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Justifying Forensic Programs to Administrations Using Humanistic Outcomes

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Mills, Pettus, and Dickmeyer (1993) tell a story that, seven-teen years later, bears an eerie familiarity. A recession hits the country. A department at a major university is forced to make deep and difficult cuts to their budgets and programs. In lieu of making “horizontal” cuts, i.e., uniform cuts from all departments and programs, the university chooses to make one, incisive “vertical” cut: the complete elimination of the school’s Speech Communication department, which, of course, means the end of the school’s forensic program. This particular story has a happy ending, with the forensics team itself playing an instrumental role in the salvation of the entire department. Using a vast network of alumni, friends, and family, the team was able to keep the Speech Communication Department off the chopping block. The team would go on to fight another day.

Not so with many other forensic programs. The last two years has seen the United States in a similarly precarious economic position, and stories of drastic staff reductions, hiring freezes, and program cuts have once again become alarmingly commonplace. In an effort to preserve themselves from elimination, many forensic programs have had to start to justify their existence at a school. To this end, coaches have employed a number of techniques. Of these, an approach that is easy to quantify and codify is the identification of discrete “learning outcomes” for forensics.

The field of education, at both the secondary and collegiate level, is inundated with the concept of the learning outcome, i.e., an evaluable measure that determines whether or not a certain pedagogical goal was reached. The name of the school I work at is Florida State College at Jacksonville. In Spring of 2009 (and for many years before that), however, the school went by Florida Community College at Jacksonville. With the Florida Department of Education’s creation of the “state college,” community colleges could now widen their enrollment to both 2- and 4-year students by offering both associate’s and bachelor’s degrees, and FCCJ was eager to get on board. However, this also meant that the college had to keep their accreditation current, which entailed a massive analysis and evaluation of FCCJ’s curriculum across the board. During this period of general education review, the touchstone that guided the entire evaluation process was the “learning outcome.” Each class had to determine what exactly students who complete any given course were, in theory, now able to do. What’s more, how do we evaluate whether the outcome was met, and whether the curriculum addresses this outcome in the first place?

In a forensic context, an analogous endeavor seems a pretty worthy one. The more we are able to present a list of outcomes and say, “Here! *This* is what a student of forensics learns,” the more viable the program seems. In essence, we can defend our programs to the administration using the

language of the administration itself. In fall of 2008, the NFA Executive Council formed a Committee on Pedagogy to do just that. The committee released a technical report in 2010, identifying four over-arching categories of outcomes for forensic participation: Discipline Knowledge and Skills, Communication, Critical Thinking, and Integrity/Values.

However, forensic students themselves report another kind of education they get through their participation in forensics. Paine and Stanley (2003) conducted a study of which components of forensic involvement students found the most rewarding – those that were considered the most “fun.” The response that appeared the most often was not one associated with academic knowledge, or even performance itself. It referred instead to the social connections forensics helps students forge, the opportunity to meet other people. Other studies detail to what extent the social and interpersonal dynamics within a team can preoccupy the coach’s time, and how much a social team culture can make or break the success of a team (Carmack & Holm, 2005; McNabb & Cabara, 2006; Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Schnoor and Kozinksi, 2005; White, 2005). These social and interpersonal “outcomes” of forensic involvement are more difficult to quantify, however, and more difficult to justify to administrators as reasons to keep a forensics team at an institution.

This paper will review literature concerning forensic learning outcomes, drawing a distinction between traditional “academic” learning outcomes and more “humanistic” outcomes that function at an intra- and interpersonal level. This paper will also examine avenues coaches can use to defend the most beneficial aspects of their programs to administrators.

Learning Outcomes of Forensic Participation

When examining literature that purports to demonstrate what exactly forensic students learn, it is clear that forensics offers a wide variety of academic skills. Though Geisler (1985) notes that many competitors in oral interpretation fall short of this goal, ideally, an effective student of oral interpretation should come away from their competitive experience with an understanding of hermeneutic theory, and how it applies to performance of a text. A student should be able to understand the importance of preserving the integrity of a text, as well as “honor generic characteristics of a given art work” (p. 78). Finally, students should not only be able to see that many interpretations of a text or valid, but should also be able to clarify which interpretations are more “defensible” and are, thus, more valid.

