Overcoming Obstacles to Scholarly Engagement

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Abstract

This paper reaffirms the idea that scholarship is essential to advancing the professional and knowledge based identity of the forensic community. To develop a vision for future scholarly activity, the paper outlines some possible areas for consideration in developing writing and research programs, reviews some of the obstacles that stand in the way of a more active community of forensic scholars, and offers solutions that hold promise for advancing the mission of scholarship in the intercollegiate forensic community.

Introduction

Most of us who gathered for the conference have professional duties as coaches, classroom teachers, and in some cases, expectations for scholarly activity. As I complete the revision of the comments I offered at the conference, weeks past the deadline assigned by the conference director, the enthusiastic sentiment expressed in my presentation in July encounter the reality of my duties as a director of a program in the first weeks of September. At the time of my presentation, the purpose of my paper was to address the perception that our coaching obligations might in some ways function as obstacles to scholarly activity. Now, two months later, I confront a conflicted sense of purpose: how can I effectively divide my time between organizing my team for the new season and the need to demonstrate some kind of philosophical and professional consistency regarding my call for more scholarly engagement at the conference. In a slightly less (or more) naïve and reflective mode, I believe that the call to action regarding scholarly activity is still vital, and difficult, but possible to fulfill with an on going commitment to the enterprise of scholarly inquiry. So I have settled in at my desk, hopeful, that the final words for this piece will come to me before the conference director can wait no longer to publish the proceedings, but committed to the endeavor of writing about the subjects that are important to us in our capacities as coaches, teachers, directors, and scholars.

Before turning to the question of how to get more scholarly work done, however, it seems important to note that some of us attending this conference might be hearing about the importance of scholarly activity in forensics for the first time. My comments, then, are offered in the hope of engaging you as scholars too, a role that you might not have initially associated with the more familiar coaching activities with which you might be currently engaged. However, scholarship is an important element for any group of professional educators. And so, toward the end of engaging you, I begin by reaffirming the need for scholarly activity. Second, I identify some of the issues that I believe we need to address in our writing and research. Third, I describe the pressures that might be holding us back as a community from greater productivity in scholarship. And finally, I offer some suggestions for overcoming some of the perceived barriers that make writing and research difficult when coaching and travel constitute a substantial degree of our professional duties in our appointments as coaches and directors.

Why Forensic Coaches Should be Engaged in Scholarly Activity

The call for research has been a ritual for the last few decades. In an article first published in a 1960 issue of *The Register*, forerunner of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* and later *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Phillips and Frandsen (1970) called for debate coaches to prove the benefits of debating to the larger academic community. Four years after a collection of leading essays from *The Register* was published (McBath, 1970), forensic directors gathered for the Sedalia conference to address the state of forensics in the United States. More research was one of the recommendations (McBath, 1975) including a research agenda proposed by Samuel Becker (1975) and an assessment of the research generated to date offered by Rieke and Brock (1975). A decade or so later, closing the proceedings published from the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics, Goodnight (1984) articulated a vision of forensics based on scholarly activity.

> Forensics is an expression of scholarship. The task of the forensic community is nothing less that the active, rigorous, on-going discovery, creation, interchange and critique of social knowledge. Social knowledge is the product of inter-disciplinary inquiry and prerequisite to public deliberation. In this regard, forensic scholarship is not so much treating contests as the object of study as it is engaging participants in the cooperative process of study. Accordingly, forensics is not so much a kitchen in which ideas are confected by recipe to suit taste as it is a la-

boratory in which intense and systematic programs of investigation are undertaken. As scholarship, forensics fits within a tradition of learning through doing and reflecting. (p. 97)

Almost two decades ago, closing a special issue of the *National Forensic Journal* devoted to assessing the scholarly needs of the forensic community, Sharon Porter (1990) offered a call to action for more research on the part of coaches and directors. Similar concerns seem pressing today as we review the papers of this conference, engage in discussions of what work needs to be done, and what steps to take next to ensure that our scholarly activities remain vibrant. The call for scholarship, then, seems to be an on-going concern for forensic professionals.

