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By Any Other Name: On the Merits of Moving Beyond Forensics

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Abstract

This essay argues that the interscholastic speaking and debating activity that calls itself *forensics* has effectively lost the battle for its own name. As students of and experts in rhetoric and performance, members of the forensics community should be the first to recognize the importance of an undisputed name. Yet the community continues to call itself by a name that medical science has overtaken. The resulting confusion does the community no favors and weakens the activity within the academy. The essay concludes that it might be time for a new name that the activity can claim for its own.

*Keywords:* Forensics, debate, forensic science, speech

Introduction

Most literary experts who have studied Willa Cather’s writings agree her prose was typically “matchless in its clarity, beauty, and simplicity” (Middleton, 1990, p. 22). So when the author described her recollections of William Jennings Bryan in a turn-of-the-century profile (Cather, 1900/1949), it was unlikely her words caused any unwarranted confusion among readers. Indeed, when she wrote, “his dining room was a forum,” she hastened to explain her meaning instantly: “I do not mean that he talked incessantly, but that when he did talk it was in a manner forensic” (p. 332). For the sure-footed Cather, the adjective *forensic* was clearly not a source of ambiguity but a rather a means of clarification. Readers surely understood her to mean that Bryan spoke with his guests in a rational, argumentative fashion about the affairs of the day.

Over 100 years later, the *New York Times*, itself a source of respected prose, offered praise for Kathy Reichs’s novel *206 Bones*. “The forensic procedures take center stage,” noted the review, “in this cleverly plotted and maintained series” (Stasio, 2009, “206 Bones,” para. 1). As in Cather’s profile, the *Times*’s use of the term *forensic* probably caused little or no confusion among readers of the review. They were well aware, as is most everybody nowadays, that the word typically has little or nothing to do with language, but rather almost always refers to any of several branches of legal science.

What a difference a century can make to a culture’s word choices. Few readers in Cather’s day could have conceived of the forensic science of the 21st century and its attendant cult of fandom. In contrast, few readers in 2012 are able to grasp the notion that *forensic* could ever have had as a default meaning such activities as argumentation, presentations, or competitive discourse—as opposed to crime scenes, autopsy tables, and *CSI*. In both 1900 and 2009, the meaning of the adjective *forensic* was abundantly clear, meaning that writers of the day could use it without much fear of confusing readers. In between these
two points in time, however, the default meaning of the word had changed dramatically.

The transformation of the adjective *forensic* in the last several generations has had important implications for the noun *forensics*, particularly for the activity that continues to go by that name. Readers of this essay surely know the activity involves a number of speaking events, such as declamation, dramatic interpretation, parliamentary or policy debate, and extemporaneous speaking. Those involved in the activity also know that most (although not all) of these events take place on a competitive basis, and involve active coaching, team dynamics, interscholastic or intercollegiate travel, and a host of academic and personal benefits.

Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people outside of what Billings called the forensics “bubble” (2001, p. 16) share these same understandings. From the giggling frosh who asks if the tournament this week will involve a dissecting competition, to the tenure committee member who cannot comprehend that the Director of Forensics has no understanding of crime scene pedagogy, to the publisher who once sent me a textbook on forensic psychology, it is increasingly clear the term *forensic* is no longer contested terrain. Indeed, by this point, I believe speech and debate enthusiasts have essentially lost the battle for their activity’s own name.

The aim of this special issue of *Speaker & Gavel* is to assess whether or not forensics is useful or useless. In this essay, I take up what appears to be an even more fundamental issue: has the name of the activity—*forensics*—become useless? I submit that the name has indeed become not only useless, but represents a nostalgic hearkening back to a time when the primary meaning of *Quincy* (at least for Americans) was the name for a town in Illinois, not that of a popular television show featuring a charismatic medical examiner. Since that time, though, the de facto possession of *forensics* has changed hands, leaving those involved in competitive speaking with a name that, for the vast majority of the public, no longer means what it once did.

I should emphasize that I have come to this viewpoint after multiple years of involvement with (and retirement from) an activity I value tremendously. In a competitive career spanning my high school and undergraduate years I participated in both policy and Lincoln-Douglas debate formats even as I competed in most of the available individual events. As a coach, assistant director and director, I went on to work with both debaters and individual events competitors on a number of teams. It was not, however, until the late 1990s that I began to suspect that the titular name for this group of activities was under siege.

