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# I Need Help Finding it: Understanding the Benefits of Research Skill Acquisition in Competitive Forensics

Jessica L. Furgerson

*Ohio University*, [jf148010@ohio.edu](mailto:jf148010@ohio.edu)

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## **I Need Help Finding it Understanding the Benefits of Research Skill Acquisition in Competitive Forensics**

Jessica L. Furgerson

### **Abstract**

Research skill acquisition is an invaluable but under explored benefit of forensics participation. Although coaches, students, and administrators acknowledge that participants gain research skills via forensics, little is known about what these skills are and how they specifically benefit students. This paper isolates three specific research dimensions students learn while participating in competitive speech and debate: locating, examining, and applying source material. Connections are then drawn between these dimensions and the attainment of high level learning resulting in the creation of educational outcomes related to research skill acquisition via forensics. Understanding the process and importance of research skill acquisition is critical to address the need for forensics educators to articulate ways in which forensics pedagogy and larger educational goals are connected.

*Keywords:* Research skills, forensics, speech and debate, information literacy, educational objectives

### **Introduction**

As a former competitor in forensics my research abilities were honed via countless debate assignments, the writing of multiple speeches, and daily extemp filing. It was not until I began teaching that I realized that although research came easily to me as a student, the same can often not be said for those who were not exposed to the rigorous research process inherent within competitive forensics. Approximately 75 percent of undergraduates admit they are either uncomfortable or somewhat uncomfortable with conducting library research required to complete a course assignment (Kunkel, Weaver, & Cook, 1996). In contrast, the majority of those who participate in forensics report feeling this participation provided them with the advantage of research skills, with 74 percent of those surveyed reporting an improvement in their research skills after competing in forensics (McMillian & Mancillas, 1991), highlighting the capacity of forensics as not just a competitive activity, but an instrumental one in teaching students valuable research skills.

The correlation between participation in forensics and research skill acquisition is certainly not new as numerous scholars have highlighted this benefit (see Greenstreet, 1993; Minch, 2006; Mitchell, 1998; Preston, 1992; Parcher, 1998). Much of this scholarship focuses on the benefits of improving one's research skills including future academic and workplace success (see Lawhorn, 2008; Loudon, 2010; Presenton, 1992). Little discussion, however, has been given to the types of research skills gained or how students develop these skills. Subse-

quently, existing literature fails to demonstrate a connection between research skill acquisition and the goals of competitive forensics on a larger scale.

Establishing these connections heeds the call of Kelly (2010) when he notes, “Forensics programming at the collegiate level needs to be reconceptualized in order to communicate the natural alignment between forensics pedagogy and institutional expectations of programmatic value” (p. 130). Therefore, this piece outlines the specific research dimensions students learn via participation in forensics, namely, location, examination, and application. Connections are then made between these skills and the larger aims of forensics in an educational setting, thus addressing a critical weakness in the literature surrounding research skill acquisition and forensics.

### **Research Skill Acquisition**

At all levels, and in all areas of competitive forensics, research is an integral step in becoming tournament ready. Whether it is compiling files for extemporaneous speaking, constructing a public address speech, assembling a debate case, or even getting an oral interpretation piece ready for competition, research is a prerequisite. The research skills developed in forensics are three fold: locating, examining, and applying.

#### **Locating**

The first, and most basic, research skill employed by students in forensics is *locating*, or the act of finding and compiling information. In many instances, locating resources goes beyond simply performing a simple Internet search, and instead requires students to find both a large quantity (breadth) of resources and a diversity (depth) of resources. Bearing in mind that each event will have a different research demand, the research skill set of locating is both variable and adaptive in terms of rigor and time. Students engaged in limited preparation events and debate will continuously engage in the process of locating resources, whereas students preparing an oral interpretation selection may only partake in locating resources at the onset of the preparation process.

The act of locating resources while preparing a speech, case, or performance piece accomplishes two things: (a) encourages students to seek out information in multiple forms and formats; and (b) provides forensics competitors hands on experience with information technologies such as databases, electronic publications, and library systems. These basic skills contribute to an increase in a student’s information literacy. Humes (1999) of the National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning explains:

being information literate requires knowing how to clearly define a subject or area of investigation; select the appropriate terminology that expresses the concept or subject under investigation; formulate a search strategy that takes into consideration different sources of information and the variable ways that information is organized. (p. 1)

Therefore, the initial act of locating resources contributes to research skill acquisition in forensics by tasking students to wrestle with information in ways that improve their research abilities and information literacy.

