What’s the Point?

Formal Education and its Purpose

by Peter Allevato

Children ask their parents this question all the time: “Why do I have to go to school?” or, “What’s the point of school?” Well, that is an excellent question, and hopefully, the parents have a good answer, because it is crucially important—particularly to competitors debating the first resolution for the 2015-16 year. What’s formal education for, and why do we bother with it?

According to Dictionary.com, formal is defined as: *being in accordance with the usual requirements, customs, etc.; conventional[[1]](#footnote-1),* and Education has two applicable definitions, each more applicable to one side of the resolution:

1. *the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life,* and
2. *the act or process of imparting or acquiring particular knowledge or skills, as for a profession.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The Department of Education has a mission statement that reads as follows: “ED's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”[[3]](#footnote-3) However, your judge is neither a dictionary nor a government agency. Chances are, your judge is going to be a person who perceives the purpose of education in his or her own unique way, which is most likely a combination of the above purposes. It is your job as the debater to cater to your judge and the purpose of education in a debate round. This will affect the debate round in a number of ways.

# Values

First and foremost, know that values that are in-line with education’s perceived purpose will likely carry more weight with a judge. A value like Empowerment, Success, or Preparation will feel more appropriate to a judge than values like Liberty or even Life that are less associated with education. While those values certainly carry a lot of oomph, they are unlikely to seem realistic to a judge, and therefore are unlikely to be preferred. It is very important that your value be the preferred value in a debate round, because it allows you to dictate where the impact lies—what truly matters in the round. Because the resolution is limited to the arena of Formal Education, values will be different than any other year.

Values that deal with equipping students for the future will likely be prevalent. These values include things like the above-mentioned Empowerment and Preparation, as well such values as Sophistication, Wisdom, Knowledge, or Education itself. Stay-at-home, homeschooling parents are deeply involved in preparing their own children for the future, and frequently deal with imparting wisdom or equipping their children for what lies ahead; these values will hold a strong sway over them. On the flipside, these values are susceptible to the approach that deals with guarantees: while preparing a student for the future increases their chances for success in life, it in no way ensures it.

For more results-driven minds, values that involve specific successes or achievements can set the scales tipping towards you. These values include but are not limited to: Job Aptitude, Wealth, Prosperity, Job Security, Success, and Application. With a value that conveys a certain amount of surety of worth, you can block would-be arguments that deal with guarantees. Working adults and alumni may be more attracted to these values, as they are actively reaping the tangible benefits (or detriments) of their particular form of education.

There are many options for values, and each debater will have their own preference, but considering the purpose of education while choosing your value will be crucial in the struggle for value superiority.

# Resolutional Analysis

Any pre-value argumentation should be grounded in-line with the purpose of education. If you provide a resolutional analysis point that states the round should be considered in the context of Education’s purpose, you immediately set, in the mind of the judge, the idea that you are fulfilling whatever Education is supposed to do.

When it comes to pre-value arguments, variety has always been the word, and it is no different with this resolution. Some options include: setting the stage for massive impacts from your value, stating that the purpose of education is in-line with your side of the resolution, or laying burdens for the round based on purpose. Definitions should be largely unaffected by the purpose of education, but you must make absolutely certain that you do not provide a definition of education that in some way conflicts with the purpose you set out for it. No debater wants to debate about education, defined as equipping students for the future, while trying to argue that the purpose of education is provide a learning experience that may or may not be beneficial to the future.

Remember that an RA, or a framework argument, or even the definitions can set the stage for the rest of round. Pre-value arguments have far reaching impacts and implications. Don’t let your opponent dictate the terms of the round. Sometimes, through the use of a pre-value argument, you can spike (disqualify an opponent’s arguments or stance) from the round before they even get a chance to make it.

# The Round as a Whole

Providing the purpose of education can clean up and clarify a round. Having an established goal that both sides are trying to fall in line with will provide better clash between yourself and your opponent. This will help the judge differentiate the two sides of the debate, and leave them less confused and better able to make the correct decision (hopefully in your favor).

Nobody debates at their best while trying to sort through murky, undefined arguments. You can cut out the clarification questions and arguments by keeping the round focused on the purpose of education. Whether it is through argumentation or cross-examination, if you establish an understanding with your opponent on the true focus of education, you will improve the experience for all involved.

However, while keeping the round focused it is important not to overdo it. Don’t act as though your opponent’s arguments don’t matter if they fall outside of education’s purpose. Maybe they don’t matter *as much as yours*, but all arguments matter to the judge. Don’t continuously pull the ‘purpose card,’ or it will appear you are using it as a stock argument that you had planned before your opponent said a word. Maintaining a balance of focus and variety is critical to both keeping the judge interested and catching your opponent off-guard.

So, when planning your arguments and writing your cases, don’t forget the power of that simple question: What’s the point? Always have your answer ready—and, if possible, give it before your opponent asks about it. The purpose of education is a powerful tool in both achieving victory and raising the quality of the debate.

1. "Definition of Formal." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 08 July 2015. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/formal>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Definition of Education." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 08 July 2015. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/education?s=t>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "About ED." *Overview and Mission Statement*. Department of Education, n.d. Web. 12 July 2015. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/landing.jhtml>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)