

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Debating as Ritual: The Performance of the Northern Luzon Debate Community in the Philippine Debate Scene

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ABSTRACT

Given the scant literature on local debating practice in the Cordillera, this paper is an attempt to study the Northern Luzon Debate Community (NLDC) and how it positions itself in the larger Philippine debate scene. As an association of debate organizations representing universities in Baguio City, I argue that debating, as practiced by the NLDC, is also a process which constitutes a ritual view of communication. This is opposed to the more traditional view of debating as a practice of transmission where debaters exchange arguments to inform an audience. In line with a ritual view of debating, I first discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the NLDC. I then narrate its strategies as it positions itself in the Philippine debate scene. Overall, this paper contributes to literature by recommending how debating can benefit the larger Cordillera region. Throughout the paper, I highlight my perspective as a member of the Northern Luzon Debate Community (NLDC) as I corroborate the analysis with data from interviews and objective measures of debate performance.

Keywords: debate societies, debating practice, ritual view of communication, Northern Luzon Debate Community, debate performance of the peace process

In the Philippines, academic and intercollegiate debating is a sustained practice in higher education institutions. Different colleges and universities have their own debating clubs or organizations (called as *debate societies*). These debate clubs are officially recognized organizations which represent their home institutions in competitions or tournaments. The same clubs also organize debate competitions for high school students and other college debaters (intercollegiate debates). Through banding with other debate clubs in organizing projects and joining debate competitions, the different debate organizations or *societies* form a *debate community*. In this study, I define a *debate community* as an association of debating clubs and organizations in a particular locality. As this study aims to show, a debate community has interests, ideas, rules, and practices shared by its members. These interests and ideas are realized through implicit and explicit rules, practices, and strategies which are consistently employed through a process of socialization constitutive of a ritual view of communication for the *debate community*.

One such community is the Northern Luzon Debate Community (NLDC). The NLDC is an association of five debate organizations representing higher education institutions in Baguio City. Baguio City is a highly urbanized city in northern Philippines. It is part of the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) which is home to various indigenous groups who live in the provinces of Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and the Mountain Province (Buendia, 1987). The NLDC, however, does not have members or debate clubs from the said provinces. Only debate clubs from Baguio City are part of the NLDC.

The universities in Baguio City with officially recognized debate organizations are the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), a training institution for future members of the Philippine's armed forces; Saint Louis University, a Catholic-run institution; University of Baguio (UB) and University of the Cordilleras (UC) which are both private schools catering to students from within and outside the region; and the University of the Philippines Baguio (UPB), a state-run institution and the 7th constituent university of the University of the Philippines system.

As mentioned, the debate organizations which forms the NLDC are usually called *debate societies*. For instance, the SLU Debate Society (SLUDS) and UP Baguio Debate Society (UPBDS). However, other terms have been used by debate clubs around the country to refer to their organizations—*debate circle*, *debate parliament*, *debate team*, and *debate varsity*. The name of the debate club is usually a matter of preference and appending the terms mentioned to the name of the institution. In this

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paper, I am referring to NLDC then as a collective of 5 debate organizations representing the universities mentioned above.

The NLDC has extension work or activities carried out by its member organizations. These activities include hosting intercollegiate debate competitions and organizing tournaments, seminars, or workshops for high school students. The clientele for these activities includes schools from Baguio City and nearby regions. Moreover, NLDC debaters have been visible in national and international tournaments. This has made it possible for debaters from Baguio City to interact with debaters from the National Capital Region, Visayas and Mindanao regions, and even internationally with debaters from other regions competing in the Philippines or vice versa.

The NLDC is part of a larger group, the Philippine Debate Union (PDU). PDU is composed of regional debating blocs such as the NLDC or individual institutions which join the National Debate Championship (NDC). The PDU makes decisions about all matters related to intercollegiate debate tournaments in the country, especially NDC. NDC is the most prestigious British Parliamentary (format) debate tournament in the country. Officers of the PDU discuss, debate, and vote on institutions that can host the annual NDC, the dates for the tournament, the election of adjudication core (a group of nominated debater and judges who have proven expertise in the field), and the actions to be taken on all matters related to the conduct of debaters in a tournament.

Research Question

In this qualitative, descriptive study, I bring to the fore my perspective as a competitor in national and international debate competitions and a member of the Northern Luzon Debate Community (NLDC) and Philippine Debate Union (PDU) for over ten (10) years now. This 10-year debate experience has made certain realities for NLDC members apparent. The first of which has to do with the positions that NLDC members take as they compete in larger debating arenas and along with this, the meaning-making process of individual debaters as they reflect on their practice. This study thus posits the research question: **How do debaters in Northern Luzon establish their position in the Philippine intercollegiate debate scene?** This project aims to address the following objectives:

- Surface the strengths and challenges of the NLDC debating bloc
- Discuss the strategies used by NLDC in positioning itself in the national debate scene

- Explain how the NLDC can establish its relevance in the larger Cordillera region

Significance of the Study

I argue that it is important to study how the NLDC positions itself in the national debate scene for four reasons. First, there has been an observable and tested dominance of Manila schools in debate championships. To a certain extent, debaters representing Baguio City have made it to the finals series or have won individual awards in major (national) debate tournaments. However, two problems remain evident in spite of the presence and increased visibility of the NLDC in the national and international debate scene—the dominance of Manila schools in competitive intercollegiate debating and the absence of debaters from other parts of the Cordillera region (except Baguio City) in major tournaments. Studying the strengths of the NLDC hopefully raises awareness and allows reflection on the part of NLDC members about what skills sets should be tapped and how they can improve their training regimen to win competitions.

Second, understanding the strengths of the NLDC members provides guidance to debate organizations who want to make debating as an activity more relevant to the Cordillera region. By reflecting on debating as a practice, NLDC members can help chart directions for a more inclusive debate framework which not only preserves a competitive spirit among student-debaters but also engages the greater concerns of indigenous peoples in the region. I chose the NLDC as a sub-community of debaters because I am a member of the said community and my long-term involvement in local debate scene. I also wish to make sense of the realities that NLDC debaters face as I advance the position that the potential of debating can be harnessed as an advocacy.