Scholarly activity is an essential mission for forensic educators. Any academic discipline hoping to define itself as important, valuable, or relevant to higher education must be able to lay claim to a body of literature that reflects the knowledge, research trends, professional scholarly interests and standards, and on going quest for new knowledge (McBath, 1975, see chapter two, pp. 34-40). Our departmental colleagues, administrators, and members of the communication discipline in general expect us to be engaged scholars, not simply coaches serving competitive ends (Kay, 1990). More importantly, if you are in a tenure track position or are in training as a graduate student to obtain a tenure position in a department as a director of forensics, chances are that there will be expectations for scholarly and/or creative activity (Aden, 1990: Madsen, 1990; McKerrow, 1990; Parson, 1990). To obtain tenure and get promoted you will be expected to produce scholarship that meets the standards of the department in which you teach. For these reasons scholarship can be considered an essential element of one's identity as a forensic director.

If your job does not require scholarly activity, research and writing might be one less thing you have to do. However, you might still consider scholarly activity as a creative outlet or as a way to refine your understanding of knowledge related to coaching or teaching (Dean, 1990). Aristotle argued that human beings are driven by what pleases them. Acknowledging that those who find "writing or doing sums unpleasant and painful" do not write or do sums because the activity is painful (Aristotle, 1988, 1175b14, p. 259), one might consider the sheer intellectual pleasure of what Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman described as "the pleasure of finding the thing out, the kick in the discovery" (1999, p. 12). Admittedly, we are not physicists but we are engaged in a vitally important educational enterprise. Thus, our scholarly activities should provide us with intellectual and professional satisfactions of "finding things out" about how to best train our students for more than competitive outcomes (Aden, 1990; Herbeck, 1990; Kay). So what kinds of things do we need to find out? What issues should we care about as coaches, teachers, scholars, or scholars in training?

Issues, Old and New

Scholarly inquiry starts with questions and issues, hypotheses and hunches, ideas and visions that need to be tested in argument with others, in studies designed to obtain the data needed to answer our questions, and in a set of on going educational concerns that seek to place forensic education at the heart of a contemporary curriculum of communication studies. I am resolute in the belief that the model of the forensic laboratory, despite whatever criticisms one might array against it, holds the greatest promise for actualizing the knowledge of communication that we teach in our communication departments across the nation. Despite my belief in this promise the range of research interests has been relatively limited as noted recently by Croucher (2006), and Kerber and Cronn-Mills (2005). So it seems to me that this conference is an ideal forum to frame discussions that might take us in new directions. Given that mission, I thought that I might offer a number of questions that might be related to the other important issues raised in the various sections. It is my sincere hope that the papers contributed here and the conversations begun here can serve as a starting point for even greater scholarly activity to come. So let me throw out some questions that have been on my mind in the hope that you will either join me in pursuing answers to these questions, or in disagreement with me, formulate what you believe to be more pressing concerns facing the forensics community.

Priorities. If we only had time to write about one thing, this month, or next semester, or next year, or this decade, what should we be writing about? What kind of priority might we consider setting as an urgent question either for ourselves individually or collectively as a community? If we could choose any kind of research project, any kind of question, any kind of methodology, what kind of research and scholarly inquiry should we be involved in? What would make us happy, proud, and satisfied as scholars? Should we limit ourselves to forensics pedagogy? If not, what other questions should we take up? The answer to these questions will vary across our individual interests. Regardless of what we perceive to be important, it is vital that we make a choice, and not worry about whether it reflects a consensus interest only that it is important enough to compel us to think about it, to inquire, interrogate, analyze and write about it. Given the demands on our time we need to prioritize our scholarly interests.

Connecting Communication Theory to Forensics. What kinds of knowledge can forensics programs, directors, coaches, and professionals generate in the course of preparing a group of students to

talk about policies, literature, communication, politics, culture, and the arts, that we have not already generated—what kinds of questions remain as important opportunities? Can we produce knowledge about communication, leadership, team building, assimilation, competition, argumentation, etc.? If we have some degree of familiarity with theory and research in the field of organizational communication, culture, argumentation, interpersonal communication, or any other aspect of the communication discipline, can we take advantage of that knowledge to ask research questions about the student experience of competing in intercollegiate forensics?

