Information Overload at the Hart House Debating Club

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INTRODUCTION

The curious student walks into the debating club meeting, not quite knowing what to expect. He notices debaters sitting around a long wooden table, discussing what they think the "resolution" should be. They decide that it will be "resolved: this house believes that the United Nations (UN) should allocate voting power to countries based on their populations." The curious student knows only a little about the UN and next to nothing about the "one state, one vote" controversy. He is asked whether he would like to debate. The curious student, feeling adventurous, decides to accept. He begins to discuss with his assigned partner how they should approach their arguments. They each scribble down notes while brainstorming.

After about fifteen minutes, the round of debate begins. The first speaker, known as the Prime Minister, stands up to speak. He delivers a clear, confident, smoothly flowing speech. He only glances down at his notes briefly and never interrupts his speech to consult them. It is now the curious student's turn to speak. He is feeling less than confident and, when he speaks, it is in a slow and somewhat unclear manner. He keeps his eyes on his notes throughout almost the entirety of his speech. Finally, he concludes his speech early and sits back down, feeling rather dejected. The curious student wonders how the Prime Minister was able to deliver such a flawless speech while barely even looking at his notes. The curious student decides that he, too, would like to acquire this impressive skill.

The introductory anecdote illustrates the author's first experience with debating in the summer of 2009. As a graduate student at the University of Toronto (U of T), he became interested in the Hart House Debating Club (HHDC) as a potential means of improving his lackluster public speaking abilities. This type of embarrassing first attempt at debating is not at all uncommon in the club, and its more experienced members, who are called "pros", have even learned to expect such moments from beginning debaters, who are called "novices." The pros, understanding that they were once also green, are generally willing to provide advice to the novices on how to improve their debating skills. An important aspect of this advice is how to improve one's notetaking abilities, which is the focus that this paper will take. Although there is no one universal style of notetaking that is objectively better than any other style, using concepts from the fields of information science and cognitive science, we can examine how certain debaters have used notetaking techniques successfully and how, conceivably, novice debaters might improve their notetaking skills by adopting similar techniques.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Case defines information overload as "a state in which too much information leads to a generalized state of anxiety and/or confusion." (p. 333, 2007) After observing many rounds of debate and analyzing debaters' notes, the author believes that he has witnessed this

phenomenon occurring at the HHDC. Furthermore, the author believes that he has experienced information overload first-hand while conducting participant observation. Makany *et al.* examined ways of enhancing cognitive performance via different notetaking techniques. (p. 619, 2009) For the purposes of this paper, we will concentrate on their notions of semantic compression and metacognition as a means of theorizing how struggling debaters might effectively deal with information overload.

SETTING AND METHODS

The HHDC has been around since the 1940s (Webb, 2003) and is open to students from all colleges and campuses at U of T. The author's student status ensured that he had no trouble gaining access to debating-related events. He had also been debating for about a year prior to beginning this study, and so useful connections with other debaters had already been established. The HHDC debaters tend to be undergraduate students ranging in age from 18-22, but plenty of graduate students are also involved. Political science, international relations, and law are probably the most popular areas of study for debaters, but it is not at all uncommon to find students in the club from less expected areas, such as medicine or information science. Although the HHDC features an eclectic mix of educational interests, the author has nevertheless found that student debaters tend to have something in common – braininess. The fierce intelligence of many of these student debaters is sometimes intimidatingly evident, especially for novices.

Fieldwork for this ethnographic study was conducted primarily at Hart House, the St. George campus student centre. The author also traveled as a novice debater to Montreal's McGill University for the 2010 Central Novice Debating Championships in early October. The author also conducted unobtrusive observation by sitting in on a number of British Parliamentary (BP) style debates while taking fieldnotes. The debaters' notes from these rounds were collected for analysis. BP style debating consists of eight debaters split into four teams of two and at least one judge. There are two sides, Proposition and Opposition, with four debaters on each side. Debaters are usually assigned the topic, known as the "resolution," by the judge and given about fifteen minutes to prepare their arguments before the round begins. Debate speeches usually have a seven minute time limit, which is enforced by the judges and other debaters banging on the table if the speaker begins to go on for too long. At the end of the round, the judges make their assessments and rank the teams from one to four.