Third and more generally, it is important to study debating practices because debate is often theorized as a skill, a product, and an end in and of itself. As an activity, debate textbooks and manuals have long listed the benefits of and gains from debating (e.g., persuasive argumentation, effective delivery, and ability to respond instantaneously) (Bell, 1982; Godden, 2010; Taylor, 1977; Werder, 1999). However, I argue that debating must also be viewed as a process, as a form of ritual and performance that reinforces itself through time. Using this perspective, I do not only focus on the rewards and benefits of debating but also the process in which achievements and accomplishments of debaters materialize and are realized.

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Finally, there is a dearth of literature about intercollegiate debating in the Philippines. It is thus my aim to provide an initial, academic account of intercollegiate debating in the Philippine north. I wish to highlight the realities that debaters face as they compete and reap the benefits of the activity. Like any competitive process or activity, intercollegiate debating carries with it politics and dynamics which only members of the community can illuminate. Thus, this study aims to highlight a meaning-making process on the part of the Northern Luzon debaters. This research contributes to communication studies because narratives and messengers are equally important to creating and sharing meaning in our common experience (Coste and Godzich, 1989).

Debate and Democracy

The importance of any form of debating cannot be emphasized enough especially when it comes to making decisions. During elections, debates are integral to democracy in two ways.

First, it is a platform in which viewers get to know their candidates better (transmission of information) (Greenberg, 2009). Second, it provides an opportunity for candidates to discuss issues as well as for viewers or the audience to engage with issues themselves. Debates are then thought to enable voters to make informed decisions. They also allow communities to talk about relevant issues and even “renews interest in political affairs or civic commitment” (Greenberg 2009, p. 16). In the words of Coleman:

Debate lies at the heart of democracy. Indeed, it would be reasonable to state that the two definitive prerequisites of democracy are the fair and inclusive right to vote and the opportunity to conduct informed, uncensored public discussion of ideas. (2000, p. 1)

If one agrees with Coleman (2000), then one sees the value of any training in debate. Competitive, academic, or forensic debating provides one form of training that seems limited in application at first but is actually crucial to democracy. Debating allows one to make informed decisions by being able to scrutinize different positions before making judgments, being open to different sides and perspectives of an issue, and avoiding misinformation, deception, and manipulation by refusing to accept unchecked and questionable information. These ideals and benefits are precisely why debating can be harnessed for civic education.

There are four theories of democracy that underscore the importance of debates—the electoral competition model, responsible party model, utilitarian theories, and character theories (Jamieson and

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Birdsell, 1988). The electoral competition model magnifies the informational value or educational impact of debates on the voters (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, p. 127). In intercollegiate debating, the electoral competition model would focus on the audience or the listeners. In this case, debating is a means to educate or inform the listeners or audience about certain issues. The debaters must then be equipped with the knowledge based on their research and present their positions or arguments on a pressing, timely issue.

Meanwhile, the responsible party model assumes that political parties differ in their policies and positions on certain issues. Debates highlight these differences to persuade voters to shift their support from one party to the other (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, p. 135). In intercollegiate debate, this translates to the mutually exclusive position that debaters must take on an issue. Intercollegiate competitions using the parliamentary debate format divides the house or the teams into two sides—affirmative and negative. Debaters on both sides must establish a marked difference in position in relation to their opponents and a failure to do so may carry penalties or a possible loss for the team.

Utilitarian theories emphasize practices of credit-claiming and opponent-blaming in debates as a way for candidates to prove legitimacy and provide a mechanism for audiences to assess the candidates (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, p. 138). Intercollegiate, academic debates are driven by strategies of credit-claiming (showing how debaters of a particular side are more consistent in arguing and had more substantive arguments) and opponent-blaming (pointing out inconsistencies in the arguments of the opponents, calling out speakers and teams on their failure to fulfill their burdens or roles in the debate).

Finally, the question “who is the person who would lead” undergirds character theories (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, p. 139). Character theories argue that voters “scrutinize a candidate’s character” and look for qualities such as knowledge, experience, competence, warmth, activity, strength, candor, dignity and stability. From the perspective of character theories, debates then function as a platform for image building (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, p. 139). Debaters in academic, intercollegiate debates animate character theories when they try to consciously or unconsciously channel their institutional affiliation, individual achievements, and debate experience when competing in tournaments. Character theories emphasize the ethos or credibility of a debater based on past accomplishments and reputation as these affect the judges’ and audiences’ perceptions about the debater’s competence.

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All of the theories of democracy as they relate to debating can be applied to competitive, intercollegiate debates. However, no single theory of democracy can account for all the processes and practices if debating is to be viewed as a ritual. Moreover, the theories of democracy emphasize a role for the debaters more than implications for audiences. If debates are to be more relevant, then they should also cater to interests of the audience and the stakeholders. Hence, I will use James' Carey's ritual view of communication as a framework in this study.

Ritual View of Communication

James Carey argues that there are two perspectives to understanding communication—the transmission model and the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009). The transmission model deals largely with communication as a linear process of merely sending and receiving information where communication is a means to an end (achieve a desired result such as change, persuasion, and information dissemination). While the ritual view of communication “is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey, 2009, p. 5).

Debates fit the ritual view of communication. They are, “after all, rites like holidays or parades, which gain meaning from the way they figure in our daily experiences” (Greenberg, 2009, p. 16). In other words, the practice of debating not only aims to impart knowledge to debaters or allow them to transmit information to their audience and opponents, debating also allows them to participate in a community where they can build relationships, form identities, and negotiate meanings.

In the context of debating, the ritual view posits that debating is not a just an end in itself or an activity that produces messages (arguments) which can be used to inform policy or resolve issues. Rather, debating is a process engaged by members of a group as they relate to one another and represent beliefs they oppose and share. Communication, under the ritual view, is then perceived as social interaction (Boni, 2016). It must be noted, however, that the ritual and transmission views of communication are not mutually exclusive—ritual is not devoid of information (Hockings, 1968) while transmission also includes repetition. In this paper, while I will mostly talk about debating as a ritual, I do not wish to discount the fact that debates may also function in transmission.

In relation to ritual, debating has also been viewed from the perspective of socialization as a principle of argumentation (Femeren and

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Grootendorst, 1992). Under this principle, the debaters interact and negotiate meaning with other debaters. Socialization in debate starts at a different time for every debater. Some debaters have length and depth of experience and breadth of knowledge in argumentation or debate competition prior to joining their respective collegiate organizations. Some used to be high school debaters while others start intercollegiate debating during their junior or senior year in college. Whether they have limited debate experience or have had significant training, recruits of debate organizations still go through a process before being granted official membership in debate organizations.