Preparation for the "Real World." Does the college forensic experience we create for our students parallel "real world" experience in ways that a traditional college experience of education in the classroom cannot? If so, how are they different and what educational experiences can we demonstrate to stem directly or indirectly from participating in forensics? This question is essential to determining if we are a "value added" educational experience for the departments whose budgets support our activities Kay, 1990).

Forensic Educational Experience. What are the central research questions and problems that forensic educators should be concerned with? For example, what do we know about the process by which a novice competitor acquires the knowledge and skills to compete in one or more events? Do we have a theory of communication skill acquisition or any research demonstrating what teaching and coaching practices work best for various kinds of students? And if we had a body of theory, and teaching/coaching practices demonstrated to be successful through our research, in what ways could we contribute to the communication discipline's knowledge of skill development? How can we demonstrate and document the educational outcomes for students who choose to participate in forensics? How can forensic educators research and document the wide range of social skills that are developed over the course of a forensic education? And how do we connect that knowledge to the larger educational mission of departments of communication so that we can argue that forensics activities constitute important learning experiences for our students?

Professional Development. What are the professional development concerns that should be debated in our journals? What visions of the forensic educational experience should we be articulating, evaluating, and shaping for future forensic professionals? What training programs, methods, and practices are best for developing the next generation of forensic professionals? What are the obstacles to meaningful research for forensics coaches and how can they be overcome? How can forensic educators nurture, align, and coordinate research and writing interests with coaching and program administration interests? How can our teaching and coaching experience, scholarly inquiry and processes, obtain the professional recognition it deserves from our colleagues who do not coach?

Taking Advantage of Opportunities. How can we take what we have learned about various topics over the course of a season, in debate or individual events, and turn that knowledge into messages that reach a wider audience (see Herbeck, 1990; Madsen, 1990)? To what extent should forensic programs serve the status quo or an ethic for social justice? To what extent do we as directors, teachers, coaches, and judges challenge the cultural issues of sexism, racism, ageism, as well as other forms of discrimination or social ills framed as 'isms? Or, to what extent do our practices replicate these enduring social tensions in the pursuit of competitive success? How best do we educate our students about the risks and benefits, and the roles and responsibilities, of fitting in or out of expected norms for professional communicators? How can forensic programs develop a sense of citizenship in an increasingly alienated student body in our colleges and universities (see Chemerinsky, 2001)? How can we activate students' sense of political awareness, nurture political activism, and engage our students in significant issues of the day beyond the tournament format? How can forensics as an educational experience teach students the ability to constitute audiences for messages of significant social change and conscience? What responsibility do we have to advance the messages offered in our tournaments to larger audiences, empowered audiences, and real audiences uninvolved with the production of tournament results? What kinds of speaking activities, projects, or programs are directors and coaches pursuing with their students that do not fit into the competitive tournament format but advance understanding of communication theory and practices in the community? Can we write up these programs, document their planning and execution for others to study, and use them as significant ways to extend what is learned in the competitive format?

Enduring Questions About Competition. What is more important, the spoken word or the speaker? How do audiences process aesthetic assessments of speakers versus messages? How should they be processed? Are judges consistent in applying constructs of evaluation? How do we maximize the learning through intensive preparation for competition while minimizing the status associated with the human need for status markers? How do we teach students ethics? What do we know about ethics, the situations where ethics conflict, where the human need for status overwhelms the sense of connection to community values, and how to reconstruct relationships when ethical lapses occur? What responsibility do we have to identify and address the chal-

lenge of teaching, coaching, and judging students with disabilities (see Shelton & Matthews, 2001)?

Culture and International Education. In what ways can the forensic community in the United States reach out to the students of other nations? Can we engage them in conversations, dialogue, argument, exchanges, among other forms of interaction to build an international community of students and professionals interested in the ways that knowledge of the communication process creates meaning, relationships, communities, and the possibility of social change? Can we enrich our understanding of what constitutes an artful and appropriate message by studying the discourse of other cultures (see Logue & Shea, 1990)? In what ways can our best practices contribute to communication education in other countries and what can we learn from other countries? Should we be concerned about internationalizing forensics activities or is it enough to maintain a professional focus on activities in the United States?