Two semi-structured interviews with debaters were also conducted. Lofland & Lofland write that "a strategy for reducing error and bias is to select informants who are themselves positioned differently within the group." (p. 93, 2006) The author heeded this advice by deliberately selecting one novice and one pro as the interviewees. The first interview was conducted with 21-year-old Jason, "The Coach." Jason, who hopes to do a PhD in political economy, has coached business students at Toronto's Ryerson University in debating. The second interview was conducted with 19-year-old Brian, "The Novice." Brian, a history and politics student, started debating in high school. They each responded to the questions quite differently, even disagreeing about certain ideas. The strategic selection of informants, *(ibid.)* then, has been worthwhile in that it has resulted in a useful contrast in the ethnographic data.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
Information Overload

Eppler & Mengis make two key points regarding information overload that the author

wishes to explore. First, they write about quality: "modifying the quality of information can have great effects on the likelihood of information overload. Improving the quality (e.g., conciseness, consistency, comprehensibility, etc.) of information can improve the information-processing capacity of the individual, as he or she is able to use high-quality information more quickly and better than ill-structured, unclear information." (p. 331, 2004)

Second, they write about interruption: "information overload is especially likely if the process is frequently interrupted and the concentration of the individual suffers as a consequence." *(ibid.)* These ideas about information overload can be seen in the context of debating. While observing a round of debate on November 2, 2010, the author wrote about a first-time debater:

> Opposition Whip (OW) now stands up to speak. She speaks hesitantly and keeps her eyes on her notes at all times. She mostly holds them in her hand as she speaks, but puts them down on the table briefly. She does not make much eye contact, seems nervous, and takes long "silent chunks" of time to look at her notes before speaking. When she speaks, it is not very clearly. Government Whip (GW) stands up to offer a point of information (POI) and OW accepts it. She seems stumped by GW's POI and only responds with "good point". She concludes her speech early.

There are several key points that the author wishes to draw attention to from these fieldnotes. First, at least two of the first-timer's opponents in this round were also novice debaters who delivered similarly hesitant, unclear speeches. The fact that the first-timer, then, had to deal with the challenge of comprehending "ill-structured, unclear

information" *(ibid.)* while taking notes may have exacerbated information overload.

Second, information overload may have also been exacerbated here by the interruptive nature of points of information. POIs occur when one or more of the speaker's opponents stands up during the speech to deliver a retort or ask a question. The speaker does not have to accept the POI and can simply wave the person down, but merely standing up in front of a speaker can be very distracting for her, especially if she is a first-time debater. The suggestion by Eppler & Mengis that information overload is "especially likely if the process is frequently interrupted," *(ibid.)* then, seems consistent with what the author witnessed in this round of debate.

Finally, the "anxiety" and "confusion" components that Case emphasizes in his definition of information overload are almost painfully evident here. The author watched this first-time debater struggle in silence while staring down at her notes, trying in vain to come up with something to say. He recalled his own first experience with debating and immediately felt empathetic for her. He had also felt that anxiety, that nervousness, that confusion. While watching her, he came up with a term - "silent chunks" - to describe those awkward time delays in which the speaker is studying her notes instead of speaking. An analysis of the first-timer's notes reveals a long-form style in which her opponent's arguments are written out in full sentences. If the first-timer had instead employed the practice of "mental sifting" while taking notes, she may have at least been able to deliver a moderately better speech. We turn now to a discussion of this practice.

Mental Sifting

Makany *et al.* conducted a study in which they placed twenty-six volunteer mature students in a classroom lecture and compared their notetaking abilities. They had one half of

the group do linear notetaking, which proceeds in a straightforward, chronological fashion from the top of the page to the bottom. The other half did non-linear notetaking, which organizes ideas in more of a non-chronological, spatial fashion on the page. They found that non-linear notetaking usually did a better job than linear notetaking at forcing the students to compress full sentences into "semantically higher category levels," (p. 632, 2009) thereby improving their notetaking and, in turn, their learning capacity. We can see evidence of this forced encoding practice benefiting debaters. While observing a round of debate on November 9, 2010, the author wrote about a debater who won the 2009 Central Novice Debating Championships:

> She looks down at her notes while speaking, but not [for] very long. She makes plenty of eye contact and delivers her speech clearly. She often glances down at her notes while talking, but never interrupts her speech.

An analysis of this debater's notes reveals a very sparse and minimalistic style. Instead of writing down full sentences, she has condensed her opponent's arguments into very short units of words, such as "alienation by atheistic schools." No doubt, her opponent used many more words than that in delivering her point. The strategy to mentally encode arguments into short cues seemed to work very well for this debater, as she delivered a smoothly flowing speech. The Novice describes this process as "mentally sifting" the information, discarding what he thinks he does not need. As a contrast, we should look at another debater in that round who seemed to struggle a good deal more with his speech:

> He holds the notes in his hand the majority of the time. He fidgets with his phone during his speech and doesn't speak very clearly. He often reads from his notes while talking. He makes [some] eye contact, but mostly he is

reading directly from his notes. He is speaking slowly.