It is through socialization that debaters take part in rituals where they learn strategies to hone their skills and work on their weaknesses. One of the skills in debating is argumentation which has the general function of managing the resolution of disagreement (Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992). While argumentation can lead to resolution of disagreements through an open, rule-based expression of reasons, debaters can look at the practice of argumentation as a zero-sum game especially in the context of competitive debates where argumentation finds a significant application. Argumentation, instead of leading to resolution, can in fact breed more disagreements and this study aims to foreground the tensions which debaters experience as they participate in national debate competitions.

Debaters also learn to use argumentation as “appropriate only when you are able to use arguments that are able to help you in arguing against another person”. Debating then is both a practice and a process (Zarefsky, 2005). The relevance of this principle to the study is in foregrounding the strategies used by NLDC debaters to position themselves in the larger debate community—how they win major tournaments, how they can engage debaters in the community they are part of, how they discredit their opponents and possibly win at all costs. This also includes consciousness and cohesiveness in group dynamics (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

Methodology

This qualitative, descriptive study used in-depth interview as a research method. Ten (10) in-depth interviews were conducted over the course of this project. Pre-interview questionnaires were administered to gather basic information and responses to preliminary questions. Responses were elaborated or clarified during the interview/discussion proper. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Debate tabs which contain speaker scores/team points garnered by debaters during the competition and circulated to all participants after each tournament

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were also gathered to provide an objective measurement of the debater's performance and to corroborate interviews conducted.

Data analysis involved an inductive approach where I made sense of the quantitative and qualitative data by looking at dominant themes, categories, and patterns in the responses and narratives of the NLDC members. Data analysis involved three levels and layers of meaning—description (what were actually stated), interpretation (my perspective on the data), and explanation (how the statements of the respondents, my interpretations, and the quantitative and qualitative data come together to advance new insights about the communication process under study). In sum, data analysis highlighted reflexivity on my part as a member of the NLDC and the Philippine Debate Union.

The respondents in this study include current and past members (students and alumni) of the NLDC or its member organizations—debaters from the Philippine Military Academy, Saint Louis University, University of Baguio, University of the Cordilleras, and the University of the Philippines Baguio. The criteria for choosing the respondents include a) the length of debate experience (minimum of two years for students and five years for alumni), b) number of local and national competitions joined (at least 2 local and 2 national tournaments), and c) awards received in local and national debate tournaments (team or individual).

Analysis

In this section, I will look into how the NLDC positions itself in the national debate scene or in the larger community of debaters who are members of the PDU. By positioning, I refer to the NLDC debaters' strategies in winning debate tournaments and the feats they accomplish through their strategies. In the analysis, I will draw from experience in the national debate scene and as a member of the NLDC. In examining the past performances of the NLC debaters in the national debate scene, I have also used objective measures of the debaters' performance (recorded and tabulated through a document called "tabs" which is circulated after every tournament) from the National Debate Championship (NDC). I am using NDC tabs as measure for the NLDC debaters' performance because NDC is the most prestigious British Parliamentary debate for all bona-fide college students across the country.

Data from the National Debate Championship (NDC) will be used to support my arguments which I will corroborate using insights from the interviews. I have organized my analysis according to the objectives of the study. I will first detail the strengths and weaknesses of NLDC member institutions. Taking off from the analysis of its strengths

and weaknesses, I will then argue how the NLDC positions itself in the national debate various strategies. Finally, I will explain how the NLDC can be more relevant to the Cordillera region in my recommendations.

Strengths of the NLDC

In my analysis, I will refer to the NLDC as a collective or as an association of different Baguio-based collegiate debating circles or societies. I argue that achievements of individual debating organizations (e.g., SLU or UPB debate teams) are gains of the NLDC as a whole, regardless of whether a debater attributes his/her success to the NLDC or only to his/her home institution. Specifically, I will look into the accomplishments of the NLDC only in the National Debate Championship (NDC). I have chosen the NDC because it is the most prestigious debate tournament for bona-fide college students in the Philippines. Only the data from NDC 2006 to the present are available so my analysis covers the 12-year period from 2006 to 2017. Table 1 shows the number of times that members of the NLDC joined the National Debate Championships (NDC).

Table 1. NLDC debate teams and their participation in the NDC

NLDC member	No. of NDCs joined from 2006-2017	No. of NDCs missed
PMA	9	2
SLU	12	none
UB	3	9
UC	5	7
UPB	8	4

With varying consistency, the five member-organizations of the NLDC have competed in the NDC over the last 12 years. SLU has been the most consistent debate organization which participated in the NDC, never missing a single edition since 2006. PMA joined the NDC 9 times while UPB participated 8 times during the 12-year period. Debate teams from SLU and PMA are funded by their respective schools. Funding includes registration fees, transportation and accommodation allowance for competitions held outside Baguio City.

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Unlike SLU and PMA, the UPB debate team was elevated to varsity status only in 2015. Debate teams from UB and UC, while initially funded by their respective schools, missed the NDC for 4 straight years (2011-2014) and the last 2 NDCs (2016-2017).

Reasons for missing the NDC include lack of support/funding/endorsement from schools and low membership in debate teams. While funding remains to be a major concern based on the interviews, some debate teams have also been able to join the NDC without support from their respective schools. Prior to the elevation of the UPB debate team to varsity status, its alumni recalled how they distributed solicitation letters to officials in the city government, asked sponsorships from establishments, and came up with income generating projects (IGPs) to defray costs of joining the NDC. This illustrates that while a major limitation perceived by members of the NLDC is external (funding/support from schools), the solution can be internal—ingenuity and commitment by members to raise needed funds to compete.

To a certain extent, NLDC schools have proven their ability to raise funds through organizing debate competitions for high school students. The debate organizations of SLU and UPB host high school tournaments regularly, proceeds from which are then used by the NLDC members to compete in intercollegiate tournaments such as the NDC. SLU and UPB did not cease to host annual debate tournaments for high school students even as their debate teams have been elevated to varsity status. Hence, one strength of debate organizations in the NLDC is the ability to sustain their activities and projects regardless of support from their respective schools. I argue that this is an important strength because it shows that NLDC debaters are not easily hampered by lack of financial support from the schools they represent. Second, NLDC debate organizations thrive and survive or are able to join competitions by engaging the younger generation of debaters through projects such as high school debate camps and tournaments.