Technology and the Post Modern World. What do tournaments do for us? What is their unique value? Why bother with tournaments given increasingly powerful forms of technology that allow real time interaction in geographically disaggregated locations? How can we continue to maintain the relevance and value of the speech tournament given recent developments in technology? What problems does technology pose for us and how might we as a professional community respond? Perhaps we should take up the study of change for forums and forms of scholarship. With new forms of technology come changes in the way humans shape and communicate knowledge. So it might be timely to ask if journals are the best way to disseminate research findings or are other electronic listservs taking over the role that journals were once designed to fulfill? If so, is this a good development, and if not, what should be done to recover the mission of our journals?

Concerns About Relevance. How can we connect our mission as a collection of forensic communities with the rest of the communication discipline? How do our practices and the experiences of participating in forensic activities help students to develop the marketable skills that career offices list for our graduates? How can we maintain our relevance to an education in communication studies or are our activities so specialized that untrained audiences cannot appreciate the product of our professional activities? Does that specialization make us an audience to ourselves and thus of little concern or relevance to the departments, universities, and communities we serve? If specialization does make us an audience to ourselves, how can we respond to that issue and ensure that our teaching and coaching activities remain relevant in the future (Kay, 1990)?

While some work has been started on many of these questions, they are far from framed well, not yet argued in detail to reveal the competing qualities of wisdom, and in terms of what we count as knowledge to support positions that might advance even a tentative answer, we are far from a well documented body of knowledge for the range of communication processes that make up speech and debate activities. Clearly, there is work enough for all of us to do. Yet, it seems we are held back from addressing these and other issues.

Obstacles

The obstacles to increasing the production of scholarship to pursue questions relevant to the forensic community are well known. However, I think the obstacles are significant and warrant identification in the hope of designing solutions to overcome them. Therefore I offer this brief review of the barriers to increasing scholarly activity organized around three basic categories of deficits: skill and training to conduct scholarly activity, resources needed to engage in scholarly activity, and professional rewards associated with research and writing about forensics.

Deficits in Skill and Training. (1) We lack training in research methods for the questions we might be interested in asking. (2) We often ignore our own scholarship in our journals and rehash old concerns without new insights. (3) We were not mentored to read the forensics discipline's literature, write papers and submit our work at conferences and to journals. (4) When directors retire or withdraw from forensics we lose mentors and mentoring opportunities regarding scholarly inquiry, processes, and productivity.

Deficits in Rewards. (1) We are not rewarded for research in forensic pedagogy; our scholarly and creative work is held in lower regard than that of those working in other areas of the communication discipline. (2) We fear rejection; decoding reviewers and editorial suggestions is difficult; revising and resubmitting a manuscript is time consuming; the result of a time consuming revision is difficult to assess and so expectancy theory undermines our motivation to persevere in the process of revising a manuscript for publication. (3) We want time for a normal life with family and friends; pursuing writing projects absorbs the time needed to maintain relationships and friendships.

Deficits in Resources. (1) We lack time, support, and resources. (2) There is a lack of coordination of resources, expertise, and efforts, when such elements might be available. (3) We want time to rest; pursuing writing projects absorbs the time needed to rest and regenerate for the next forensic season. And depending on whether this list covers the obstacles that you face, feel free to fill in the ones that I

missed. Regardless of these or other barriers, we are called to be scholars as well as coaches.

Solutions

First, we cannot be paralyzed with concern over where to start. We need to just get started. However, it seems possible, partly through this conference, to identify areas of on going concern to the forensic community.

Second, more specific actions might enhance the training of new members as they join the ranks of forensic professionals. For example, we might undertake more mentoring activities for undergraduate and graduate students. Presently, the training of graduate students might not always include the encouragement to submit one's work to conferences or journals. Making that a concern draws attention to the need for scholarly inquiry. Workshops at tournaments and conferences might be a first step to developing a more strategic approach to mentoring.

