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Dusting Off the Trophies: Filling the Gaps in the Forensics Collective Memory

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Filling in the Gaps in the Forensics Collective Memory

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ABSTRACT

With any organization or group, certain areas, events, and individuals eventually become forgotten and left out of the collective memory. Forensics, at the institutional level, is no exception. This essay explores the concept of collective memory, with particular attention to how some areas are left out. It examines how and why certain areas of forensics history are lost, and the impact that has on the forensics community. Finally, it offers some suggestions for forensics educations on how to keep desired stories from being left out of the collective memory. Advice includes recording the stories in written or audio/visual format, bringing alumni back to share the stories with the current team members or others on campus, and constructing a team’s history.

As an undergraduate forensics competitor, whenever I was practicing or working at school I found myself surrounded by dozens of trophies from victories over the last few decades. Most were team trophies, but one section included individual ones that graduating seniors would give back to the team at the end of their collegiate experience. This tradition included a short speech by the senior at the team’s banquet at the end of the year. Usually it included some stories or memories and explained why that trophy was the one that meant the most to them. At one point during my forensics career, a teammate and I were moving the trophies and started looking at the bottom of them to see who had given them. Some of the names were ones we had met or at least heard of from a coach or former competitor. However, we noticed that many of the trophies did not have name on them. We spent several weeks attempting to discover who had won those trophies as we asked coaches and looked through old team records. Some of them remain unmarked.

Later that year a few alumni of the program came and we showed them their trophies they gave back. Usually they would laugh and then tell a story about that tournament or a particular round that had made that trophy so meaningful to them. It was an exciting moment for us all as they relived a great forensics memory, and as we learned and became connected with those who went before us. Sadly, most of the stories remain untold, and may soon be forgotten.
entirely as alumni pass away. Whenever that happens, a part of the team and its heritage dies with them.

This essay seeks to explore how those forgotten memories and stories of forensics yesteryear can be rediscovered in order to create a more meaningful experience for all involved in the program. This will be accomplished by first examining research on collective memory and how it applies to forensics. Next, the harmful effects of forgotten aspects, or holes in the collective memory, will be explored. Finally, ways to prevent this erosion of memories and create a healthy team history will be discussed.

Building a Collective Memory

The term “collective memory,” developed by French sociologist Halbwachs (1992), refers to the shared identity and understanding of the past for a community. Each community, whether it realizes it or not, has a collective memory to which it is constantly adding, and losing, memories and experiences. Collective memory research is a growing field with numerous communication studies ranging from media coverage, national memory, smaller community, museums and the remembrances of historical events (e.g., Barnhurst & Warrela, 1998; Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Hasian & Frank, 1999; Hasian & Shutgart, 2001; Haskins, 2003; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000; Peri, 1999; Prose, 1998; Weng, 2001; West, 2002). For a forensics program, the collective memory, or sense of tradition, can play a vital role in “building and maintaining a sense of team (Derryberry, 2005b, p. 5). Forensics coaches/scholars have argued that a sense of tradition is important for forensics teams (Compton, 2000, 2006; Derryberry, 1997, 2005a; Jensen & Jensen, 2007; Redding & Hobbs, 2002). As Compton (2006) offered, “How a collective tells its stories, and how a group balances the importance of commemorating with accurately documenting, affects not only how a collective views its past, but also its future” (p. 33).

For the forensics community, several important aspects from the collective memory research can be useful to our remembering of the past, particularly for individual teams. First, as a community, a forensics team’s collective memory is created by both shared, or team, memories and the collection of individual memories or experiences. It is also diverse as it travels across the forensics generations just as the team does. With each new class of students, new memories will be added to that of the collective, and those of the previous students will be more likely to be lost or forgotten. Next, Katriel (1994) argues that it is important to recognize the difference between memory and history. Although history is an analysis and recording of what happened in the past, memory is the living experience of the past interacting with the present. She writes that in the realm of history one finds “the isolating, intellectual stance of critical reflection,” but in the realm of memory finds “the all-consuming moment of ritual, communal bonding” (p. 16). This tension between history and memory will be important as team attempt to preserve their past. Finally, the (re)telling of a group’s collective memory influences the collective, or team, identity and experience. Schiffrin (2001) suggests, “Collective narratives are formed by group and
communal experiences and come to play a role in collective identities” (p. 508). Understanding the impact these stories from the past have on the present and future identity of the team and its competitors suggests the significance of examining a team’s collective memory and working to create a healthy understanding of the past.

**Impact of Holes in Collective Memory**

When the collective, or institutional, memory of a community leaves out significant details and stories from the past, it can create problems in the present and future. When the successes, excitement, and experiences of previous competitors are lost, then the current and future competitors lose out on living those experiences with them. Sometimes not knowing history does not doom one to repeating it, but will keep one from ever experiencing or enjoying it. As Compton (2006) argued, “the community should ask not only who emerges as forensics legends in their collective memory, but also who does not” (p. 32). There are several subgroups of the forensics community that are hurt when the collective memory leaves out the stories of past competitors: alumni, students, and coaches and administrators.