The strengths of the NLDC members can thus be defined using two terms—*resolve* and *reinforcement*. *Resolve* simply means that some members of the NLDC are resolute in joining debate tournaments for personal improvement. Debaters who were interviewed emphasized that resolve is a very important strength especially when the debate team that one is a part of does not get support or from the school they represent (I will discuss this in the limitations of the NDC). Some debaters still join as many debate tournaments as they can even if it meant using their own resources. I argue that such resolve is needed if NLDC debaters are to be more visible in the national debate scene. After all, achievements and awards are products of skills honed through experience.

The second strength is *reinforcement* which is a collective undertaking by the debate organization itself to provide a venue for younger debaters to experience the rewards of debating. While resolve can be anyone's strength, whether one is a debater or not, reinforcement is effectively carried out through working in groups. I must highlight the importance of reinforcement especially when a) debaters interviewed agree that it is difficult to encourage anyone to debate as opposed to convincing them to take on arts and crafts and b) debaters who stay in the community (continues to join competitions and participate in projects) usually start young or are initiated during their exposure to debate as high school students. The participants agree that these two strengths go a long way for any debater who is part of the NLDC because success in debating is largely a product of persistence (*resolve*) and mentorship from model debaters (*reinforcement*). As I will explain later, these strengths are also critical for effective engagement between the NLDC and the Cordillera region.

Another strength of the NLDC that the participants refer to is the supposed advantage of the NLDC in discussing issues about the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera. Respondents from UPB have cited this advantage, owing to their academic training and niche of UP Baguio in Cordillera Studies. As I will argue later, the NLDC can capitalize on this perceived strength if it is to make debating relevant to the region.

Limitations of the NLDC

As mentioned, the main limitation of NLDC debaters is funding or limited support from the schools they represent. For varsity teams, funding can cover everything from registration fees to transportation and accommodation costs of joining debate tournaments. Currently, intercollegiate debate tournaments are held for 2 to 3 days. Two formats are usually used—Asian Parliamentary and British Parliamentary. The tournaments include 2 stages—elimination rounds usually held during the first and second day and break rounds or the finals series held during the third or last day. The case of the National Debate Championship (NDC) is different for it is usually held after the first semester of each academic year. Currently, it runs for 5 to 7 seven days during the last week of December. As the most prestigious intercollegiate debate tournament in the British Parliamentary format, NDC has 7 rounds of eliminations and 4 rounds in the finals series (octo-finals, quarter-finals, semi-finals, and grand finals). Held annually, the venue for the tournament depends on the vote of members of the Philippine Debate Union. Table 2 shows the host university of NDC from 2006-2017.

Table 2. Venues of NDC from 2006 to 2017

Year	Venue/ location
2006	University of Baguio
2007	Philippine Military Academy
2008	Ateneo de Davao University
2009	Lyceum of the Philippines University
2010	University of the Cordilleras
2011	Ateneo de Cagayan-Xavier University
2012	UP Iloilo
2013	Ateneo de Naga University
2014	UP Cebu
2015	Saint Louis University
2016	De La Salle University
2017	Ateneo de Cagayan-Xavier University

The venue for NDC or debate tournaments in general is a consideration for NLDC schools wishing to compete. As in the case of NDC 2017 held in Cagayan de Oro, NLDC schools need to request not only for registration fees (which will be much more expensive because Baguio City debaters need to avail of a stay-in package) but also airfare or transportation costs. Fortunately, the debate teams of PMA, UPB, and SLU had their costs covered by their respective schools, owing to their varsity status. In general, however, the venue or location of the NDC and other debate tournaments is a limitation to for NLDC debate teams. Refer to Table 3.

Table 3. Participation of NLDC schools in the NDC

Year	Venue/ location	No. of NLDC teams	Total no. of teams
2006	University of Baguio	29	120
2007	Philippine Military Academy	28	132
2008	Ateneo de Davao University	5	124
2009	Lyceum of the Philippines University	11	101
2010	University of the Cordilleras	20	116
2011	Ateneo de Cagayan-Xavier University	5	97
2012	UP Iloilo	8	96
2013	Ateneo de Naga University	10	104
2014	UP Cebu	6	89
2015	Saint Louis University	20	100
2016	De La Salle University	10	104
2017	Ateneo de Cagayan-Xavier University	7	63

As shown in Table 3, there is a surge of participation among NLDC schools when various editions of the NDC were held in Baguio City. NDC 2006 held at the University of Baguio saw the highest number of NLDC debate teams (29 out of 120 teams). Similarly, a fifth of the competing teams represented NLDC schools in NDC 2007 (organized by PMA) and NDC 2015 (hosted by SLU). Finally, 20 out of the 116 teams were from the NLDC in NDC 2010 held at the University of the Cordilleras. However, only few NLDC teams were represented in Ateneo de Davao NDC in 2008 (5 out of 124 teams), Ateneo de Cagayan NDC in 2011 (5 out of 97 teams), UP Iloilo NDC in 2012 (8 out of 96 teams), and UP Cebu NDC in 2014 (6 out of 89 teams). In general, 2017 saw the least number of teams participating in the NDC in the last 12 years (total of 63 teams only) and NLDC schools sent only 9 teams to the competition.

Debate tournaments held outside Baguio City would entail more costs on the part of NLDC schools, more so if the tournament would be held in the Visayas and Mindanao regions. Even as NLDC members have been granted varsity status or has regular funding from the schools they represent (PMA, SLU, and UPB), the costs of joining tournaments outside Baguio may still be prohibitive for a school to fully fund all debaters of an organization who wish to join. While NDC is not the only debate tournament in the country, most intercollegiate debate competitions are held in the National Capital Region on almost a

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monthly basis. However, due to constraints such as time, distance, and resources, NLDC schools usually opt to attend the major tournaments and competitions held in the Cordillera or nearby regions only.

In spite of consistent participation in major tournaments, it cannot be denied that NLDC debate teams still experience a relative lack of exposure to competitions and access to opportunities compared to their Manila-based counterparts. As I said, the location of the tournaments and the geographic location of the NLDC institutions do not allow for fairly easy access to cross-training with Manila schools and frequent participation in Manila-based tournaments as venues for training.