Third, we should consider drawing on communication theory in areas that might be related to forensics. Some examples: Forensics and organizational communication (Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006), forensics and leadership development, forensics and interpersonal communication, forensics and performance studies, forensics and critical/cultural studies, debate and public policy argumentation (Herbeck, 1990), debate and organizational decision-making processes. Some of this work has been done but the possibilities have by no means been exhausted. Given the large scope of the communication discipline these connections do not seem so far fetched. But the more traditional research program can inform forensic pedagogy with concepts and theories useful to advancing the educational concerns of the forensic community.

Fourth, we should engender cooperation across forensics programs in addressing research concerns of common interest. If you have a research concern about how novice students get assimilated into an existing team structure, a team building concern about how to create a championship culture, or a professional development concern about how to document your activities as a coach, chances are, other directors have similar concerns. Thus, our conversations about common problems we face as coaches, teachers, and directors can serve as a way to join forces, coordinate resources, and address an issue in a research project that would be more daunting for a single director to complete.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, we should seek to develop greater cooperation across the various professional organizations. Much progress has made in this area over the last decade or so. However, intensifying the degree of coordination helps frame important issues, alerts professionals across the communities of common concerns, maximizes the intellectual resources of those with a stake in the community, and holds much promise for addressing major priorities facing the forensics community.

Fifth, rather than taking on a major research project by one's self, it seems possible to take advantage of the prospect of forming research teams. In a related way, we can enlist the support of undergraduate research assistants or graduate students by involving them in our research and providing valuable training in research methods. Our students also have the chance to pursue opportunities for presentation at undergraduate research conferences through the development of greater expertise as researchers and writers.

Sixth, make writing an important part of your professional life by integrating it into the present time demands you face as a coaches and/or director. For example, it seems possible to offer workshops on writing and research at conferences, to hold summer and winter workshops on writing and research, to write while at tournaments--especially with a research team, and to write at the conferences we attend. In short, there is time in between all of the things we are called upon to do if we take advantage of it. We need to be creative and dedicated to do so, however.

Seventh, work on our follow through. Every year, many papers and panels are submitted to national and regional forensic interest groups for presentation at these organizations' annual meetings. We should view every convention paper as a submission for a journal; we need to be submitting our work for consideration for publication in our journals; we need to revise our work; we need to keep submitting. We need training, mentoring, experience, and support for the difficulties faced in evaluating our work (see Klumpp, 1990). However, this should not hold us back since we engage in the process of evaluation at every tournament as judges. We should extend our critical processes to reflection and writing about our practices.

Eighth, we need to write more, we need to write more often, and we need to write on a greater number of subjects. We can do so by reflecting on trends after every season, disappoints or success stories, theoretically interesting or frustrating developments. But reflect and write we must even it means tasking an undergraduate to take dictation on the way back from a tournament as we keep the minivan on the road at 2:00 am. We can take these reflections and make them the subject of our writing. For example, what role might reflective coaching logs or even blogs play in identifying issues of concern to the community?

Ninth, we should not let listserv discussions serve as a substitute forum for working on professional issues regarding theory, practice, professional development, community concerns or research. We should take listserv discussions and turn them into

papers, then into submissions, then into polished articles. We should spend less time on the more ephemeral forums for discussing professional issues of theory and practice on listservs and more time on permanent forums for our scholarship by polishing manuscripts and submitting them for publication.

Tenth, we cannot hope that someone else will carry the banner of scholarship for us so that we can continue to do what we have been doing if it does not involve scholarship. We must take responsibility for the intellectual health of our educational community. The way to raise the visibility and prestige of our scholarship is to refine it, to augment the body of work in our journals thus far with increasing sophistication in our writing and research. We have much scholarly work to be proud of but we also have more work to do. We need to get started.

