As an educator today, I draw on the writings of University of Washington political science and education professor Walter Parker, who has noted that “engaged citizens do not materialize out of thin air. They do not naturally grasp such knotty principles as tolerance, impartial justice, the separation of church and state, the needs for limits on majority power, or the difference between liberty and license.” If our students are to understand the pressing issues of the day, they must be exposed to myriad viewpoints and able to synthesize information from multiple sources.

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Forensics challenges students through events in both speech and debate. In the discipline of platform speaking, students select a controversial subject and conduct extensive research before trying to persuade the audience. Competitors in extemporaneous speaking have 30 minutes to prepare a seven-minute response to a question, complete with source citations. Topics the National Federation of State High School Associations developed for extemporaneous speaking contests in 2008 included, Should public schools be allowed to segregate along gender lines? Should phone companies that aided in illegal wiretaps by the government be immune from prosecution? Should China relax its one-child policy?

In competitive debates, students do not choose which side they will defend. Most tournaments involve switch-sides competition, in which debaters defend the proposition (affirmative) and opposition (negative) sides an equal number of times. To prepare, student competitors must look at the issue through a nonpartisan lens or from multiple perspectives, thereby gaining a deep understanding of issues that confront our national (and world) leaders. Over several years of teaching and coaching debate, I have witnessed students shift their views on a host of topics as a result of their debate experience. Most often, they grow to acknowledge, accept, and empathize with those who hold opinions contrary to their own.

Students who hope to succeed in forensics must possess wide-ranging knowledge of current issues. It is not uncommon to catch my students reading from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, The Economist, and Political Science Quarterly, not to mention pocket copies of the Constitution, Common Sense, and inspirational books of quotations.

A few years ago, while driving home from work in Alaska, I received a call from a former student who was at a tournament in Florida. At the time, students commonly used Foucault’s writings to argue against federal action to alleviate the harms of the status quo. As the student launched into a description of how an opposing team had presented a unique twist on Foucault, I thought, “Man, I don’t know how I would answer that.” Before I had a chance to respond, he blurted out, “It was sweet. Do you know what we did?” He then explained how he drew on his understanding of readings from social ecologists, professors of intercultural communication, and John Stuart Mill to develop his own criticism of Foucault’s thoughts on power, knowledge, and discourse. The tournament judge commended both teams for developing new takes on a common argument.

Whether forensics is a mainstay in the curriculum, an extracurricular club, or used occasionally by teachers in the classroom, it has the power to inspire students to learn and to help them grasp the concepts we aim to instill.

Shawn Briscoe is debate coach and adjunct professor in the Department of Communication and Discourse Studies at the University of Alaska Anchorage and coaches speech and debate at South Anchorage High School.

In the fall of 1990, I somewhat reluctantly joined my high school debate team. My first debate focused on whether the United States should increase manned space exploration. I was completely lost; it seemed I had forgotten how to speak. Thankfully, I had a supportive community in my hometown of Nevada, Missouri, and a talented coach by the name of Tim Gore. I quickly found there is nothing quite like watching the faces in the audience as people realize you have taken control of the debate. I admit I became intrigued by the idea of intellectual combat.

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