The interviewees also argued that another limitation in the NLDC is the relative lack of alumni support within the community. As for UPB and UC, for instance, there have been factions in the debate organizations of these institutions in the past. The faction stems from issues of their respective alumni. In contrast, debate organizations in Manila are known for the active involvement of the alumni in the current affairs of younger debaters. The alumni team up or partner with young debaters of the same school in open and invitational debate tournaments. In fact, IVs (intervarsity debates) and debate opens (where competing teams do not have to be composed of enrolled students representing the same school) were said to be the brainchild of the Manila-based debate alumni so they can team up with their younger counterparts.

On my end, I have competed for UPB as a debate alumnus and teamed up with members of the UPB debate team. I consider this another strategy to mentor the younger generation of debaters. Other institutions in the NLDC can be more active in this endeavor. However, it is understandable that the alumni of the NLDC debate teams leave debating altogether after graduating from college, getting stable jobs, and focusing on other priorities. As in the case of the alumni of Manila-based schools, commitment to debating is usually driven by passion as noted in the interviews but even then, the debate alumni who keep coming back (continue to join tournaments) are those who are members of the academe, lawyers, law students, or alumni who found careers as debate coaches.

Strategies of the NLDC

I will refer to the positioning of the NLDC largely in terms of the strategies they employ (*capitalizing on skilled debaters, mentoring/internal reinforcement, building social capital, and modelling*) and the extent of their achievements in the NDC. I will refer to team achievements of the NLDC

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in terms such as “breaking teams” which means that a team has avoided elimination and advanced to the finals series of the tournaments as “octo-finalists”, “quarterfinalists”, “semifinalists”, or “grand finalists”. Team achievements should be defined in these terms because these are the credentials recognized by the Philippine Debate Union and the parlance of debate achievements in the community.

Based on my 10-year experience in the national debate scene, the debate teams of UP Diliman, Ateneo de Manila University, and La Salle University usually reach the semi-finals, grand finals or championship of major debate tournaments like the NDC. UP Manila, UP Los Banos, San Beda College, and University of Santo Tomas have also significantly placed in national tournaments. From memory, there are a few teams from the regional or provincial schools which also made their mark in the NDC like Xavier University (Ateneo de Cagayan) and Ateneo de Davao University, reaching as far as the semi-finals of the NDC. The biggest achievement for a debate team from the NLDC is quarter-finals in NDC 2006 held at the University of Baguio. Table 4 shows the debate achievements of the NLDC.

Table 4. NLDC debate teams and their participation in the NDC

NLDC member	No. of NDCs joined from 2006-2017	No. of breaking teams produced from 2006-2017	Highest achievement for the breaking team
PMA	9	1	Octo-finalist
SLU	12	8	Quarterfinalists
UB	3	0	
UC	5	1	Octo-finalist
UPB	8	4	Octo-finalist

SLU also produced the greatest number of breaking teams (8) in a 12-year period compared to other institutions representing Baguio City. SLU has also advanced the farthest in terms of breaking in NDC (quarterfinals). UPB trails behind SLU in terms of the number of breaking teams produced during a 12-year period (there were breaking teams from UPB in 2006, 2008, and 2009). UC and PMA debate teams (in 2010 and 2012, respectively) have broken to the octo-finals of NDC once and UB never had a breaking team in its three-time participation in NDC.

While the debate achievements are indicative of the strength of the NLDC debate teams, it can be observed that the same debate organizations have not gone beyond the quarterfinal round. The championship is the ultimate barometer of success in any debate tournament and debaters reaching the semi-finals and grand finals are

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given higher regard and trust by the community. There has been no semi-finalist and grand finalist from the NLDC since 2006. However, there are lessons that can be gleaned from the trajectory of the NLDC debate teams.

The SLU debate team has been the most consistent in joining, not missing a single edition of the NDC since 2006. It also has the greatest number of breaking teams in 12 years. If anything, its constant participation in the NDC paid off with a total of 8 breaking teams as an aggregate of their achievement in different years. SLU broke in NDC 7 times (2006-2007, 2010, 2013-2015, and NDC 2017). It must be noted that breaking teams from SLU are composed of debaters who have consistently joined and consequently broken (competed as octo-finalist/quarterfinalist) in earlier editions of the NDC. The breaking team from SLU in NDC 2010, for instance, is composed of debaters who have broken in NDC 2007.

SLU's winning streak in NDC 2013-2015 was also brought by the same debater who only changed his teammate every year. Nonetheless, he was the constant in the breaking team of SLU from 2013-2015. SLU's performance can be contrasted to that of the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). While PMA has competed in NDC 9 times (missing only 3 NDCs—2008, 2009, and 2011), it has only produced 1 breaking team. As I mentioned in the case of SLU, the achievement was brought by an experienced debater who performed way better than his/her peers. In 2012, the debater put an end to PMA's continued non-placement in the NDC. However, the PMA debate team failed to place in the succeeding editions of the NDC when the experienced debater who once represented PMA left the team. Prior to joining the PMA debate team, the debater was part of the UP Manila Debate Circle and his debate experience revived the PMA debate team.

I will refer to the strategy mentioned above as *capitalizing on a skilled debater*. The insight from this is simple—while debating is a team activity, a single, strong, and skillful debater can have a lot of influence on the chunk of the debate achievements for a particular school. I wish to clarify that recruits in a debate organization have varying levels of efficiency upon joining the debate team. Some recruits in intercollegiate debate were high school debaters while some have no debate background at all. While all debaters become skilled through training and experience, certain debaters will take a shorter time to improve.

As a strategy, it is thus common for the NLDC to capitalize on strong, skilled debaters. This means honing the debater further or, if the recruit is the strongest debater in the debate pool, finding a suitable

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teammate or partner for the debater—a partner who can complement even if not exactly parallel the performance of the skilled debater. I argue that this is an important strategy in the NLDC because debate organizations are revived once achievements or accomplishments are brought in by a few recruits who become skilled or start out as the strongest member in the debate pool. In the case of SLU, a single debater broke in the NLDC for three consecutive years, only changing his teammate or partner annually. For PMA, the recruit who was part of the UP Manila Debate Circle prior to joining the PMA debate club, was able to bring home debate credentials for the institution.

