued was,” or other appeals to simplistic formulas all need to be defused by you as the chair. Quite often these things are revealed during the judge briefing at the beginning of the tournament, and while you do not need to point this out right away, you might want to do so if they refuse to give in on using these simplistic criteria.

I think that a better way to make such decisions is to take what can be described as a more holistic view of the debate. Focus on what the debate was about. What were the main arguments they agreed were important and then who won them? Instead of asking what the debate should have been about, ask the question, what was the debate about and who won those issues? If there was an argument that many agreed was important, then it would help to do the best job on that argument. Likewise, if a major argument was made and did not go anywhere, it might not be as important, even if you liked it. This does not mean that you should reward teams for running away from the strong arguments of the other side, as they should be required to refute major arguments made by those who speak before them, but if certain issues seem to “have legs” and are found in many parts of the debate, then who wins these issues is very important in determining the rankings.

In terms of determining who “wins the issues,” I am comfortable with concepts like argument development, the

support given for arguments, the expressed importance and impact of the arguments among other things. Of course, these criteria have to be bolstered with specifics and not applied as general gradations. At this point in the discussion you are probably determining who gets a first or a second, or who gets a second or a third, so there is room for specifics.

Often judges see the debate as a contest between the halves. Things like, “the first opposition clearly beat the first proposition” are meaningful to me only when you are trying to determine which of these teams gets the higher of two ranks that are in sequence. Obviously, it is harder to compare the first proposition with the second opposition because there is no direct clash, so that should be done with great care.

Analysis of results indicates that second teams score better than first teams. This is a natural result, because the first teams had fifteen minutes to consider the issues, while second teams had thirty or forty minutes to consider the issues. It is wise to be aware of this, and to credit first teams where credit is due. If first teams introduced issues that “had legs” throughout the debate, judges should keep that in mind. Likewise, if the first proposition set up what became a very good debate large on their issues they deserve some credit for that. Ranking the second teams automatically higher is another simplification that should be avoided.

Take notes to prepare for feedback. As the discussion moves forward, begin building your comments for the revelation of the decision to the teams. This will save you time as well as allow your feedback to be much more comparative and specific, which is very useful to the contestants.

Try not to vote, but vote if you must. Consensus is not always possible in a short time. Human nature and long debate experience may have inculcated the habits of disagreement too much and a vote may have to be taken. Usually, if it is clear that two panelists feel strong about something and persuasion is failing, so it should not be necessary to take a vote, because the results would be obvious, and the lone panelist will adjust their ranking. Panelists should respect the experience of the chair and vote against (or “roll” the chair) only in extreme circumstances. It should never be thought of as a “power play” where panelists prove their superiority over the chair, because the goal is not to establish a pecking order as may exist in a pack of wild dogs, but to arrive at a sound decision. Chairs who think they have been “rolled” inappropriately should indicate this on the feedback forms commonly used where chairs evaluate the panelists. Chairs who are outvoted may wish to allow one of the panelists to provide feedback to the debaters, since it is difficult to do a good job explaining a decision that you disagree with.

Judges unfamiliar with the consensus decision-making system seem more likely to “roll” the chair, at least from my observation at American tournaments. This is not a sign of their success, but rather a sign of their failure. Good chairs should be open to strong ideas expressed by panelists and should be willing to adjust their rankings. However, chairs should not acquiesce in a decision that they strongly disagree with. Likewise, panelists should listen to the ideas of the chair with the respect due to their position. However, sometimes consensus fails and a vote needs to be taken, and the system allows for this.

Once rankings are set, award the individual speaker points. The chair takes the ballot and fills in the rankings one

through four. Do it orally as the panelists listen to make sure it is correct. In tabulating tournaments I have seen a few instances where this would have avoided a serious problem. Assign speaker points based on the scale stipulated by the tournament. These often indicate the score of an “average speaker,” but of course you do not know the qualities of this mythic “average speaker.” The points for speakers should be assigned cooperatively. Avoid giving speaker points from top to bottom based on rankings, rather it is advisable to go speaker by speaker, by asking questions such as, “Who was the best/worst speaker in this debate?” After assigning points then make sure that the first ranked team has more points than the second, and on down the line, where some minor adjustments may have to be made.

Review points and ranking. I generally have one of my panelists check my mathematical calculations. I would advise all chairs to put their mobile telephone number (assuming you have service in that location) on the ballot in case there are questions, and of course make sure to turn your mobile telephone back on.

Give the ballot to the runner. If there is no runner, ask a junior panelist to take the ballot to the tab room or the collection station.

Do not necessarily call the debaters back into the room immediately. Take time to work on your feedback script before calling the debaters in. Review the major comments for each team briefly and orally with the panelists, and now is a good time for them to indicate specific comments they would like to make. Then, call the debaters back into the room.

## **Giving feedback**

Congratulate the debaters on the debate (even if it was not of the highest quality) and indicate if it was a unanimous decision or a split vote.

You can either announce the results or let them come out during the comments. I prefer the latter as the teams tend to pay more attention to the comments that way. You can start with the first or the fourth and work your way to the other extreme. I usually start with the first team, as the later teams need to hear the feedback for the teams that outperformed them as well as their own feedback. If you announce the fourth first, they may well shut down and not listen to the rest of your comments, which would be unfortunate for them.

Good feedback is comparative. It is not just, “You did well, you not as good, you less well and you the worst,” as that tells them very little. Good feedback includes details. If the central issue is on argument development, explain why one team’s arguments were better developed than others in specific detail. Use an issue focus, saying that this debate seemed to be about certain issues and explain why some teams did better on those issues. My experience in many formats has shown me that the more specific your feedback the more likely debaters are to believe you are correct.

Contrast the performance of a team with the team above or below them. Often this takes the form of “tipping points,” where you can say, “they did specific X, and if you had done specific X you might have finished ahead of them.” This helps them understand the process you went through in your discussion.

Once again, feedback should avoid the use of the simplistic decision notions described above, especially the “you should

have argued X,” or “you should have had better style.” Do not tell the debaters what they should have done; reveal your decision about what they actually did. In all of my judging experience I have to keep reminding myself that I am present to judge the debate going on in front of me, not the debate going on in my mind.

Spend more time on later places. They are harder to convince and have more to learn, so they are more deserving of your attention. This will also help improve your evaluations by the debaters. I believe that I succeed as a judge when I convince the fourth place team that the decision was correct. It is a difficult task, but one that I am willing to take on.

Have positive things to say about all. This is important, as no feedback should make debaters think that they should cease their participation in the activity. Along with some comments on what they did right, indicate areas of hope, where they did an acceptable job and if they had done better in that area they might have received a higher ranking.

Stay within time limits. Nothing is ever discussed completely, and the tournament must go forward. After the conclusion of the feedback invite the teams to engage individual panelists and yourself for comments on how they can improve further. Be sincere about this and they will often take advantage of this learning moment. Low ranked teams who receive good advice from you are also less likely to evaluate your performance poorly.

## Conclusion

Everyone has his or her own judging style, and I urge you to find yours. I offer these thoughts as my personal guidelines

for your consideration, not as the final word on how to chair a debate. All of our involvement in this wonderful activity should be an opportunity for us to learn and grow. I hope that this will take place in the way you read this essay as well as your experience in every debate you are asked to judge.