Debate and Debating Strategies: A Tool for Re-branding the Youths in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract
This work is an attempt at exploring debate and debating strategies as a tool for re-branding the youths in Nigerian Universities. Efforts were made towards explaining the concept of debate, the forms and its importance, Nigeria’s language policy and the choice of English language as a medium of instruction in Nigeria. The relevance of proficiency in the English language as it concerns debating is also discussed. Further, this paper also takes a critical look at the concept of branding and re-branding; re-branding in Nigeria and debate and re-branding of youths in Nigerian universities.

1. Introduction
The way a nation defines its youths is related to the objectives, conditions and realities that exist in that country. In Nigeria, youths are referred to as persons of ranging from ages ranging from 18 to 35, and who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2001). They are the most active, most vulnerable and also most volatile segment of the population in terms of emotional, socio-economic and most other aspects of human existence. They are regarded as the future of every nation. But in Nigeria, this segment of the population is confronted with problems of indiscipline, moral decadence, cult activities, political manipulations, lack of role model, poor education, unemployment and under employment, to mention only these. These have predisposed them to engaging in nefarious activities that are tarnishing the image of the country. Those in the universities are most challenged by these problems and seem to be championing some of the ills outlined above.

It is the responsibility of the government to constantly address the needs of the youths through mobilization, enlightenment, and appeal to their conscience, reorientation and training. Several attempts have been made by several regimes to improve the conditions of the youths and inculcate in them various developmental plans but these efforts seem to have little or no significance in the face of the problems. Some of the efforts include: national Youth Service Corps programme, vocational training programmes, Citizenship and Leadership Development Centre at Jos, Plateau State, establishment of Ministry of Youths, Sports and Culture, etc. In September 2004, the government reiterated her commitment towards addressing one of the major problems of the
youths, which is quality education. This was so important that the 47th Session of the International Conference on Education, Geneva was entitled, “Quality Education for All Young People: Challenges, Trends and Priorities”. In recent times through the rebranding Nigeria project, the government has also not lost sight of the youths in tertiary institutions.

This work therefore looks at how debate, as one of the tools of learning can be exploited in re-branding our youths in the Nigerian universities as one of the ways of creating a better image for our dear country, Nigeria.

2. The Concept of Debate

It is a known fact that people tend to hold their views supreme unless proven otherwise. This goes to say that for two or more parties to agree on a particular thing or situation, there must have been some elements of argument either overtly or covertly. In other words, there must have been some atoms of argument. Debate is a formal, oral confrontation between two individuals, teams, or groups who present arguments to support opposing sides of a question, generally according to a set form or procedure (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010).

There are various forms of debate that may include: (i) Parliamentary Debate, (ii) Lincoln-Douglas Debate (also called value debate), (iii) Cross Examination Debate (also called policy debate or team debate), (iv) Academic Debates. Debate is about decision-making. Our lives are filled with decisions to make. Some are simple and relatively unimportant, like what to have for dinner, or what to wear to an occasion. Other decisions are more complex and with a lot at stake, like what car to buy, which university to attend, whether to take a job, or whom to marry. In all of these cases our lives, communities, etc are improved by better decision-making. It is also about eloquence, which has come to be the hallmark of a learned individual.

However, for a debater to be effective and make informed and persuasive communication, there is the need to speak the language that is understood by the vast majority of the people as in the case of Nigeria which is blessed with a multiplicity of languages and ethnic groups with associated cultural differences. Debate enables students to express their views effectively and to respond cogently to arguments with which they disagree. In addition, students who often the most well read and well informed in their grade level. The scope of their studies allows them to take part in a truly worldwide examination of the issues facing all people.
A number of uses for school debate have been reported in the literature. These include: (i) starting discussions on controversial or difficult topics (Frederick 1981), (ii) improving the skills that students bring to respective courses (Wentlaff 1988), (iii) sharpening argumentation skills (Sinonneaux 2002), (iv) teaching critical thinking (Leeman 1987), (v) using debate as introductory exercises for other skills to be learned later (McClish 1988), (vi) correcting deficiencies that students currently possess but need to improve (Rothenberg, Fraser, and Berman 1980), (vii) teaching ethical principles as part of specific course content (Michael & Mitchell 2003).