While NLDC debate teams capitalize on skilled debaters as a matter of strategy, mentorship through *internal reinforcement* is also a common strategy among NLDC debate teams. Even college debaters without experience in high schools speech and debate competitions can be honed through training and experience. In NDC 2017, SLU is the only debate organization from the NLDC to break in the octo-finals. Among the NLDC debate teams then, SLU has accomplished a certain level of *internal reinforcement*. Internal reinforcement is both a function of individual motivation—a debater wanting to improve him/herself—and teamwork or a level of commitment within the organization to help budding debaters. In the case of the SLU debate team, debaters were able to pass on their skills and strategies to newcomers and eventual breaking teams. This is evident in the number of breaking teams the debate club has produced in (2006-2007, 2010, 2013-2015, and the most recent NDC 2017).

Based on my experience in the debate circuit, tapping well-achieved debaters from Manila to partner or team up with NLDC debaters can actually work on two levels—pass on strategies and training from the Manila-based debater to the NLDC member and bringing home an achievement for a debate team from the NLDC. The interviews reveal that NLDC debaters have tried partnering with Manila-based debaters in national competitions (local, intervarsity debate championships, and open invitation debates) in order to learn from the more experienced debaters from Manila. What NLDC debaters learn from partnering or teaming up with Manila-based debaters in pre-NDC tournaments are then applied to NDC and other major tournaments.

NLDC debate teams thus strategize by complementing their training and competing pool with debate partners or teammates from Manila who are willing to share their expertise. I consider this the kind of positioning built on *social capital*. The NLDC recognizes that it needs help outside the local circuit and from the more sophisticated debating clubs

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of Manila. Debate teams from the NLDC thus network with debaters from reputable debate organizations based in Manila. The connections established go a long way in terms of sharing debate strategies, training, and partnerships. As an interviewee noted, debate is a “psychological warfare”. She meant that connections go a long way in the debate community because when people know and are familiar with you, they are more likely to judge you favorably in a competition. After all, judges in a debate competition (referred to as adjudicators) are one’s peers or fellow debaters.

Another strategy the NLDC uses in its positioning is *modeling*. This only means that once the NLDC member is able to adapt and imbibe the strategies of a “model” debater, he/she applies what he/she learned to his own practice and is then able to break in tournaments or bring home achievement for the home institution. The interviews reveal that the success of an NLDC debater also depends on how much one can learn/model from successful debaters. In this regard, modeling is another strategy employed by an NLDC debater to position himself/herself in the larger community.

As the data would show, NLDC teams have only reached as far as the quarterfinals of the NDC. Models for debate in the community vary per individual. However, they are bound by the same standards—having been in the debate circuit long enough to be known among peers, having achieved a significant measure of success like winning individual awards and national/international debate championships, and having a personal appeal in terms of manner of deliver or sophistication of argument. The NLDC admits that there are more debate models in the Manila debate circuit and the reason for this are the opportunities and exposure afforded to Manila-based debaters which NLDC debaters have limited access to.

Positioning in the National Debate Scene

I would refer to positioning largely as NLDC’s placement in the most prestigious debate tournament in the country, the Philippine Debate Union-sanctioned NDC. NDC is the national barometer of success for every debater because it is a highly competitive platform for intercollegiate debating. Only enrolled college students are allowed to join and there are strict rules in breaking or advancing to high rounds (octo-finals to grand finals). The preliminary or elimination rounds are also where schools from across the regions benchmark until the top 32 breaking teams (octo-finalists) are selected. Table 5 below shows the NLDC debate teams’ achievement in 12 years of joining NDC.

Table 5. Summary of debate achievements of the NLDC in the NDC

Year	No. of NLDC breaking teams	NLDC breaking teams	No. of NLDC teams	Total no. of teams
2006	3	SLU (2 teams) UPB (1 team)	29	120
2007	3	SLU (1 team) UPB (2 teams)	28	132
2008	0		5	124
2009	1	UPB	11	101
2010	2	SLU (1 team) UC (1 team)	20	116
2011	0		5	97
2012	1	PMA	8	96
2013	1	SLU	10	104
2014	1	SLU	6	89
2015	1	SLU	20	100
2016	0		10	104
2017	1	SLU	7	63

The table shows that out of 32 breaking teams (octo-finalists) in the NDC, only 1 to 3 teams break from the NLDC. As argued, Manila-based schools dominate the competitions. The breaking teams from NLDC also do not reach as far as the semi-finals (top 4 teams). SLU reached as far as quarter-finals (top 16) but no NLDC team has advanced in the NDC beyond the quarter-finals. In other words, an NLDC team breaking in the NDC is an exemption rather than the norm. This is due to certain factors and the most salient among which is the perception of the interviewees that regional or provincial schools (such as teams from the NLDC) face discrimination when competing in major tournaments.

The NLDC is not a stranger to certain political dynamics working against it such as the bias and stereotyping they face when pitted against formidable, established debate organizations in Manila. Adjudicators judge members of debate teams from Manila schools more favorably especially if these members come from the “elite” debate clubs of UP Diliman, Ateneo (ADMU), and La Salle (DLSU). This is so because some adjudicators are inexperienced. Due to inexperience, some adjudicators judge on the basis of presentation or the school represented by the debaters or institutional affiliation (more established versus lesser

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known debate organizations) instead of actual performance or content of speeches of the debater. Adjudicators in intercollegiate debate tournaments, like the debaters, are not experts but university students who might come up with partial decisions or judgments about which teams won the debates because of lack of training.

Since the debate teams of UP Diliman, Ateneo (ADMU), and La Salle (DLSU) have long dominated national championships (with UP Manila and UP Los Banos making it to the grand finals of the nationals in the recent past), a lot of NLDC debate organizations would rather align and train with the said debate teams. Through building social capital as a strategy, NLDC debaters have been able to network with successful debaters from Manila. Debaters from San Beda College and University of Santo Tomas, for instance, have actually trained and teamed up with NLDC schools in certain competitions. I argue then that NLDC's positioning is based on its alignment with Manila-based debate organizations through adapting their strategies.