As with the first-timer, an analysis of this debater's notes reveals a long-form style in which his opponent's arguments are written out in full sentences, such as "non-Catholics going to Catholic schools are being harmed by being exposed to a message which attacks them as non-believers." It seems that this debater has not put any effort into condensing arguments into "semantically higher category levels," *(ibid.)* which may be a reason why he spent so much time looking at his notes while speaking. Makany *et al.* found that the initial cognitive effort of this forced encoding process paid off by increasing the "comprehension performance" of those who adopted it by 20%. *(ibid.)* It may be possible to suggest, then, that if the flustered debater worked more actively on this practice of mental sifting, he may be able to clean up his notes and, thereby, increase his chances of delivering a more coherent and convincing speech.

Metacognition

Makany *et al.* define metacognition as "the knowledge about knowledge that is truly a critical skill from the very beginning of our literate existence that reflects on the highest level of cognitive functioning in which the human notetakers need to be reflective and aware of their own abilities of recording information in writing." (p. 620) When asked if he is reflective about his notetaking, The Novice said "no," but then went on to admit, "though sometimes I do get lost a little. Not terribly but... sometimes I just have trouble finding things." The author's first-hand experience with participant observation has led him to believe that metacognition is a principle that can be very useful for debaters. Every September, the HHDC holds an event for new students interested in debating called Novice Training Day. At this event, only one style of notetaking is formally introduced – the "T" format in which the debater's points are written

on one side of the page, and their opponent's points are written on the other. The author adopted this style when it was formally introduced to him in September 2009. More often than not, while attempting to make sense of his notes, the author found that he would become flustered during his debate speeches. Nevertheless, after each round, he would not put a whole lot of thought into how he was actually taking notes because he did not necessarily consider the notetaking component of debating to be that crucial. Upon reading about the principle of metacognition in October 2010, however, he began to become more reflective about his notetaking practices.

Additionally, the author read about the importance of devising a notational system in an article by Lofland & Lofland. They write, "[one team of ethnographers] used quotation marks to signify exact recall, apostrophes to indicate verbal material of which they were less certain, and no markings when they could recall the substance but not the wording of what was said." (p. 113) Similarly, in thinking about metacognition, the author began to apply a notational system of quotation marks and brackets to his debating notes. The quotation marks were used to signify his opponent's arguments, while the brackets were used to signify his own arguments. The author feels that this clearer representation of different arguments in his notetaking has helped him improve the delivery of his speeches, as he has had an easier time making sense of his notes while speaking since adopting this technique. The author's practice of devising a notational system for his ethnographic fieldnotes actually paralleled and reinforced his attempts at devising a notational system for his debating notes. The fact that the author was conducting an ethnography, then, may have helped him get into this metacognitive mindset.

The author's first-hand experience with applying metacognition to his notetaking has been positive, so it may be reasonable to suggest that when notetaking is treated by debaters as less of an afterthought and more of an immediate concern, opportunities for improving one's debate speeches may be identified.

CONCLUSIONS

In his interview, The Novice made sure to emphasize that "having good notes alone isn't going to make you a good debater." The Coach, however, emphasized that "notetaking can have a significant effect on the organization of your speech." The author's first-hand experience with debating has convinced him that, while organized notetaking will not necessarily produce an excellent debater, finding a "cognitively compatible" (Makany *et al.*, p. 619) style of notetaking could only be beneficial for a debater's development.

It should be noted that there are many excellent debaters in the HHDC who seem to be good at the practice of mental sifting, and yet they take notes in a linear fashion. Makany *et al.*'s finding that non-linear notetakers are generally better than linear notetakers at mental sifting, (p. 632) then, is not immediately apparent in the context of debating. The Novice said he does not think the non-linear style could ever work for him because "it's too elaborate for debate," but The Coach mentioned that he knows of at least one debater who employs the non-linear style effectively. It cannot be definitively said, then, that non-linear notetaking would not work for many debaters without conducting more thorough research. A study comparing linear and non-linear notetaking similar to the one that Makany *et al.* conducted with students in lecture environments could instead be done with debaters in debate rounds, for instance.

After the standard "T" notetaking format is introduced to students at Novice Training Day, it is usually mentioned in passing that

each student needs to find the style of notetaking that suits them. But by only introducing this one style, each novice is encouraged to find their own individual style through the initial foundation of the "T" format. Perhaps certain students, though, would be more cognitively receptive to starting from the foundation of some other style of notetaking. It seems that exploring different styles of notetaking can be highly beneficial for a debater as he attempts to discover what is cognitively compatible for him. Rather than treating notetaking as a topic that does not necessarily require thorough reflection, then, debaters might find that seriously considering such principles as mental sifting and metacognition can help them to mitigate information overload, and, potentially, improve their debating skills.

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