Gernant (1991) similarly notes a distance between theory and practice in forensics, but maintains that effective oral interpreters display a strong command of literary analysis. Strong oral interpreters have absorbed the concepts of au-

thorial intent, thematic analysis, and the performative link between the audience and the performer. Conversely, Koepel and Morman (1991) focus not on the literary outcomes of participation in the interpretation events, but the rhetorical benefits. They argue that, by focusing on the argumentative or rhetorical nature of oral interpretation, coaches can help students understand the function of oral interpretation, give students a competitive edge, and “increase the communicative value of the oral interpretation events” (p. 150). Though many of these authors focus on what is missing from current forensic practice, the fact remains that, if all goes well, a student will have achieved a wide variety of impressive learning outcomes.

As for the public address events, literature abounds on the potential learning outcomes of participation in this genre of forensic competition. The entire Fall 1985 edition of the *National Forensic Journal* is devoted to the event of Rhetorical Criticism (Communication Analysis) alone. Rosenthal (1985) focuses on how the activity can reinforce its roots in the rhetorical tradition – how to put the “rhetorical” back in “rhetorical criticism.” Benoit and Dean (1985) explore how CA competitors can broaden their knowledge of so-called “non-rhetorical” artifacts, like literary works and films. Shields and Preston (1985) even note how participation in communication analysis can familiarize a competitor with such concepts as fantasy theme analysis.

The learning outcomes of participation in events like informative and persuasive speaking are self-evident and parallel to the learning outcomes of basic public speaking courses. A look at the AFA Event Descriptions (2010) shows that a competitor in persuasive speaking should be familiar enough with persuasion theory to successfully “inspire, reinforce, or change the beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience.” Students competing in After Dinner Speaking should be able to “exhibit sound speech composition, thematic, coherence, direct communicative public speaking skills, and good taste,” a pretty impressive pedagogical stew. Finally, Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, and Loudon (1999) assert that participation in competitive forensics augments a student’s critical thinking skills.

Few of these benefits to forensic participation should be too surprising to coaches in the activity. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, forensic participation demands a wide-reaching breadth of knowledge few teachers and students outside the activity attain (Boileau, 1990). Even relatively new directors, such as myself, become quickly aware that to effectively coach (or, more importantly, compete in) all the genres of competition, one must have an eye for good literary writing, a solid foundation of literary and rhetorical theory, a working knowledge of current events, a keen grasp of structure and outlining, and a broad base of pop culture and historical knowledge.

Humanistic Outcomes of Forensic Participation

However, there is another set of outcomes students claim to glean from the activity, a set that I will call *humanistic out-*

comes. Hinck (2003), drawing similarities between athletic and forensic participation, describes these outcomes as a result of sustained involvement in a competitive activity:

Competing can give a student identity as a member of a team since joining a team, becoming assimilated as a member, and preparing for a season of tournament activity can challenge students to develop social skills that are essential to success beyond the college classroom. . . . A competitive season simulates life situations requiring adaptation to changing circumstances, recommitment to achieving one’s goals, coming back from a disappointing experience, and hard work without the guarantee of success. (p. 62)

In addition to intrapersonal communication outcomes like reacting professionally to victory and setback, Carmack and Holm (2005) elucidate the education forensic students experience through interaction with their teammates:

Members also learn that forensics is not an easy activity in which to be involved. They learn about practice schedules, the amount of practice “required,” who to go to for coaching in which events, and which events to compete in, through their interactions with coaches and varsity competitors. Sometimes these role behaviors are consciously communicated to the new members with the expressed intent of getting them to conform. (p. 35)

It becomes clear that forensic students, due only to their participation in a competitive activity, receive a profound education in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group communication.