NLDC positions itself in the national championships by aligning with Manila-based debate organizations through a) modelling, b) building social capital, c) adapting the debate strategies. I have discussed modelling and building social capital in the section of the analysis which talked about the strategies used by the NLDC. I will now focus on the debate strategies adapted by the NLDC. I am using the word *adapted* because an overwhelming majority of respondents agree that it is difficult to establish a "brand of argumentation" distinct for the NLDC. The strategies used by the NLDC were developed, shaped, and influenced by their exposure to debate competitions where majority of the participants are Manila-based debaters. In the process, NLDC members have incorporated the strategies they learned to their own debate regimen and practice.

Alignment with Manila-based schools has implications for the NLDC. First, since most of the debate models of NLDC members are from Manila, the strategies adapted are also learned outside the NLDC circle. Hence, when NLDC debaters win in competitions, they do not attribute their success to the NLDC per se. As one interviewee noted, debaters in Baguio City do not regard the NLDC as crucial to their achievements. Hence, the NLDC as a collective does not position itself consciously in the national debate scene. What exists are individual strategies and positioning of different debaters from Baguio City in representing their respective debate organizations.

The first step in which the NLDC positions itself in the national debate scene is thus through imbibing school pride and consciously

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representing one's institution in the best way possible. For instance, SLU debaters use the tag "*we are the North*" in their debate speeches, referring to SLU's position in the Cordillera. SLU also takes pride in its own debating practice when it joins competitions. Thus, members of the debate team credit individual achievements not to the NLDC but to themselves as debaters and the school or institution they represent. There is no incentive for individual members to enrich NLDC as a collective because they focus their efforts at winning for their respective institutions.

The commitment of debaters remains with the debate organizations they are part of and the schools they represent. Even as some debaters claim in their debate speeches that they represent the "North", this rarely connotes pride for the NLDC. If anything, the statement claims that a particular institution has outdone other debate teams in the Cordillera to be the best in the "North". To be fair, the same dynamics can be observed among Manila-based debate teams and it is exactly this kind of dynamics which can drive debaters and the debate organizations towards an individualistic mindset and away from a sense of community.

None of the debaters who were interviewed categorically stated that the NLDC was instrumental in their individual debate achievements measured through breaking (octo-finals, quarterfinals, semifinals, and grand finals) and awards (best speaker or debater). This suggests that NLDC still has a lot of work to do in instituting a training regimen, arranging regular training and interaction among Baguio City schools, tapping their alumni to help with training, sharing resources and expertise for the benefit of the community, and participating in all debate tournaments as an opportunity to hone skills. Enabling conditions within the NLDC would help create a mindset among debaters that the NLDC is contributed to their success.

While there is nothing wrong with a go-getter attitude in debating, debating is not a solitary activity. Within a debate team, members should cooperate to build a solid case, fulfill their speaker roles, and pre-empt their opponent's arguments. In this light, debate organizations in the NLDC must also cooperate if they are to strengthen the practice of debate teams in the Cordillera. An individualistic mindset furthers an exclusivist approach where best practices are not shared and effective debate strategies (expertise) remain to be in the arsenal of a few debate organizations. While Manila-based debate organizations are also as exclusive (if not more) as their counterparts in the Northern Luzon, balancing inclusive debate practices alongside exclusive interests for school pride and organizational gain will benefit NLDC and even the larger region. In a nutshell, there is thus no collective position established

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by the NLDC as a bloc. What exists are different strategies employed by the members for their own, personal gains.

The consistent attendance of Manila-based debating orgs in various IVs or debate opens has allowed debaters based in Manila to share each other's debate strategies, approaches to a motion (debate topics), and even arguments. Aptly observed by two interviewees in this project, debaters representing schools in Manila have a way of arguing which make it appear that they are on the same page about what certain arguments are expected in a motion (topic) and they have a way of delivering their speeches in a more presentable structure and packaging (manner). These advantages were honed through continued sharing of strategies and expertise of Manila schools.

Another factor that contributes to a lack of shared vision among NLDC members is the lack of common ground or experience. For instance, NLDC is composed of debaters set out to compete for themselves, their teams, and schools. While they are representing the Cordillera, ethnicity is not a factor in the debate experience of NLDC members. Only few NLDC debaters claim to be members of indigenous groups. What shapes their experience is the political dynamics that exists within the community. In fact, a common experience narrated by the interviewees in the study is how unfair some adjudicators/judges are in competitions.

Debate judges are likely to judge debaters from reputable schools more favorably compared to debaters from provincial, regional schools. The NLDC members are thus disadvantaged not because of their ethnicity but because of the schools they represent. Oftentimes, neophyte judges also focus on manner of delivery over content of speech. Thus, sophistication trumps substance. Hence, the participants in this study agree that during competitions, they lose to debaters from Manila because while their opponents may be saying the same arguments, they are more sophisticated in delivering their speeches and thus come off as more persuasive.

I argue that Manila-based debaters do not have the monopoly of sophisticated, structured argumentation. However, it cannot be denied that that success of an NLDC debater hinges largely on their ability to appropriate and adapt the styles and strategies of their Manila-based debate opponents and counterparts. There is thus a standard by which debaters are judged and this standard closely resembles, if not entirely shaped, by the debate styles, strategies, practices in the debate circuit of the center—Manila. This is the political dynamics I refer to which shape the debate experience of NLDC members. In sum, however, I argue that

while the NLDC forms part of the “other” in the debate circuit it has been part of for the longest time, the NLDC can establish its own circle where it gets to establish the rules towards becoming more relevant to the region it represents.

Establishing Relevance in the Cordillera Region

By relevance, I argue that the NLDC can engage more students and even professionals in the Cordillera region through debating. Another indicator of relevance would be the extent in which the NLDC can share the benefits of debating as a skill and practice to a wider audience. Finally, it can be said that the NLDC is relevant if it is able to build on its strengths to sustain a culture of critical thinking in the Cordillera region. The NLDC’s relevance can thus be attained through more inclusiveness in the practice and introspection about the process.

First, the NLDC needs to be more inclusive in the practice. By inclusive, I refer to the possibility of recruiting students who are members of indigenous groups in the Cordillera to be part of debate teams and organizations. UP Baguio can take the lead in this as it has a program for indigenous cultures. The large Cordilleran student population in SLU, UB, and UC can also be tapped if the debate teams in these schools are to encourage membership of IP students. While the NLDC acknowledges that ethnicity is not a factor in the debate experience, to have an IP student experience the rewards of debating through recruiting them as members of debate clubs is a value in and of itself. The rewards of long-term engagement in debating (2 years or more) include critical thinking, thinking on one’s feet, and improved delivery or articulation of thoughts.