Now that I am retired from involvement in coaching or directing, it has become even more evident to me that the words *forensic* and *forensics* are no longer a useful way to designate competitive speaking activities. Moreover, I am convinced that it would be ill-advised for the community to fail to address the issue of its own tattered moniker. If one agrees with Kenneth Burke about the paramount importance of names (e.g., 1984, p. 4), then it is necessary to confront the issue directly. As a means of beginning the confrontation, this essay forwards three claims: 1) *forensic*, which never fit speech and debate activities
well to begin with, has now definitively migrated to the various fields of legal medicine; 2) this migration fosters misunderstandings about the speech and debate community that have potentially significant consequences; and 3) the community does have a few remedial options—including the difficult notion of moving beyond the name that that the activity has effectively lost.

The Forensic Migration

Initially, it is important to consider the migratory trajectory of the adjective forensic over the last several generations. The best place to start is probably with Aristotle, whose influential use of the word featured prominently in his Rhetoric. Therein the philosopher argued that there are only three identifiable species of the rhetorical art. The forensic variety, he stipulated, involves a law case, a judge or jury, features attacks and defenses, engenders discussions of past events (such as a crime that has or has not been committed), and seeks justice (1358b, trans. 1954). It seems clear from even a quick review of his discussion that by forensic rhetoric he was referring to discourse that takes place in the courts or a similar legal system.

But to accept Aristotle’s definition is to accept a difficult conclusion: even from its emergence in the late 19th century, the activity that speech and debate folks would gradually come to call forensics was a poor candidate for the name. It is possible to argue some of the earliest intercollegiate debate contests exhibited some of Aristotle’s forensic elements, such as the requirement for a judge as well as the use of strategic attacks and defenses on the other side’s arguments. For the most part, however, intercollegiate and interscholastic speech activities immediately embraced a tradition that bore only a casual similarity to the classical understanding of forensic discourse. Less than ten years after the Civil War, for example, T. Edward Egbert’s winning speech at the first Interstate Oratory contest offered a stirring encomium to the power of oratory itself—a message that most resembled Aristotle’s epideictic variety of rhetoric (1874/1891). Not much later, the first intercollegiate debates seem to have focused on what Aristotle would likely have recognized as deliberative resolutions, such as whether or not railroad rates should be fixed, or progressive inheritance taxes levied (Trueblood, 1907, p. 388; see also Ringwalt, 1897).

As the title of Trueblood’s 1907 article indicated, the adjective forensic was indeed being used by the turn of the century to describe both debate and oratory contests, as well as the developing college and secondary curriculum courses that supported them (see also Weaver, 1916). Ironically, however, as the activity evolved it continued to separate itself from the classical conception of forensic discourse. While the name forensics has remained, forensicators have gradually added to the original policy debates and oratorical contests such events as values-based debate, student congress, several genres of public speaking, and various forms of literature interpretation and performance. Little reflection is required to conclude that many of these additional events bear little or no resemblance to Aristotle’s understanding of the forensic species of rhetoric. In short, forensics did not start out as very forensic—and it has gradually become even more distant from the classical basis of its own name.
Even as speech and debate activities have evolved away from the root of their titular name, however, the exploding sub-fields of the forensic sciences have embraced it. To be sure, the use of the adjective *forensic* to modify *science, medicine,* or related areas is not a recent innovation. In fact, in the European tradition the term *forensic medicine* was being used as early as 1650, though the meaning of the phrase was still more medical than legal at the time (Watson, 2011, p. 2). Still, the emergence of forensic science as a coherent set of formalized disciplines is much more recent, having taken place over the last fifty years or so (Daéid, 2010, p. 1). In that time, myriad areas of forensic investigation have emerged, including computer forensics, forensic entomology, forensic accounting, forensic serology, and forensic psychology. Most ominously for anyone in the speech and debate community who is interested in keeping their traditional name intact, there are even experts in forensic stylistics and forensic linguistics, which involve “the scientific study of language as applied to forensic purposes and contexts” (McMenamin, 2002, p. 67).

The phenomenon of forensic science as an ubiquitous aspect of popular culture is an even more recent development. Despite older precedents such as the occasional scene from the mysteries of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, it was not until the appearance of the television show *Quincy, M.E.* in the late 1970s that the idea of forensic medicine truly captured public attention. The show’s unexpected popularity soon inspired a new generation of forensic dramas (Jentzen, 2009, p. 184). These days, it is difficult to avoid various versions of forensic science on television (e.g., *Bones, Cold Case, Crossing Jordan, CSI* and its spinoffs, *NCIS, Without a Trace,* motion pictures (e.g., *88 Minutes, Conviction, Murder by Numbers, Pathology*), and blockbuster novels (e.g., works by Patricia Cornwell, Iris Johansen, Alane Ferguson, and the aforementioned Kathy Reichs). As Foltyn (2008) pointed out, “the grisly cadaver of scientific and forensic investigation” is now “propagating like locusts across media land” (p. 154).

