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Copycat Forensics: How Social Learning Problematizes Intercollegiate Forensic Performances

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights noticeable problems stemming from students adopting forensic norms without critiquing practice. Although many pedagogically sound reasons account for some structural similarities in events, many performance choices enacted in forensic competition are not grounded in educational principles but are learned and fostered through social learning. Currently, students can achieve forensic success without developing sound reasons for performance choices. Uncovering the ways in which students, judges, and coaches, produce and reproduce copycat performances can improve overall academic and competitive rigor.

Keywords: Social Learning, Forensic Pedagogy, Forensic Judging, Forensic Research

Introduction

A typical weekend evening for many forensic educators involves discussing weekend on-goings with students. Often during these conversations, I am taken aback when I hear students state that an event "works" a certain way or that they would be successful if they incorporated a "buzz phrase" like other winning speeches they have seen. I have often wondered what my students are learning when they watch their peers. Many forensic coaches, myself included, encourage students to observe and learn while at tournaments. Subsequently, students often witness, emulate, and adopt the behavior of fruitful forensic speakers and speeches. Paine (2005) argued that adherence to forensic norms regulate not only the perception of how events should be performed, but that they also infiltrate all aspects of forensic culture. Our students pick up on most aspects of forensic culture without coaches present.

Every organizational culture has a unique set of nuanced behavioral norms. Intercollegiate forensic individual event competition is no exception. Individual events are not only framed by competition rules but are often evaluated on how well one executes forensic norms. Many forensic scholars have contextualized how norms alter competition e.g., Billings, 1997, 2002; Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003; Carmack & Holm, 2005; Cronn-Mills & Golden,

1997; Duncan, 2013; Epping & Labrie, 2005, Gaer, 2002; Morris, 2005; Ott, 1998; Paine, 2005; Ribarsky, 2005; VerLinden, 1997. Adoption of norms is a primary facet of observational learning thus presenting a problematic issue; our students are modeling themselves after each other but are doing so without critically asking why they are copying their peers, or if they even should.

Coaches should to stop treating what other teams are doing as isolated from what their own students are doing. Although every team fosters their own team philosophies and pedagogies, students are proliferating and incorporating socially learned traits into their performances. Every performance a coach is mentoring has the potential to ripple into other forensic performances from other teams. When one student pushes the boundary of an event it can soon become a cascade moment for individual event participation and multiple programs experiment with events and norms. Therefore, forensic students should develop as discerning observational learners, yet it would seem that they are losing the performance pedagogy behind observed forensic presentations, which should spur more academic discussion among students, judges, and coaches about what students are performing at tournaments but more importantly what it means for intercollegiate forensic competition.

Most students are capable of evaluating and correcting their behavior. However many are lacking the critical ability to question their own behavior; this lack of critique towards socially learned behavior is problematic not only for our activity but is also disservice to the alumni we produce. This paper will problematize Social Learning Theory and then address future potentialities for the activity to move beyond copycat forensics.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory is a very broad theoretical framework that would be difficult to explore in its' entirety, therefore I shall apply multiple facets of the principle to forensic students and judges.

Students. The inclination for our students to inspect other competitors and adapt to the norms of the activity are inherent to human socialization behavior. Rendell, Boyd, Cownden, Enquist, Eriksson, Feldman, Fogarty, Ghirlanda, Lillicrap, Laland (2010) found that copying conduct is natural and effective in competition settings. Part of succeeding in any field requires learning how to not only navigate the norms, but to perform them well. Peteraf and Stanley (1997) stated that the desire to effectively navigate norms stems from reducing uncertainty in social interactions. Therefore, students want to follow forensic norms in order to better predict performance outcomes.

Forensic norms are uniquely scrutinized during performances, i.e. body movement, pacing, off stage focus, and topic selection (Epping and LaBrie, 2005). Therefore, in round performances serve as locations of embodied norms. Students might observe other competitors paying particular detail to bodily performance and interpret the success of other participants as reason to alter bodily performance, often resulting in a blind adoption of norms. Carmack and Holm (2005) reasoned that socializing to the conventions are at the forefront of forensic group

interaction because the human dynamics i.e. competitor, teams, judges, alter frequently. Norms are a more stable facet of the activity for students to observe and execute with familiarity. Therefore, students that desire success develop a grasp of the activity as soon as possible often achieved by observational learning. Observation is the primal tenet of social learning theory. Bandura (1969) reasoned that complex catalogues of communicated behavior could be understood through observing behavior. In many ways, social learning is the most direct form of knowledge students develop about forensic culture. Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch (1998) defined the optimal shift in behavior based on observed actions of preceding individuals as an informational cascade.