Numerous benefits are reported in the literature for using debate in the college classroom. These include examining both sides of issues in a thorough and fair manner (Mooney 1991; Ingalls 1985), promoting gender equality and advancing feminist perspectives (Elliot 1993; Bruschke & Johnson 1994; and Haffey 1993), promoting liberal art values in the curriculum (Rohrer 1987), improving students’ communication skills (Garrett, Hood, & Schoener 1996), helping students to overcome their fears (Gersten 1995), increasing active student involvement in the learning process (Crone 1997), advancing critical thinking skills to new levels which likely could not be achieved via other methods (Colbert & Biggers 1987), and empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning, rather than being instructor dependent (Frederick 1987). As a unifying theme, debate has the potential to free students by helping them to think for themselves.

Debate protocol comes in many forms, and there does not appear to be one procedure, which best suits all classroom scenarios. A traditional format typically contains first affirmative, first negative, second affirmative, and second negative speeches. These are followed by first negative, first affirmative, second negative, and second affirmative rebuttals (Firmin 2007). Formal debates, as held in schools, societies, or on radio or television, generally conform to the following procedures: the topic is stated as a positive resolution—for example, “ Strikes Should be Outlawed in the Higher Institutions”; two teams, usually of two members each, argue for and against it; each team receives equal time, a first period—usually 10 to 15 minutes for each speaker—to present its side and then a shorter period to rebut the opposing side; the order of speakers alternates by team, with the affirmative side initiating the argument and, as a rule, the negative side initiating the rebuttal; arguments take the form of contentions supported by evidence, and in the rebuttal, though
new evidence may be introduced, no new contentions may be raised; a 
neutral moderator acts as chairman of the debate.

3. English Language Proficiency as a Tool for Effective Debating

The multi-lingual and multi-cultural nature of Nigerian polity on the 
one hand and the absence of a national unifying indigenous language on 
the other has led to the adoption of English language as a medium of 
intra-national and international communication (Fakeye 2006). The 
language has become the centre of the country’s education. The language 
is the medium of instruction for most school subjects from the primary 
school level to the university. This is in addition to being a compulsory 
school subject that must be passed at all levels of education in Nigeria 
(Ajufo 2007). The poor performance of students in the in language at 
public examinations in recent times has been explained as a major cause 
of the decline in academic achievement and standard of education in 
Nigeria (Fakeye and Ogunsiji 2009). It does not end there because poor 
performance in other subjects is blamed on the weakness in the English 
language as it is the medium through which the other subjects are 
conveyed to the learners.

A lot of empirical evidences have indicated the strong relationship 
between overall academic performance and the proficiency in a 
particular language used in teaching of the subjects involved (See Fakeye 
and Ogunsiji, 2009; Gitomer, Andal & Davison, 2005; Vinke & 
Jochems,1993). In a study by Feast (2002), there exists strong positive 
relationship between English language proficiency and performance at 
the university as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA). Ajibade 
(1993) found a significant positive relationship between proficiency in 
English and achievement in French among Nigeria Secondary School 
students. These findings agree with that of Stern’s (1992) discovery t 
that the weak overall language ability of Iranian undergraduate students 
affects drastically their academic success in the university semester 
examinations.

Therefore, proficiency in English language is a veritable tool in 
debating. Good knowledge of the language is needed to enhance 
academic development of the student. Debate is an excellent activity that 
engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic productions. In 
addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking, reading and writing 
practices, debate is also highly effective for the development of 
argumentative skills for persuasive writing. For an individual to sound 
persuasive, he or she must be able to communicate effectively in the
language. Therefore it will not be out of place to say that debating and English language proficiency go hand in hand.

4. The Concept of Branding: The Nigerian Model

A brand is the identity of a specific product, service, or business. A brand can take many forms, including a name, sign, symbol, colour combination or slogan. The word brand began simply as a way to tell one person's cattle from another by means of a hot iron stamp. So simply put, it is about creating uniqueness of a particular thing. It is the personality that identifies a product, service or company (name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them) and how it relates to key constituencies. Branding has traditionally been associated with products and services, rather than with countries, places and cities (Nwora 2006). Global companies and corporations and their marketing communications agencies have continued to create and use branding as a distinguishing and strategic competitive factor in the market place, and also in the fierce market drive for consumers.

Presently, it has become so common of governments, countries and institutions embracing branding in a bid to enhance their profile before the whole world, which Nigeria is a case in point. This however is also done to attract foreign direct investment, improve tourism and trade and disabuse the minds of the international community of negative impressions they might have of a particular people. When something is to be rebuilt, it means it has degenerated from its original structure (Akunyili 2010). There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria has terrible image internationally. No thanks to her reputation as one of the most corrupt nations in the world, coupled with other socio-political issues that have greatly affected its global image and have directly impacted on its attractiveness as a potential investment and tourist destination.

