

## THE VALUE OF FORENSICS RESEARCH: THE DIRECTOR OF FORENSICS' VIEW

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Identifying the value of forensics research, whether from the perspective of a director of forensics or a university administrator, is difficult because of the uncertainty we have over why we do forensics research. Unfortunately, the skeptical, and perhaps prevailing, view is that we do it mainly for job security. "As a new generation of directors seeks jobs and tenure, they take advantage of the opportunity to publish articles that establish the norms for the events," writes Murphy ("Separate" 117). Ironically, Murphy's comments are found in an article suggesting how we can improve forensics. Thus, the confusion: is forensics research generated to improve the activity or to improve the job security of its sponsors? Although the dichotomy I establish is somewhat forced—job security and a desire to improve forensics are not mutually exclusive goals—I offer it to draw attention to the fact that we can overlook a valuable resource for our students and our activity if we think of research articles in forensics as merely tools to gain tenure. Accordingly, in the following paragraphs I attempt to highlight the means by which forensics research can strengthen programs, and by extension, the community.

First, forensics research assists coaches by offering perspectives for approaching the various events. Most of us, if we are so fortunate, completed only one class that concerned issues involved with directing a forensics program. Given the limited time available for such a course and the myriad of issues to discuss, we likely learned much of our profession through trial-and-error as graduate students. Consequently, our ideas of what and how to teach our students are picked up from our mentors and what we see succeeding at tournaments.

Forensics research, fortunately, provides us with additional perspectives for coaching—many of them offered by opinion leaders in the forensics community. The *National Forensic Journal*, for example, is filled with articles outlining methods to approach the coaching of various individual events. Reynolds and Fay discuss the interaction of the classical canons of invention and memory in impromptu speaking; Dreibelis and Redmon explore means of presenting a serious theme throughout an after dinner speech; Swarts explains the function of the introduction in oral interpretation events while VerLinden encourages

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critical decision-making in the compilation of an oral interpretation event; Aden and Kay as well as Crawford suggest an approach to improving the educational value of extemporaneous speaking.

Perhaps the most helpful role of forensics research involves probably the least understood and most debated event, rhetorical criticism. Most scholars agree that composing a "professional," thorough rhetorical criticism that is under ten minutes when presented orally is next to impossible. As a result, substantial confusion arises when we seek to tell our own students and other students (through ballots) what constitutes an effective criticism. While there is certainly no universal standard of quality criticism, several articles exist that illuminate components of a solid rhetorical criticism speech (Benoit and Dean; Dean; German; Kay and Aden; Murphy, "Theory"; Rosenthal). These and other articles provide a plentiful harvest of ideas to consider when coaching rhetorical criticism.

Second, forensics research provides a valuable resource for students. The cost of a subscription to each of the major forensic journals is minimal and gives students access to the judging philosophies of some of the community's opinion leaders—philosophies that students will not find on the brief, context-specific ballots they receive at tournaments. In addition to the approaches to the various events (noted in the previous point), students can learn about the evolution of events like oratory (Sellnow and Ziegelmüller) to discover what is "cutting edge" in the activity, explore the advantages and disadvantages of using original material in oral interpretation (Endres; Green; Lewis), and how to properly use evidence in a speech—a skill we frequently take for granted since Frank notes the widespread improper use of evidence in a national final round of persuasive speaking.

The availability of these resources is especially important for those programs working without a full-time director of forensics. Additionally, directors can direct advanced students' knowledge of why they are creating performances in a particular manner. Since most all of our current directors of forensics were at one time undergraduate competitors, we are well-served to encourage the understanding of forensics pedagogy and scholarship at the undergraduate level.

Third, forensics research enhances student and coach understanding of the connection between theory and practice. Although some articles in individual events research ground themselves in and/or develop communication theory, the primary beneficiaries of theory-based research are students who participate in debate. A recent issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, for example, devoted itself to presenting various perspectives on counterplans (Herbeck et al.; Panetta and Dolley; Perkins; Solt; Walker). In a similar vein, Gass critiqued the

growing use of the narrative perspective in academic debate. Topicality articles are also a source of theory/practice ideas for students participating in debate (Shepard). Finally, Allen and Kellerman studied whether disadvantages taught how to argue but not how to persuade.

The preponderance of theory/practice research in debate is, of course, partially a function of the historical, interactive, and argumentative nature of the activity. Still, individuals engaged in individual events research would do well to enhance the quality and quantity of such research in their realm. While projects that suggest what is effective can offer theoretically valuable insights, the focus of much of the research is still on effectiveness—"this is what we should be doing." In other words, much individual events research tells coaches and students how to fit in with the status quo instead of questioning the practices produced by the status quo. Part of the blame lies in the "inbreeding" that occurs among the most successful programs in the country. As Murphy notes, many of the coaches of the most successful programs earned their degrees at other successful programs ("Separate" 116). Second, the competitive nature of the activity tends to promote practices that are successful. The after dinner speech that is without a first point of definition, for example, is rare. Certainly, inbreeding and desire for success may in fact be generating practices that are theoretically sound but perpetuating those practices without increased self-reflection may prevent improvement of the activity.

Forensics research can and should be more than a means to attain job security. There is certainly no use in denying that any individual is not better off without a record of research, forensics or otherwise. Yet, those of us who have chosen forensics as a profession possess a special obligation, I believe, to produce research that enhances the practice of communication. More than any other interest group in our discipline, forensics concerns itself with the use of communication in public. Accordingly, our efforts should focus on what can be done to enhance the communication education our students receive in forensics. And, as directors of forensics, we should do our best to see that our students are exposed to the ideas of ourselves and our colleagues.

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