The Usefulness and Uselessness of Forensics A Speaker & Gavel Special Issue

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The original call for this special issue was for scholars to submit papers exploring the usefulness and or the uselessness of forensics. There has been considerable discussion (for many years) at the NCA (National Communication Association), at other regional conferences, at tournaments, among coaches and students, and among administrators about the utility of forensics as an activity. Therefore, the purpose of this issue was to explore the debate. When the review process was complete, two papers emerged as the overwhelming favorites among the reviewers. Other scholars were chosen to write responses to each of these two chosen papers. In total, this special issue has four papers, two original papers, and two responses.

The first paper in this special issue is, “By Any Other Name: On the Merits of Moving Beyond Forensics” by James Kimble. In his analysis, Kimble (2012) argues the activity of forensics needs to go through a renaming process. He describes how medical sciences has overtaken the name forensics. Kimble provides an in-depth discussion of medical science media and its effects on forensics, which he believes leads to confusion for many students, academics, administrators, and can lead to economic and structural problems. In the piece, he offers suggestions for new names for the activity that he feels may best represent the activity; though he does admit none of the names are perfect. This piece is appropriate for this special issue because it highlights (in Kimble’s opinion) the uselessness of forensics itself as a term to describe this activity.

In response to Kimble’s piece, Outzen and Cronn-Mills (2012) wrote, “What’s in a Name? Defending Forensics: A Response to Kimble’s ‘By Any Other Name.’” The authors contend forensics has not lost the battle for its name because in their opinion a battle does not exist. Outzen and Cronn-Mills believe changing the name from forensics is not needed because it best represents the activity. They provide a description of how changing the name of forensics will lead to further confusion over what the activity best represents. Therefore, the authors contend the term forensics still is a useful term to best represent the broader speech and debate activity.

The third piece in this special issue is by Jessica Furgerson, “I Need Help Finding It: Understanding the Benefits of Research Skill Acquisition in Competitive Forensics.” Furgerson (2012) describes how research skills (something promoted highly in forensics) has been underexplored in forensics research. In her analysis, she discusses how little is known about the actual research skills individuals learn through forensics competition/training. She concludes that through forensics competition/training, individuals develop a higher level of research skills and a higher level of critical thinking. It is through this analysis that Furgerson (2012) is able to show another useful aspect of forensics, research skill acquisition.
The final piece is an elaboration on Furgerson’s (2012) piece. Diers’ (2012) piece, “Help? Not If You Don’t Know What to Look for: Applying Social Cognitive Theory to Program Evaluation in Competitive Forensics” explains how scholars should do more than just look at skill/research acquisition as a benefit of the forensics. Diers (2012) explains how forensics researchers and coaches should do more to incorporate theory into decision making, team building, goal-setting, and program evaluation. She specifically suggests the use of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives and Bandura’s social cognitive theory as options for theories to incorporate into forensics decision-making and management. Ultimately, Diers’ suggestion for greater theoretical incorporation suggests a way to make forensics more useful, as one critique of forensics is that its research is atheoretical (Croucher, 2006, 2011).

Collectively, these pieces represent four different opinions on the usefulness or useless of forensics. I thank each of the writers for their contributions to this issue. I continue to thank the reviewers and the rest of the editorial staff for the continued support.

References


Diers, A. (2012). Help? Not if you don’t know what to look for: Applying social cognitive theory to program evaluation in competitive forensics. Speaker & Gavel, 49(2), 96-104.


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