Is it any wonder, then, that the default meaning of *forensic* has gradually migrated away from the speech and debate community? After all, the activity “usually resides in the shadows of football, basketball, and even field hockey” (Moscowitz, 2005, p. 61)—and that is just within the boundaries of the school or campus itself. When it comes to the much larger arena of the popular imagination, it is difficult if not impossible to compete against forensic science’s massively entertaining dramas and the way they have inundated the entire culture. For better or worse, it is clear the term *forensic* now has a different primary meaning than it did even 50 years ago.

**Misunderstandings and Consequences**

Losing default control over one’s own name is bad enough, but speech and debate enthusiasts are increasingly finding the migration of *forensic* has led to both misunderstandings and their attendant consequences. A useful way to conceptualize the misunderstandings is to adopt an intercultural perspective, which suggests that debaters, individual events speakers, and their coaches belong to a culture that is like no other. To be more precise, they are members of a co-
culture, or even a set of co-cultures (Orbe, 1998). As with all cultural units, the grouping possesses its own identifiable communication style, language choices, behaviors, and much more. Over time, it has even developed what Aden called an “aura of mystery and specialization” (1991, p. 100). These qualities allow for identification within the group even as they serve to separate the co-culture from other co-cultures and from the larger societal culture. The result is that an invisible, but formidable barrier exists between forensicators and non-forensicators. Anyone wanting to join the grouping must learn its specialized language and behaviors before they can become a functioning part of the community.

Because the grouping of debaters, speakers, and their coaches forms a relatively discrete community, it makes sense that it has continued to embrace its traditional label. From an internal perspective, one could argue that the nature of that label is relatively inconsequential. After all, from within the “closed nature of the forensics community” (Aden, 1991, p. 101), everyone understands what the activity’s name is and what it is supposed to represent. Historically, there are prominent examples of cultural groupings that have adopted names meant more for internal understanding than for external use. Members of the Arapaho tribe, for example, call themselves hinono’ei, which translates as “our people” (Anderson, 2001, p. 243), while the secretive Sicilian and Italian-American mafia continue to use the name Cosa Nostra, meaning “our thing” (Dickie, 2004, p. 17). Neither name suggests that its culture had to be overly concerned about external impressions when it was adopted.

But the forensic community is not relatively isolated, nor is it an ultra-secret society. Rather, it is a co-cultural grouping whose continued existence largely depends on the favor of individuals in the “dominant cultural sphere” (Ramírez-Sánchez, 2008, p. 89). Regrettably, most people external to the activity do not understand its nature at all. Jensen and Jensen observed that “it is not uncommon for those outside of the forensic arena to be unfamiliar with the nature of the forensic and debate culture.” Furthermore, they added, “misconceptions about what constitutes forensic education and competition, such as associations with forensic medicine, and all events being generalized as debating issues in face-to-face settings are commonplace” (2006, p. 21). To the extent that the activity might rely on overcoming such misunderstandings for its health or even its survival, the community continuously finds itself on unstable ground.

The activity’s name is perhaps the central issue in these misunderstandings. For those outside of the activity, it is normal nowadays to think that forensic matters involve courts and crime scene investigations and dead bodies. Any such person coming across a forensic team in an interscholastic setting is bound to be bewildered. It is no wonder that teams are constantly explaining themselves, such as when the Bethel College Forensics web page advises visitors that “if you’re looking for information about the field of forensic science and criminology, you’re not in the right place!” (What is Bethel Forensics?, 2011). Similarly, an on-line letter to prospective recruits (and their parents) from the Tampa Plant Forensics Club & Team begins this way: “Considering the Plant High School Forensics Team? No, we are NOT an anatomy science crime club! We are a debate and public speaking/performance club” (PHS forensics, n.d.). Given the
popular perceptions of what *forensics* is, these teams are wise to offer a pre-emptive caveat when communicating with people outside of the co-culture.\(^2\)