The alumni of the program are the ones most obviously affected by the forgotten past as their stories and experiences are lost. With the exception of a few trophies and photos, there may be very little left from their time on the team. Current competitors may have to work very hard to even find out if someone was on the team twenty or so years ago; hearing the stories from that time can be next to impossible. Alumni want to be remembered and feel that they still have a connection with the team. Keeping alumni connected also helps keep them giving, either financially or through service such as judging. When alumni feel they are no longer remembered, and therefore no longer appreciated, then they may quit trying to help the team or stay connected with what is happening. Unfortunately, it seems that the majority of alumni take this route eventually. Perhaps even for them their forensics career becomes all but forgotten.

Current (and future) students are also hurt by holes in the collective memory passed on to them. Often the extent of their institutional memory of the program may be a few years before they came until a few years after they leave. The continual movement of students, with a complete new group every four years, makes it more difficult for a collegiate community to maintain a deeper understanding of the group’s heritage. Students may not think that the past is significant to them (but that argument is generally made only by those who do not know the past). When the stories of those who went before are lost, the sense of being part a something bigger than oneself is lost. Without the stories of the past, it can be hard to truly appreciate how the program is today. I still remember the stories of how the team traveled when it began—staying at homes of family and friends and eating lunches packed by the cafeteria. It helped me to be thankful for the donations that those competitors gave as alumni so that we could enjoy better traveling conditions and afford to travel more frequently for tournaments. The older the team, the richer that sense of heritage and being part of something great should feel. Being a part of an honorary or national organization should also aid in this sense that the current students are
one chapter in the middle of great book. Particularly in an organization like Pi Kappa Delta with lifetime membership and rituals such as the ceremony for new members, it becomes harder to feel the past is completely irrelevant. And competitors should feel that they are a member of their team for a lifetime. Thus, they are teammates not just with the competitors with whom they actually compete, but also with all who have competed with the team. But when the past stories remain untold, the current competitors are much less likely to develop that sense of team.

Finally, the coaches and administrators may be unable to perform their duties as well if the collective memory is not sufficiently detailed. Without an understanding of the past, a coach will not be able to help students discover it and feel connected. New coaches, in particular, may find it difficult to understand some of the traditions and aspects of the program that their students are a part of unless they learn about how the team got to where it is today. Administrators are less likely to make efforts to learn about the team’s history, which is why the coaches should work from time to time to help them learn it. An administrator could come who does not know the team’s rich past and thus make decisions that could adversely affect the program’s future. Without a solid institutional memory, coaches and administrators may steer the program in a harmful direction.

**Collective Memory and the Team**

Coaches of forensics, like those of sports such as gymnastics and track, must constantly work to bring individual competitors together as a team. Team sweepstakes awards assist in this building of a team ethos and focus. One of the greatest skills that forensics students can learn is that of cooperation on a team. The team bonding can also assist in enriching the forensics experience. With this sense of team spirit, individual competitors may push themselves harder than they might otherwise have, so that they will not let their teammates down. Usually, they will find greater individual success because of their work for the team. As Derryberry (1991) argues, “My experience with this blending of interests is that a speaker’s motivation to assist the team through broader participation also brings a sense of accomplishment to individual students as well” (p. 22). This sense of team should extend beyond simply those who they compete with during the same four-year period. As a result of the teammates who have gone before, perhaps even before the current competitors were alive, and their accomplishments, students might work even harder to keep the tradition alive and not let the (overall) team down.

By increasing the depth of the team’s institutional memory, this sense of being a part of the greater team, and the desire to live up to the team’s tradition, can be increased. Embree (2001) contends that one important reason for telling the history of the team is to help current students see how the history affects them: they are part of the overall history, are where they are because of those who went before, and are helping build on that rich tradition. Kaylor (2003) posits that when writing or telling the team’s history, “One should attempt to build one continuous narrative so that highlighting the past raises the stature of the team as a whole, then and now” (p. 13). However, when there are significant holes in the team’s collective memory,
this feeling of being part of a team and something larger than oneself may be lost, or at least diminished.

It is important to note, though, that simply learning the history and past of the team is not a magical formula for success. Obviously, there are more important aspects of a forensics team—such as competition and learning public speaking skills—that need to be the focus. Although it is important to highlight the team’s past, it should be done in a healthy level of moderation. However, it is unlikely that any team focuses too much on its past. Instead many, if not most, teams probably ignore it too much and have allowed holes to develop in their institutional memory. Since holes in the collective memory of a forensics team, particularly holes in the stories of past competitors, can hurt the overall sense of team and lessen the experience, it is important to work to (re)build the collective memory. There are many ways that this can be accomplished, and what works well will differ depending on the team and the history. Here are a few such ways that the “lost” stories of the past can be (re)discovered.