Should IPs be hesitant to join debate teams, the NLDC can still target IP students by hosting, conducting, or organizing debate competitions specifically for IP students. The NLDC can set the criteria for who are qualified to join these competitions. Aside from making sure that the participants are IP students, the NLDC can also “indigenize” the topics. This means using motions (issues to be resolved in a debate) which relate to IP concerns such as ancestral domain, free and prior informed consent (FPIC), Cordillera autonomy versus federalism, representation of IPs in popular media, and other issues about IPs. The NLDC can even consider conducting debate competitions which use a specific language known to all the IP debate participants including the judges and the audience. For instance, conducting a debate competition where the medium to be used is Ibaloi and the debaters and judges are Ibaloi or at least know how to speak Ibaloi.

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The second recommendation I wish to make about how the NLDC can be relevant to the Cordillera region is through introspection about the process of debating. This study is an attempt to allow the NLDC debaters to make sense of their practice as debaters. I then propose a view of debating in line with James Carrey's definition of a ritual view of communication where communication is not only a product of transmission of messages through time but a process of shared meaning-making. I argue that this is a more appropriate perspective about debate because debating is not an end-goal that culminates in achievements or when one ceases to be a part of a debate team upon graduation, voluntary resignation in a debate club, or termination of membership in a debate team. As one interviewer noted, "one never really retires from debating" and this has reference to debaters who stayed in the debate scene even after their stint as collegiate debaters ended.

As a ritual, debating is then a process of initiation, negotiation, and renegotiation. It is a process of initiation where debaters do not simply become debaters. They are honed through practice and experience. A ritual view of debating thus demands the avoidance of any deterministic notion of who the debaters are. They do not possess a fixed set of characteristics and they cannot even be bound by "universal features". The good news then is anyone can be a debater, some are just more prepared than the others especially if they possess advantages such as command of the English language, if they are more articulate, trained to think on their feet, and have experience prior to college debate. However, when it comes to the skill of critical thinking, spotting argument, and leaps in logic, everyone is on equal footing. This is where the rituals of debating come in—training, education, and exposure through opportunities to compete—make someone a debater.

Debating is also a process of negotiation and renegotiation because debating as a ritual trains its participants to be mentally flexible. This means being able to debate two sides of an issue, regardless of what one personally believes in about an issue. This is the reason why debaters are perceived to have a liberal bias. As noted by an accomplished debater and alumnus of one of the country's most decorated debate organizations:

Liberalism is the default setting of a parliamentary debate. In a debating tournament, it is difficult to argue against human rights like free speech or to argue in favor of dictatorships. It is a bias, but it is a good one. (Claudio, 2016)

I argue that this is the beauty of debating—the opportunity to expose one's self to different sides of an issue. As a debater, one must be prepared to argue either the benefits (affirm) or costs (negate) of a

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particular social policy, one is trained to defend certain values that might not align with one's convictions. For instance, defending same-sex marriage in a debate about legalizing it in the Philippines even if one does not personally support the idea. Mental flexibility is then reinforced through debaters negotiating with their positions in certain issues. If they are able to argue the different sides of an issue, then they can also renegotiate their long-held beliefs.

Renegotiation allows debaters to revisit their beliefs which can result in either abandonment or reinforcement. Through reading and being able to argue the different sides of an issue, a debater can change his or her outdated beliefs for more progressive ones (abandonment). In itself, this is a value because the ability to listen and expose one's self to other people's opinions and arguments help avoid the creation of echo chambers where the loudest of voices and the most bigoted of statements sometimes prevail. Rituals require actors and these actors are bound by rules. Debating provides implicit and explicit rules about open-mindedness and espousing well-reasoned position that when followed, produce meaningful discourse and interaction.

Debaters rarely win on arguments based on stereotypes, biases, prejudices, and bigotry. The point here is that debaters do not suddenly become open-minded and liberal when initiated to debate. Instead, they acquire open-mindedness through unspoken debate rules which penalize ignorance and bigotry. This can only be positive for the Cordillera region. The NLDC, through its projects, can thus start to effect open-mindedness about certain issues in the Cordillera. For instance, initiating a discussion about the other side of the supposed benefits of Cordillera autonomy where a strong lobby exists in Baguio City. Open-mindedness is also called for in social issues confronting the Cordillera region such as the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality. Through issue fora, symposia, and competitions—practices which rituals afford—debaters in the Cordillera can start the conversation about changing the traditional or conservative views about masculinity in the region.

However, a debater can also solidify his or her beliefs (reinforcement) which can result in more conviction on the part of the debater. Conviction is needed for any debater because it will allow debaters to transcend the politics of competitive debating in favor of making debate an advocacy. In the case of the NLDC, if the debaters only get convinced that debating is more than just about winning (an end goal), then they are more likely to be convinced to use debating for a greater purpose—as an advocacy. The NLDC can start with an advocacy as simple and basic as imbibing open-mindedness among debaters in the region. The NLDC can do this by making debate a research-based

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practice where all sides of an issue are covered and presented. This means arguing with a purpose and not just arguing to win. The purpose is aimed at increasing awareness and equipping the audience with proper information which are often the requisite steps to rational decision-making.

Conclusion

A debate is a space for everyone with an opinion to speak out and be listened to. In a way, debates are venues for self-expression and at the same time, social cohesion. Healthy disagreements should be common. Debates are likened to dialogues where participants or parties respect each other's disparate voices. Pearce and Cronen agree that "dialogue can't be produced on demand but they can be experienced if we seek and prepare for it" (Griffin, 2012, p. 483). A shift in perspective from one that views debate as a competitive activity to a one that sees debate as a cooperative enterprise constitutes a ritual view of debating that will allow the NLDC to reach out to other parts of the region.

I will liken debates to Habermas' discourse ethics where he imagines an "ideal speech situation where people are free to speak their minds without fear or constraint". Habermas believes that any ethical conclusions reached in this ideal speech situation will be valid only when "(1) everyone has a chance to participate regardless of their status, (2) all participants exchange their views in a spirit of reciprocity and mutual understanding, and (3) their ethical judgments apply equally to everyone" (Griffin, 2012, p. 483). Ritual underscores the practice of debating as it continues to generate feelings of unity and identification among debaters.

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