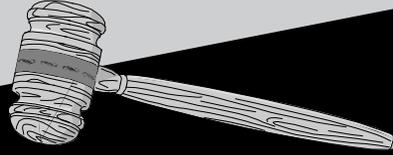


# Skills Taught Through Student Congress Training



by  
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Student Congress is a great way to teach many different skills that students need for several different events. The skills needed in Congress include researching, topic analysis, cross examination, speaking skills, etc. Therefore, participation in student Congress helps students in various other areas in debate and in life.

Since Student Congress must cover constantly changing issues and include many topics in any given tournament, Student Congress participants must be well-versed in current events. Their research starts with reading the latest edition of a news magazine every week, having a subscription to a national newspaper and keeping an eye on the day's events. It continues with more in-depth reading of economics and politics from people such as Thomas L. Friedman and Joseph S. Nye. What the students prepare one week might have to change the next due to changes in the world around them. Therefore, they must constantly keep up with both domestic and international affairs and understand the concepts that underlie them.

When my students performed at a recent Rotary meeting, the Congress students asked to take topics from the audience. They were thrown some softballs and asked for something harder. Finally satisfied with a foreign relations topic, the lead speaker gave himself about 30 seconds and then began to speak. The Rotarians were awed as he gave in-depth analysis with flawless delivery. Then the next student got up and gave a rebuttal speech tearing the first one apart. Again, they were awed. The wealth and depth of knowledge they have on many important issues is amazing for anyone at any age. It comes from having to be ready on either side of the plethora of topics available to Congress.

At the same time, Congress has been criticized for not having longer speeches to encourage in-depth analysis. But by the very nature of the shorter speech, students must learn to eliminate frivolous arguments and narrow their debate to the most important factors from the first moment. There is no time to have tangents or information that will be discarded later. Like a short story, every sentence must be important to the overall effect of their speech. Choosing the most unique and interesting arguments, sometimes with only minutes of preparation time, is an amazing talent and skill that can be carried over to everyday life.

Of course, Student Congress is a unique event due to the political aspect it entails. For some, those politics are an instant turn off; for others it is a challenge they love to tackle. For me, it was both. When I first started coaching, I was appalled that the final winner of Student Congress was selected by student vote. I had an outstanding student who came in first by judges at one tournament and end up fourth after the voting. It made me angry beyond belief.

As I began to understand the event more, I realized that part of what makes Congress special and great is the student voting. Students not only have

to learn the research skills and speaking skills of many other events, they also must learn how to win friends and influence people. I have found that it is an event where the nice guy can win, by actually being nice as well as good. Students spend years working with each other, helping each other to win and then end up with votes on their side. These things do not happen overnight. The process of building alliances and friends in Congress is a long and arduous one, but it teaches students the power of integrity and consistency. Students who are consistently voted up are usually those who are not only good at what they do but are honest in their dealings with others. Students who are willing to work across schools to better each other actually benefit. Students from other teams actually get together to go over legislation and help each other process arguments, even the night before final rounds. How many events can say that?

Congress also teaches students that they must be inclusive in their dealings with others. At a final round posting of nationals this past year, I watched one of my students write down the names of the people also in finals that he did not know yet. He needed to go meet them all. Why? To get their votes. No one in the room was less important than any other person in the room that day. He knew what he needed to win and he set out to get it. Does this always work? No. Students do actually vote for who they think is the best speaker despite the politics. After many years of tabbing student Congress in Florida, I have found that, despite my experience with my student early in my career, most of the time the judges and the student vote are in agreement. Not all the time of course, but often enough to see that the students do want those who are best in the event to walk away with the awards. But the process they are learning of building alliances, meeting people and working with others is all part of the political process in not only government but also in business. Think how far ahead they will be from this experience.

As a coach, I love tabbing and running Student Congress. I get the opportunity to know students from different schools from around the state. Seeing them in this environment is a completely different experience than just judging them in rounds. Debate students are a unique breed of kid. They spend much of their free time doing extra work and then choose to spend their weekends in an academic endeavor. Talking with students between Congress sessions and in late night preparation meetings is as fun and inspiring as watching them in rounds. Most of them will go on to be leaders in whatever field they choose. I only wish more people could see Student Congress, really all forensic students, in action.

**(Kathi Wells** started the debate program at Winter Springs High School, FL nine years ago. She is a diamond coach and teaches English.)