Informational cascades according to Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch (1998) develop when individuals are placed in similar situations, with similar available means, with similar alternative actions, while facing similar benefits or payoffs, much like a forensic tournament. The simple surveying of peers often requires students to develop their interpretation of what successful competitors look like until they find their own way. This exercise of trial and error is a form of modeling socially learned behavior. Much like a cascade, observations flow from competitor to competitor. What starts as an individual performance choice, can become forensic norm. Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) maintained that students develop self-value through comparison. Competitors will frequently self-examine and choose to either adopt or defy conventions. Ladd and Mize (1983) articulated that students are engaging in a social learning process when they alter concepts or performances as a response to adjust outcomes. If a forensic competitor earns success at a tournament than other students are likely to adopt the behavior of that winning student. If the copied behavior bodes well for other students competitively than copying becomes reinforced behavior in forensic competition.

Students perceive tournament success as endorsement of, good and bad, performance choices often attributing competition success to the wrong reasons. It would then lead a student to reason that they have indeed learned how to win. Compounded by what Monaco and Martin (2007) characterize as unique feeling of specialness the millennial generation experiences from competitive success in extra-curricular activities students are prompted to perpetuate successful choices in lieu of academically sound choices. Swift (2008) elaborated: "Unfortunately, trophies can become a greater reward than individual and collective integrity" (p. 7). Improperly citing sources, audience pandering, milking the moment, and occasional flubs can easily be misinterpreted by competitors as behavior to emulate, thus reinforcing problematic messages to self-evaluating students. These competitive experiences, if unexamined, become dogmatic principles that students share.

Unfortunately, student audience members often observe without guidance, and develop forensic conventions into doctrine when the comparatively self- evaluate. Sellnow (1994) argued experiential education required grounding in theoretical principles in order to be effectively applied in real world situations. Even more problematic is when students bypass valuable self-reflection. However, Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch (1998) found problem when an informational cascades develop into herding, or the propensity to rely on others for information

rather than critical self-evaluation. Forensic competitors too often fall prey to herding behavior. Fully observable herding behavior is achieved when in round performances are subject to the same unspoken nuances. Olson (1989) observed that the norms stifled forensic innovation. To a degree, this observation stands.

Many events do seem to fit into patterns; however some of those patterns are grounded in pedagogy such as a teaser in an interpretation event before an introduction as it functions as an Attention Getting Device for an interpretation event. However, the concept of a teaser seems to be less and less grounded in this pedagogy as students will finish their introduction after three minutes have passed. Students seem to understand that they need to provide some literature up front in order to get the audience invested in the speech, but simultaneously seem the lack the ability to understand when a performance is being teased and fully immersed. It should be at that point when a coach steps in, if they see one of their students with such a long "introduction" and should begin asking questions. If a student in a public speaking class were as verbose in an introduction/ attention getting device it would presumably be reflected in a dropped grade. In this particular instance, the norm is evolving outside of pedagogical principles.

Herding most likely occurs when students espouse uninformed anecdotal advice with canonical ethos. These interactions were humorously described by Perry (2002) as picking up information from "the streets" (p.72). Students drawn to this activity have a tendency to enjoy communicating and relish in the opportunity to share what they know, emphatically. Furthermore, Peteraf and Shanley (1997) contended that developing mutual understandings are critical to establishing group identity. While students sharing experiential knowledge helps establish community rapport the act simultaneously perpetuates herding. Walker (2011) characterized experiential knowledge as wanting "to leave how a student interprets their experience open for the student to figure out" (p. 9). I value this approach however broadcasting personal experiences among competitors often becomes shared unquestioned "rules" for events. A laissez faire approach to norm adoption problematizes what students learn from forensic competition. Blind adherence to norms often manifests in book opening and closing techniques, speech voice, unnatural pausing, and too much disclosure for topic selection. Norms in this vein are nontransferable skills outside of forensic participation and accepting forensic norms as standard without a critical interrogation only entrenches reproductions of dominant cultural ideologies.