Furthermore, Paine and Stanley (2003) studied which factors of forensic competition a forensic student perceives as most “fun.” The second most popular group of response involved “the value of an education,” and included such benefits as enhanced critical thinking skills and increased performance ability. However, the most popular set of factors in the study were those related to “the value of people and relationships.” Students reported that meeting new people, sharing time with like-minded students, and having a “sense of community with other schools” were the most fun aspects of forensic involvement (p. 44).

I would hope these findings are not terribly surprising; if we did not all value the interpersonal and humanistic education that students in competitive forensics receive, we would simply be instructors of communication, and not forensic coaches.

Working with Administrations

Sellnow (1994), in addition to offering a formidable review of literature on how to justify programs to administrators, offers an additional take: framing forensic education as “experiential education.” Forensics, in this particular mode of thinking about the activity, offers a unique connection to theory and practice that few other co-curricular activities can provide. Forensic participation also teaches students to

value a wide array of “ways of knowing,” that will ultimately lead them to become lifelong learners.

Paine and Stanley’s (2003) study has special relevance for the community, however, when examining how to justify forensic programs to administrators. Littlefield (1991) conducted a study of college and university administrators nation-wide, searching for attitudes about debate and IE programs. Administrators responded that the primary benefits to having a forensic program on-campus was enhanced education for the students and enhanced *retention* of students (emphasis mine). College presidents, provosts, chancellors, and deans are, unsurprisingly, interested in ways to keep enrollment in the university high. Paine and Stanley’s findings about the “fun factor” of forensics bear an even greater importance when considering that these are the very factors that keep the students in forensics, and ultimately, in school. The forensics-as-family concept may be difficult to articulate to administrators, but it keeps students coming back, which is music to any administration’s ears.

This paper is only the start of an important conversation. By all means, we need to take a look at the pedagogical outcomes of the activity. The pressure to keep our activity a viable presence at a college or university demands that we do so. The NFA’s Committee on Pedagogy has created an invaluable document that will serve directors of forensics well all across the country, and its importance and usefulness cannot be overstated. However, just as the document claims to move discourse about the sustainability of forensic programs beyond a competition vs. education dichotomy, I would encourage us to take the conversation one step even further to embrace the humanistic outcomes of forensic participation, as well. We are certainly teaching our students (or at least, allegedly so) a vast body of knowledge – how to argue, how to persuade, how to deliver a composed speech, how to analyze literature, how to step into the skin of a fictional creation – but we are also teaching a different and complementary set of skills: how to graciously accept both goals met and hopes dashed, how to be a good teammate, how to place the needs of the group before those of the individual, how to take constructive criticism, how to be a good person. We must value and codify the educational outcomes of the activity, but so much of our time as forensic coaches is devoted to these intangible values that we cannot ignore them either.

I recognize that these values are not unique to forensics. Participation in any competitive team activity ostensibly confers these same values. This does not (nor should not) detract from their importance. As Hinck (2003) notes:

Although it might be possible for some of our forensic team members to participate in college or intramural sports for the purpose of gaining the common benefits of striving toward competitive excellence, it seems unreasonable to expect all of our students to seek the common benefits of competition there. They are drawn to forensic activities because forensics is a collection of

speech activities, of which they are interested in, and because they are not interested enough (or possibly talented enough) in basketball, football, field hockey, chess, tennis, bridge, or any other game to forgo participating in forensics activities to pursue those other interests exclusively. (p. 63)

Littlefield’s (1991) study is nearly twenty years old; perhaps it is time to re-investigate what administrators view as the primary benefits to having a debate or IE program on-campus. Hopefully, some the literature cited in this paper will prove useful to directors seeking to defend their programs to administrations. Moreover, what I am offering is a different way for us to think about “outcomes.” I have heard several coaches say, “You know what? Educational objectives aside, my goal is for this student to become a better person.” I believe students *can* become better people through forensics. Some administrators will be swayed by this assertion. Others will not. For those administrators, focusing on the diverse rhetorical, theoretical, and literary benefits of forensic participation will have to do. But if we are going to start to formalize our discussion of forensic outcomes, we need to pay attention to the more intangible benefits of participation in the activity.

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