A Modest Action Plan

First, if you are new to ranks of forensics professionals it seems appropriate to start gathering ideas. While you are at this conference write down your ideas for research and scholarly inquiry during each session, each evening before you socialize, during the conversations you have while socializing, and before you turn in for the night. Make each session, each conversation, and each new person you meet an important opportunity for sharing your thoughts, learning what others think, and developing ideas for scholarly projects concerning the many vital issues raised in the discussions here. Find out what forms of research expertise are represented by the folks attending this conference; try to align your research questions with contacts and interests of those who also are motivated to engage in scholarly activity. Apply the same strategies of networking, note-taking, and idea development to future conferences you attend at the regional and national level. In short, if you do not have the support and connections needed, commit yourself to building the professional network necessary to sustaining the kind of writing and research projects the forensic community needs.

Second, make a commitment to a challenging project. Before August 1, 2009, if you have not already done so, make a commitment to writing or co-authoring at least one paper. More importantly, before August 1, 2009, map out a program of research for yourself that can be executed in writing cycles of 1-2 years, 2-5 years, 5-10 years. Creating a scholarly agenda of such a nature commits you to the project, sustains your interest in writing, gives you something important to share with other forensic coaches and directors, allows you to celebrate the progress along the way, increases your stature among your students and administrators who evaluate your work, and constitutes an important intellectual investment in the future should you choose to get out of forensics and into a more traditional faculty position.

Getting started is not nearly as challenging as it was a decade or so ago. Given the good work of Dr. Dan Cronn-Mills in constructing a database for forensics literature, conducting a search as a starting point for a review of literature has never been more easy or comprehensive. A link to this index can be found on the National Forensics Association's website. Make a commitment so submit at least one paper or one panel to a forensics interest group at the national or regional level. The professional organizations that depend on your submissions can be found on the organizational web pages of these organizations: National Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, Eastern Communication Association, Southern Speech Communication Association, and Western States Communication Association.

Third, persevere. Determine what obstacle(s) hold you back from writing and research. Write them down. Now take the solutions that have been offered and see if they can address those obstacles. If the solution still falls short, consider alternative strategies. But do not give up an identity of a scholar unless it is absolutely necessary to do so to survive with all of your other duties and responsibilities. After aligning possible solutions with the obstacles you have identified, commit yourself to overcoming those obstacles through dedicated action. If possible, find colleagues who are willing to support you in your role as a scholar. Any of us who have had the good fortune to get a manuscript into print have also had friends and colleagues who were willing to read our work and offer honest feedback.

Fourth, if you have never submitted anything, train up on the process of participating in the "big conversation." Find a mentor if one has not yet found you. There are several at this conference and chances are, at least one is sitting within an arm's reach of you right now. Ask someone to demystify the process of submitting for conferences or to journals for publication; to explain how a journal works; to provide a context for the process of moving an idea along from conceptualization, to drafting, to revising, to submitting, to revising and resubmitting. Many individuals at this conference (as well as those you might know who are not attending the conference) have a substantial amount of experience in evaluating manuscripts and would be more than happy to sit down with you to talk about the process of getting a manuscript into print. But if you don't ask, you'll never learn. If you did not attend the conference or did not talk to folks about the submission process, an excellent essay that explains the expectations for quality work can be found in James F. Klumpp's (1990) article, "Wading into the Stream of Forensics Research: A View from the Editorial Office."

Fifth, surround yourself with other creative people. Create or join a research team. Make a date to write at tournaments where you see other members of your research team over the course of the season. If the paper is not finished by this time next year, finish in the fall of 2009, or the next semester, or the next. But commit yourself to the project, take actions to begin the project, and celebrate whatever incremental progress you can make toward its completion. Scholarship is a time intensive activity but taking the long view of the process will reduce some of the psychological barriers to getting started.

In closing, I hope you have a start on developing some strategies to overcome the obstacles to scholarship that forensic directors face, that you can become creative in finding time for writing, and that you can find others to support you in your work. I hope you will become motivated to start writing, continue writing, or write more, by yourself or with some one else, or a writing team, and that you will submit your work to the appropriate outlets soon. Much good work has been produced in response to the periodic calls for research. However, as a scholarly community, we have much more to offer and much more work to do to in fulfilling our obligations as scholars, coaches, and program directors. We need to get started.

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