According to the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria still ranks as the third most corrupt country in the world in a survey of 146 countries, coming only ahead of Haiti and Bangladesh. Some Nigerian citizens including the members of the political class have also not helped matters with their ever increasing corrupt and fraudulent practices; these fraudsters are known locally as 419 people, named after the section in Nigeria’s constitution which deals with advance fee fraud. The new wave scammers comprising young boys and girls (mainly university students) are called Yahoo boys and girls, as
a result of their information technology (IT) dexterity and their penchant for perpetrating the scams using the internet, constantly sending unsolicited scam e-mails using Yahoo and other free e-mail websites to targets all over the world, promising them spurious and ludicrous financial deals and marriages.

Given such deplorable situations, the Federal Government of Nigeria initiated “The Re-branding Nigeria Project”, which is an effort, according to Akunyili (2010), directed at correcting the perception of the poor image foisted upon Nigeria by the international community and given flesh by bad behavior of a few of us both inside and outside the country. But, perhaps, it is worthy of mention that the present effort is not the only attempt by the government to address these social ills in order to improve her profile internationally. There have been some programmes - Ethical Revolution, War Against Indiscipline (WAI), MAMSER, Heart of Africa - all geared towards improving the country’s image. Some failed and some were not sustained.

The “Re-branding Project”, as stated further by Akunyili (2009), is anchored on attitudinal change, re-orientation, revival of our beautiful old cultural values, and instilling a renewed spirit of patriotism and hope in all Nigerians. It is a project meant “to inspire a rebirth in the country’s belief system, repackage Nigeria and present her to the world in a more acceptable manner” Akunyili, (2009)

4. Debate and Re-branding the Youths in Nigerian Universities

The importance of re-branding cannot be over emphasized, moreso as it concerns the youths in Nigerian universities. This can be effectively done through the application of debate and debating strategies. Unexamined life, according to Socrates (470BC -399BC), is not worth living. It is through debate that series of issues and problems confronting individuals and society at large are brought to the fore and examined critically. Typical examples as it affects a nation are constitutional debates, legal arguments in the law courts, etc. Suffice it to say that there hardly exists any field of human endeavour without its own inherent debates. It is from these debates that issues are thrashed, wrong notions are corrected and perceptions of individuals changed. Debate is a veritable tool in re-branding the youths in Nigerian universities. This is important given the untoward perceptions of the youths in Nigerian universities.

It has been established that debate teaches ethics, self confidence, critical thinking, tolerance, ability to research properly, conquering of
stage fright and effective communication to mention these few qualities expected of a well educated individual. Re-branding is about identity-problem-solving. The engagement of youths in debate will necessitate the acquisition of the above mentioned qualities. This will in no small measure disabuse the perception of the international community towards the youths in Nigeria and change the attitude of the youths towards the ills associated with them.

6. Conclusion

It is an established fact that debate teaches students the ability to think critically. Logical reasoning and proper analysis of situations have been the problems confronting many youths in Nigerian universities. This could only explain why so many are involved in internet scams in recent times. With quality debate, this situation could have been nipped in the bud as most would have known before hands the repercussions of such crime. Also with debate, the students’ performances in certain courses are improved. Courses on entrepreneurship are not divorced from these. Most importantly, ethical principles and self confidence are products of school debate. Good understanding of ethics predisposes students to respect core societal values, which at present are found wanting amongst the youths and which also happen to be among the core objectives of the federal government’s “Rebranding Project”. Furthermore, most university graduates are not employable because of the fact that they lack self confidence due to little or no participation in school debate.

On the basis of the foregoing, we recommend that debating exercises should not be an exclusive preserve of students who belong to the Nigerian Debating Society. The National University Commission (NUC) should include debate as part of the curriculum for all the courses offered by Nigerian universities. Debating materials and resources should be provided for all the departments and students should be encouraged to make use of them. Government should liaise with the university administrators to provide motivational supports to the debaters (winning teams) in form of trophies, materials, scholarships, etc. This will encourage ardent participation in the exercise. Massive advertisement should be carried out across schools and in the media so that the public can participate for effective re-branding. The government and universities should map out programmes and topics of debates that will include intra- and inter- university debates where critical issues affecting the image of the youths both nationally and internationally will be
debated live on television and radio. Such academic exercises will go a long way in reaching out to the entire Nigerian youths and to the general public.

References


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