Does this confusion truly matter, or is it just an annoying inconvenience? Arguably, the forensic activity’s compromised name has consequences on three fronts. First, with some exceptions, speech and debate programs rely on administrative hierarchies for space, budgets, staffing, transportation, and (occasionally) promotion or tenure opportunities for coaches. At times, administrators making such decisions are (or were) themselves part of the forensic activity, and so it is probably safe to assume that they understand what forensics is. But it is likely more often the case that administrators do not understand the activity, and even those who do cannot remain in their supervisory position forever. Sooner or later, programs are thus bound to face administrators who are confused by the term *forensics* in their budget reports. Coaches seeking promotion or tenure can easily face a similarly daunting situation. Regrettably, in an era of tight budgets and cost-cutting (M. Bartanen, 2006), programs and positions that are confusing to administrators can find themselves in jeopardy. As Audrey Cunningham pointed out, “our community has seen many programs eliminated when a new dean or department chairperson with a lack of knowledge about forensics wants to cut budgets” (2005, p. 15). For their part, Holm and Miller (2004) concluded, “it is important to the survival of individual programs and the health of the activity at large that we take steps to insure that administrators understand the valuable services provided by a forensics program.” “Self promotion,” they added, is “a basic survival skill” (p. 24). Unfortunately, a compromised name within an impersonal bureaucratic structure makes the process of self-promotion much harder to do—and ultimately puts programs at risk.

A second consequence involves the recruitment of new generations of competitors. Attracting recruits is, of course, a requirement for any team that wants to maintain its existence over a period of years. But just as today’s target age group—generally ranging from 14 to 19—cannot remember a time when there was no internet, neither can any but the very oldest remember a time when popular culture was not awash in every conceivable form of forensic science. For most of them, then, *forensics* has never had anything to do with debate or speaking. To hear that a forensics team is recruiting at school must be shocking indeed. “Many of us,” noted Moscowitz, “have fielded various renditions of this question, such as ‘Do you investigate dead people?’, ‘Do you practice lab science?’, and ‘Is that like on C.S.I.? ’” (2005, p. 61). Moscowitz was right to suggest that these questions can on occasion represent a good recruitment opportunity, but one wonders how many students—many of them with a great need for forensic skills, or with amazing competitive potential—are turned away by the name itself and thus never think to ask. While it is true, as Moscowitz concluded, the community should strive to let people “know that enhancing communication is what you and your program are all about, not seeing dead people” (p. 64), doing so is largely impossible for potential recruits who never get beyond the off-putting label and the images it engenders.

The confusion inherent in the name *forensics* also produces a third consequence, which is essentially a combination of the first two. To wit, if it is the
goal of the activity either to expand or just to avoid long-term atrophy in the number of schools fielding teams (whether regionally or nationally), then there is an ongoing need to foster and nurture new programs. But such an endeavor requires convincing both administrators and students at new schools of the innate value of the activity—a task made that much more difficult at schools that have never heard of this activity with the seemingly bizarre name. On college campuses, the challenge can be compounded by academic turf battles. For example, when a forensic science program already exists in a given curriculum, gaining permission to use the word forensic for a new speech and/or debate team will typically be an uphill battle. Once again, the co-culture’s continued use of a name whose default meaning has migrated elsewhere has introduced not only common misunderstandings, but consequences that potentially threaten the well-being of the activity.

Considering Remedial Options

Given the problematic state of the activity’s name, a few suggestions are in order. However, I should preface my suggestions with a caveat: as I am no longer involved with forensic activities on a day-to-day basis, my stake in the future of the activity is not what it once was. It is, rather, up to those who have directly personal or professional stakes in forensics who should judge whether or not my concerns are worth further consideration and, if so, what responsive measures are appropriate. In any case, I am confident that there are many more possible ways forward than have occurred to me thus far.

That being said, it seems to me that any potential responses to the activity’s name-crisis fall into four categories. The first is the most conservative, as it involves simply waiting to see what happens. In this view, it is possible to argue that the popularity of forensic science is only a fad that is bound to fade sooner or later. If that turns out to be the case, once the national culture is no longer awash in the movies, novels, and television shows that presently venerate the status of medical examiners and crime scene investigators, the name forensic will again be available. Such an approach has the obvious advantages of being simple and free. Yet it is also based in hopeful speculation about the future, meaning that it is impossible to assess whether or not it would be successful.