Judges. Many forensic scholars have laid the groundwork for evaluating judging practices: Jensen, 1988; Klosa & Dubois, 2001; Mills, 1991; Morris, 2005; Nelson, 2010; Ott, 1998; Outzen, Youngvorst, & Cronn-Mills, 2013; Ross, 1984; VerLinden, 1986. Forensic norms are culturally constructed and inscribed through ballots. Scott and Birkholt (1996) clarified that forensic judges are subject to inconsistent judging paradigms that stem from personal biases. Klosa and Dubois (2001) explained that ballots functionally evaluate rounds and provide educational feedback for students. However, ballots can serve a third function: behavior endorsement. A ballot is not just a means of competitive necessity and educational

dissemination, but it serves to inform students what behavior is successful in forensic culture and what is not.

Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) contended that students are more likely to perpetuate a behavior if it has been validated. Judges therefore are as responsible for herding behavior as students. Competitors adjust behaviors in order to appease a particular judging pool. I believe this is how students develop potentially off putting speech performance choices. Students might develop a "speech voice" while they are learning how to project and use a room more effectively and if they happen to gain more competitive success they will likely adopt that bad habit, even if criticized on a ballot. This often produces a certain "competition" speaking style that is unique to our activity, socially enforced by in round rankings. Ribarsky (2005) summed: "This lack of realistic presentational styles through norm perpetuation further hinders the educational values" (p. 20). Functionally, we are teaching our students how to be effective forensic speakers rather than effective public speakers. Our stylized form of speaking has, quite frankly, gotten away from us. I have witnessed many performance trends in forensic oral performance that is so idiosyncratic to forensic culture that it is actually off putting to lay audiences, such as performing every line of prose as a question. Competitive success effectively teaches students to adapt to a forensic audience and judges but not necessarily all audiences.

The power of endorsement is further problematized when Elmer and VanHorn (2003) highlighted "there is no definitive standard for event descriptions or judge requirements" (p. 105). Without these definitive standards judges, especially former competitors, rely on cursory knowledge gleaned from experience, often delivered as dogmatic truths on ballots. This is probably why Ott (1998) described judges as police that enforce and reinforce performance traits. Consistently relying on judges that learned through observation and anecdotal information sets a disturbing precedent. Reid (2012) portrayed forensic judges as facilitators whom all too frequently reward performances that best demonstrate forensic norms. Including alumni judges with poor pedagogical training into the judging pool decreases ballot efficacy, however this is an all too common resort. The common assertion is that a competitor knows how a tournament works therefore their feedback should be inherently valued. Unfortunately, alumni ballots are not guaranteed to promote forensic pedagogy.

When Cronn-Mills and Golden (1997) outlined how forensic norms should be enforced, they were presenting an indictment aimed at the heavily shrouded "rules" of our activity. However, their paper exists solely in the academic realm. Conversations about norm enforcement are still ever present in judging lounges and are rarely critical. It seems that judges understand that different programs approach forensic competition differently yet it is not universally understood that there is no singular way to do individual events correctly. Critics that have gleaned their forensic knowledge through the herding process tend to write ballots that reflect their socially learned forensic behavior. Often these judges are very familiar with competitors at the tournament and they will write casual ballots with instructions for how the event should be performed. As former competitors are using up eligibility and graduating into our judging pools, they are effectively poisoning the well of the judging pool. Morris (2005) defined judges that

ranked more from norm enforcement rather than sound pedagogy as evaluator critics. Evaluator critics often learned forensics absent from pedagogy and enforce forensic knowledge attained through herding can often provide not only uneducated ballots, but occasionally, anti-educational ballots. There is a difference between an opinion and an educated opinion. Being complicit with poor judging recruitment practices is validation among coaches that we support poor judging practices.

If we are not educating our judging pool, even our alumni, we are simply producing more evaluator critics. It is the responsibility of the tournament host to find judges but often the host is so overwhelmed helping along first time judges that it is easy to overlook alumni judges, however I believe these judges to be more problematic to the activity. Lindemann (2002) accused these types of judges of pressuring students to change pieces or arguments because they have seen them done before. A student still has much to learn from a particular piece no matter how many times a judge has seen it performed. Although Ross (1984) called for localized judge skill workshops, which was furthered by Outzen Youngvorst, and Cronn-Mills (2013), such a practice has yet to be universally adopted. Frequently, tournament judges are not adequately prepared to impart effective critique. It might be difficult to accept that coaches are culpable for poor judging practices. It is further complicated when our teams and students may receive recognition as a result of a poorly trained judging pool.