**Record the Stories**

An important step in keeping the stories of past competitors is to record them. Some teams have team histories, or at least scrapbooks and records from which a team history, but these are generally made up mostly of tournament results and photos. Although these are important aspects of the past, they are fairly uninspiring without that story, or *pathos*. A coach may want to ask graduating team members to write or tape a story or some of their favorite forensics memories. If a team has a banquet or other special occasion where students share stories, then taping that event would capture these reflective moments. These stories could be used in a number ways as discussed below. The importance here is simply collecting the memories so that they will be available for sharing later.

For teams that have not been collecting these stories, now is the time to contact alumni and ask them to share them. Again, this can be done in a written or taped format. For older teams, there may be some alumni whose stories shed light on a very unique and different era and who may not be around much longer to share those stories. An added benefit of this collection process is that it engages the alumni and reassures them that they are not forgotten and that they are still an important part of the team. Once the alumni feel connected again, they will be more likely to help out the team with financial or other contributions and to return for a homecoming or team banquet.

**Bring Alumni to Share Stories**

Another way to help fill in the holes of a team’s collective memory is to bring the alumni back to share their stories. This can be done successfully in both formal and informal settings. Bringing back alumni to address a team banquet or other occasion gives them the opportunity to reflect on their time as a competitor and what they have learned since then. During this time a
speaker will often share humorous stories of their forensics experiences, as well as some things from that time that they continue to treasure. This will not only enliven the event for the current competitors who will usually enjoy the stories that are unique, but yet refreshing similar. In fact, students may learn that they share more in common with these past students (who may be the age of their parents or grandparents) than they do with many of their classmates who do not quite understand the forensics world. This event also reaches out to alumni by showing them that they are important and that their stories are valued and not forgotten. Even those who do not speak can feel like the team from their era is remembered. Also, when an alumnus speaks, it usually will increase the attendance from other alumni of that time period. This brings them back to campus and gets them reconnected with the team. At this event it is also important to help the alumni feel connected with the current team by allowing current students to share a little about their year, their experiences, and the results. Forensics coaches/scholars have noted the critical role a banquet can have in recreating and celebrating a team’s heritage (Compton, 2006; Derryberry, 2005a, 2005b). With this verbal give-and-take, both groups feel more like they are a part of the other. Because of these types of stories from alumni, the banquet for my forensics team was one of the experiences I most looked forward to at the end of the year.

Less formal occasions may also provide great opportunities for alumni and current competitors to share stories and create a cross-generational team. When alumni come to judge at a tournament, it helps them feel like they are still a part of the team and are needed. Just as important as this service they provide the team are the opportunities to chat with the current competitors, whether it be between rounds, in the hotel, or at a restaurant. In this relaxed setting, it will not take forensics students (old and new) too long before they start talking about forensics. The alumni and the current competitors will likely share stories back and forth, finding similarities in their experiences and gaining a sense of being part of the same team and tradition. Some of my greatest memories from my forensics career are those times hanging out with alumni swapping stories and sharing laughs.

**Tell the Stories**

Finally, it is important for the team to tell its story and history. Many teams do this with data and photos, but stories are also needed. Once they have been collected as discussed above, then one has a great resource for adding *pathos* to the team’s past. In fact, these stories should constitute the bulk of the telling of the team’s past. Few things can capture the experiences and recreate the past as good as stories. Photos, tournament results, and other significant events should be included throughout, but these should be used to add to the stories and not the other way around. The stories of the alumni and current competitors, if woven together well, will create a powerful journey through the past and present and bring the photos and other data new life and interest. As Redding and Hobbs (2002) explain, the stories of alumni can be a one of the most powerful ways to tell the past of a team. It is time to move beyond a simple history but toward presenting the memory (as suggested by Katriel, 1994). Speech teachers and coaches
teach the importance of stories and *pathos*, but it is also important to implement these lessons personally to communicate a team’s heritage.

Through it all the focus should be on building up to the present. It should be evident for the audience to capture not only a sense of awe and excitement about the past, but, more importantly, a sense that it all worked together to create the team of today. As Kaylor (2003) argues:

Telling the stories and presenting the success of a team’s history should help communicate that the program has been valuable to the students and the school, and that all the money, energy, and time spent over the years has been a good investment (p. 12). This telling of the team’s past should be done periodically as the team celebrates milestones or anniversaries. Once packaged together it could make a great fundraiser as alumni will want a copy of their and their teammates’ collective memories. One should also be given to key administrators and other supporters of the team. Additionally, as one’s school celebrates an anniversary, the team can use this time of reflection to highlight their past as well (and should be able to more powerfully communicate their tradition than any other campus group). As Redding and Hobbs (2002) argue, one’s team history helps justify the team’s existence and purpose in the academic community in which it resides.

**Conclusion**

This essay has explored the concept of collective memory and how it relates to a forensics team, the problems with having holes in that institutional memory, and then offered a few suggestions on how a healthy team history can be passed down through the team’s generations. A team’s past, and the telling of it, is a living and breathing thing that affects not only the past, but also the present. It is what unites a team divided by different times and experiences. If we ignore it, then it will be lost, to our own detriment. Therefore we must continually work to (re)tell it and (re)live it. The time has come to dust off the trophies and let the stories begin.

**References**


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