A second potential response, to borrow one of my high school debate coach’s favorite strategies, constitutes a minor repair, one that some teams already use. Specifically, since debate and individual events tournaments have gradually diverged in many variants of the activity, it is increasingly common to see teams specializing in one or the other. This trend in some respects eliminates or greatly reduces the need for the higher-level term forensics. Indeed, there are already teams that call themselves “debate teams,” “speech teams,” or “individual events” teams, opting to avoid the use of forensic or forensics altogether. Ball State University’s team, for example, uses its website to describe the “Individual Events Program,” which is “best known as the speech team.” The word forensics does not appear on the page (Individual Events, 2012). Such a relatively subtle shift in the community’s language, if adopted widely, could avoid
many of the problems I have outlined above, even as it adroitly sidesteps the growing juggernaut that is forensic science.

A third category of response would involve more forceful measures. If the name *forensics* is important to the speech and debate community for reasons of tradition or preference, perhaps it is time to try to seize a portion of it back in some way. An aggressive public relations campaign, for instance, could be instrumental in helping to re-establish the activity’s presence and its name in the public arena. Given the talents and gifts of so many who are members of the co-culture, it might be possible to produce a creative and compelling campaign that might have a chance at gaining attention. Unfortunately, such an effort would require not only coordination across several aspects of the community, but also significant funding; PR campaigns are not inexpensive to sponsor.

A final potential response—and likely the most controversial of the four—envisions the activity eschewing *forensics* altogether and adopting a new name. If, as I have suggested, the activity’s moniker is no longer all that accurate, one could argue that such a change has been in order for some time. The experience of the Speech Communication Association’s transformation into the National Communication Association is instructive in this respect. The change was not without controversy, and even angst. There were traditionalists who felt that the existing name was not only sufficient, but a better descriptor of the community’s historical interests and activities. Others disagreed passionately, believing that the word *speech* no longer described most of the organization’s varied research agendas, and also that it linked the association with an outdated frame of mind, making public relations that much more challenging. The latter group won the vote and the change was begun in 1997—and, to all appearances, the organization has moved forward better than it was before (Gaudino, 1997).

For forensics to move beyond *forensics* would require a similar discussion. Not only would the community need to agree that change is necessary, but also to agree on what the change should be. Personally, I believe that some variation on *rhetoric* would be fitting, based in classical ideals, and uncluttered by other communities (although, admittedly, the word *rhetoric* suffers from a negative ethos for some; see Bryant, 1953, pp. 402-403). Other alternatives might include variations on *argumentation* (following the spirit of the 1974 Sedalia conference; see Faules, Rieke, & Rhodes, 1978, p. 23), *oratory*, *sophistics*, *platform*, or—to stay close to the original name—*forum*.

Each of these possibilities, and the many more that have not come to mind, have advantages and disadvantages. None of them, unfortunately, present a perfect choice. Yet as the experience with NCA suggests, even the most extreme option of adopting a new name for the co-culture is feasible. In this case, given the misunderstandings the activity’s current name can easily create when communicating to important external audiences, it might well be a change whose time has come.

Change in traditional cultures is always difficult—and forensics has a powerful affinity for tradition. But tradition (and its sibling, nostalgia) are poor coping mechanisms in a changing world. The word *forensic* has transformed its default meaning dramatically since Willa Cather used it so confidently over a
For the speech and debate co-culture to continue to use it as if nothing has changed since that time suggests that the activity is either not paying attention to the world outside its bubble or that it is unconcerned with its public image. For this reason, my goal herein has been to call attention to a problem that I fear is much less visible from inside the activity. Everyone in the community can agree, I think, that although forensics programs are “an innovation of the turn of the twentieth century,” they remain an excellent fit for educational models in the present century (K. M. Bartanen, 1998, p. 1). That attribute, thankfully, has not changed—even if the meaning of the activity’s own name has.

References


**Endnotes**

1 Note that McMenamin (2002) does not feel that it is necessary in his book to define *forensic*, since it is apparently the norm to assume it refers to a legal context.

2 The National Forensic Association itself includes this line on its main web page: “If you’re looking for information about forensic science, you won’t
find it here—instead, we encourage you to search other sites by using terms such as ‘forensic science not speech’” (National Forensic Association, 2012).

3 In fact, the National Forensic League’s official vision is that “every child in the United States will be empowered to become an effective communicator, ethical individual, critical thinker, and leader in a democratic society,” a goal that it hopes to achieve by growing the activity in new schools (About/History, 2007).

4 For an example of a high school web page that uses a similar strategy (only mentioning forensic when referring to the National Forensic League), see About us/history (n.d.).

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