Solutions

As a passionate educator and coach, I refuse to claim that intercollegiate forensic competition is wholly non-educational. Both competitive and educational aspects of the activity shaped and continue to shape my worldview in profound ways. However, it is important that as educators, coaches understand how norms are influencing students to gauge what students are learning. It is a difficult task to ascertain not only what students are learning but also *when* they are learning. Bandura (1971) initially pinpointed the difficulty of social learning because a learner does not have to consciously learn in order to learn. A significant amount of forensic learning is unmonitored. Student progress is observable but it is hard to say what exactly attributed to the intellectual growth and maturity directly. It could be a ballot, a fellow student, a profound coaching appointment, and/or epiphany of clarity when in a round. Whatever the case may be, norms of the activity influence students to at least some degree but, allowing competition to norms dictate our student's performance choices is pedagogically irresponsible. Cronn-Mills and Croucher (2013) asserted: "Forensic scholars constantly work with their student competitors to review comments and triage the importance/relevancy/ necessity of the comments to improve the speech/interpretation/performance" (p. 12). I think that norms should be treated in the same manner in order to move past inflexible enforcement. In order to combat potentially negative socially learned behavior I suggest Workshops, Student Mentoring, and Forensic Pedagogy Scholarships.

Workshops. Some forensic organizations host individual event workshops. Often during these workshops students will perform multiple genres to demonstrate them to beginners. It

would be beneficial to schedule multiple speakers performing different styles and structures of public address, limited preparation speeches, and literature performances. Workshops are beneficial educational experiences for students not quite ready to jump into competition. However, we could make competition more welcoming to novices by operating some of them as tournaments with workshop elements. Before awards, tournament hosts could incorporate open forums or TED Talk type discussions headed by a forensic community member during league tournaments, such as MAFLs, TCFLs, SNAFUs or PSCFAs. Having these talks while tournament staff are tabbing could be an easy way to enact this. Students would relish in an opportunity to share and learn if facilitated in a sound way. If every tournament hosted by one of these organizations did workshops, it could be particularly beneficial to new programs or student run programs.

Additionally, tournaments could provide novice breakout rounds and provide ballots for student observers. Maybe more experienced students could get ballots that do not have ranks and ratings and provide suggestions. Although some potential herding could happen this way, coaches can at least review the information being offered to their students. The practice of learning how to write instructional feedback could be beneficial for students. This introduction could help usher more effective critics and fewer future evaluator critics. The ballots written by students could simply be gathered and stuffed into school ballot envelopes with relatively little added effort and cost to tournament hosts.

An integrated workshop approach to communal forensic pedagogy could establish an intellectual trickledown effect among competitors. Conversations among students could move beyond pleasantries or norm enforcement to more involved discussions about performance and social issues. To a degree, this is already happening at forensic tournaments, but well-established theoretical guidelines would provide more conversations grounded in forensic educational principles and hopefully decrease forensic herd behavior.

Student Mentoring. Furthermore, coaches should be encouraging students at tournaments of varying competitive levels to come watch a round that coaches are judging. This could foster a conversation about rankings. Some of the best "van talk" moments have come from students engaged and willing to justify their perspective of a round that none of their teammates were competing. These conversations also begin to guide students into the realm of appraising a round of competition while limiting their individual stakes. I often enjoy these conversations because I can hear how a student would rank the round and then I will ask them to describe how someone could justify their sixth place ranking as the first place. Students may realize that different judges can rank differently and putting them in a position to justify the opposite opinion is not only a good practice in ballot writing but also a fascinating exercise in critical thinking. Harnessing a potential evaluator critic while they are still competing could be the key to increasing the amount of educational feedback on ballots. Starting the process earlier could teach students how to begin more pedagogical opinions before they are placed in the role of judge.

Furthermore, as a community we can also begin a more concerned effort to mentor coaches. One of the joys of this activity is building relationships with students but inevitably we have to let them go. Many talented performers leave the forensic community when they graduate, or lose eligibility. However, I developed my passion for coaching when I coached a high school team. It was rewarding. It was fun. It helped me envision my future as a pedagogue. Although this is a personal experience, I know many others have had similar experiences. Encourage students to work at local high schools or speech camps. If the student is extremely busy, suggest they judge a local high school tournament. If a student demonstrates a particular skill for coaching, teach them how to fill out leg qualification paperwork. Maybe if a student has qualified all of the events they wish to compete with for nationals, suggest that they travel on a tournament weekend to learn how to tab. It is critical that we instill the sense of a larger community while students are competing. Promoting a greater sense of community early can provide students with a feeling of pride associated with intercollegiate forensic competition. Students motivated towards preserving forensics are likely to come back as better competitors as well as future judges and/or coaches.

Forensic Pedagogy Scholarship. It is important that students understand that work put into their events before the tournament matters regardless of what other competitors are doing. Therefore, it might be time that tournaments provided awards for students working to improve forensic pedagogy. A few years ago, the National Forensic Association experimental event was Forensic Criticism. Many scoffed that any event could technically be forensic criticism according to the broad definition of the event. However, the event provided an opportunity for students to actively begin discussing how to make forensic competition better. There is no reason why we cannot support this sentiment without competition. Providing scholarships to students that wish to improve forensic pedagogy could significantly alter the landscape of our disciplinary scholarship. National organizations could provide a scholarship for the top paper and have the paper published in the national journal or even develop a special edition just dedicated to undergraduate research dedicated to forensic research. The forensic community as a whole can begin to adopt a philosophy of student incorporated pedagogy.

Local forensic organizations could provide scholarships for students that provide written critiques of their performances and establish an event improvement journal. Teams could provide a reward for a similar practice and use it for educational assessment purposes. Imagine how rewarding and refreshing it would be to read a student’s thought process for performance enhancements throughout the year! Providing recognition for forensic specific research for undergraduates could spur more forensic research as a whole. For decades, the forensic community has been pushing for increased published scholarship: Cronn-Mills and Croucher, 2013; Croucher, 2006; Hample, 1981; Kay, 1990; Kerber & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Klumpp, 1990; Logue & Shea, 1990; McGlone, 1969; Ryan, 1998. Raising students in an atmosphere of explicit research application beyond forensic performances could foster generations of academically invested educators and subsequently more forensic publications. Encouraging students to research forensic practices could also help guide them to making more pedagogically grounded

decisions in the performance choices. Students researching forensic norms would be more likely to critically self-evaluate and avoid herding behavior.

Conclusion

Social learning theory is a double-edged sword for competitive forensics. On one hand it helps students' process multiple scenarios for different communication exigencies, while on the other hand it is difficult to monitor and truly determine what lessons are being imparted. Duncan (2013) argued that the "conventions are minor aspects of performances and do not negate the educational value of this activity" (p.21). I wish to further this sentiment. It is not that the norms negate education rather they are shaping how and what students are learning. Because norm convention is not limited to forensic culture it is paramount that we teach students how to assess norms and how they wish to navigate them in forensic and real world settings. For example, muted pant suits have dominated women's professional wear for at least two decades and yet certain teams still dogmatically assert bright skirt suits for their female competitors and other teams. Although it is not directly communicated, female students are learning that in order to be professionally successful they also need to adhere to normative femininity. As critics, we need to be more critical of the messages or norms we are communicating to students. We cannot control what other competitors or judges tell our students but we can help our students navigate decisions they make based on feedback. To foster a community of people with the same perspectives and performances is educationally irresponsible.

Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch (1992) articulated, "mass behavior is often fragile in the sense that small shocks can frequently lead to large shifts in behavior" (p. 993). If we wish to alter the information cascades our students are receiving than we need to be more active in altering those messages. It is time that coaches amend problematic, archaic, uniformed approaches towards how events should be performed. We can start by adopting an attitude of willingness. Our activity is no longer at a point where we can treat each team as isolated intellectual property islands. Derryberry (1991) argued for programs to build total programs, which he described as teams grounded in providing opportunities for students to research and organize language while developing presentational skills. One of the best ways to do this is through forensic community building. If we want the activity to improve we need to push our students to push the boundaries of our norms. If we are tired of speeches sounding the same then we have to start taking more risks. Forensic competition is a co-cultural activity that allows students to simultaneously represent cultural constructs while critiquing them. It is time that more forensic performances lived up to their potential to effectively critique. Spurring new perspectives in the activity is paramount for forensic competition to evolve beyond copycat forensics.

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