### **Examining**

Second, forensics competitors gain the skill of *examining*, or critically evaluating sources based on numerous criteria including usefulness, timeliness, and appropriateness. Although it is a good idea to cast a broad net in the locating phase of research, not all of the resources students find during this process should be utilized in the final product. As such, students must engage in a process of examining the resources they have found based on the constraints of their specific event, with the most leniency granted to those in the oral interpretation categories. Standards of acceptability within forensics necessitate that students carefully examine their sources. For example, the National Forensics Association (NFA) rules for the use of evidence in debate specify evidence come from a published source that is available to the public and can be verified by tournament staff, and further stipulate that speeches within the category of informative be both factual and realistic (National Forensics Association, n.d.a & National Forensics Association, n.d.c). Operating within the constraints established by the governing body requires that students actively, and critically, examine their resources using criteria such as those put forth by the *Style Manual for Communication Studies* (Bourhis, Adams, & Titsworth, 2008), which include clarity, verifiability, competency, objectiveness, and relevance.

The act of examining resources builds student's research skill set in two key ways: (a) students learn to become critical consumers of information; and (b) students become more knowledgeable about their topic. First, by examining sources students begin asking questions about the author's motivations, possible limitations of the reference, and the overall effectiveness of the source; these questions are essential to the ethical and knowledgeable use of information in so far as students are grappling with the information rather than incorporating it without question. In a broader context, "students who know how to use information resources and who recognize the essential characteristics and purposes of published materials have a critical advantage when adding to their knowledge base" (Quarton, 2003, p. 123). Thus, the secondary act of examining resources contributes to research skill acquisition via forensics by encouraging students to reflect on the sources they draw from in ways that promote ethical scholarship and an increased awareness of a topic.

### **Applying**

Finally, students competing in forensics learn the skill of *applying*, or incorporating, the resources they have gathered and evaluated into a final product. Although differing based on event, students competing in forensics must learn how to orally cite information in a way that adds rather than detracts from the delivery of the speech and conforms to organizational standards and expectations. According to the NFA bylaws (n.d.b), contestants competing in either Informative or Persuasion are expected to use and cite multiple sources throughout the speech and competitors in Lincoln-Douglas Debate are expected to provide the author's name and qualifications, a full date, and a title of the source when presenting evidence. Although not identical in all forensic organizations,

the necessity to incorporate sources in a clear and ethical manner requires that students master the skill of applying resources.

Applying builds the research skill set of students in forensics in two distinct ways: (a) an improvement in speaker ethos and logos; and (b) an understanding of ethical scholarship. Initially, by learning how to apply and incorporate resources appropriately, students improve the quality of their performance. Sprague and Stuart (2005) explain, “By giving credit for supporting materials, you build your own credibility by showing the range of your research” (p. 198). The incorporation of resources, when balanced with effective prose or narration, allows students to demonstrate their knowledge on the topic, increasing their ethos and logos as a speaker and subsequently their chances for success. Additionally, the expectation that all sources will be orally cited socializes the student into ethical practices of scholarship and places greater emphasis on students to avoid plagiarism and the misrepresentation of other’s work. Therefore, the act of applying resources contributes to research skill acquisition via forensics by providing students with guidelines for the implementation of resources in ways that further promote ethical scholarship and attention to one’s ethos and logos as a speaker.

No matter what forensics events a student participates in, research skill acquisition occurs at the levels of locating, examining, and applying resources. Each of these dimensions provides students with practical experience necessary for success in forensics, academic settings, and the professional world. Additionally, these skills work in conjunction with one another to develop a student’s research abilities and information literacy.

### **Why Research Skill Acquisition Matters**

Forensics is inherently an educational activity which seeks to provide students with more than just opportunities for competition. However as Paine (2010) explains, “in a time of shrinking budgets and increasingly insistent calls for accountability, we must develop clear connections between what we do as a community and what we therefore have the right to say our students learn” (p. 8). The preceding discussion of research skill acquisition proves that forensics does in fact facilitate student learning of key research skills. Yet, as Paine does with his exploration of learning objectives in the event of Rhetorical Criticism, the process of locating, examining, and applying resources must also be connected to larger educational goals; this is achieved via an examination of research skill acquisition through the lens of Bloom’s Taxonomy as well as the development of educational objectives.

### **Bloom’s Taxonomy**

Initially, Bloom’s “Taxonomy of Educational Objectives is a framework for classifying statements of what we expect or intend students to learn as a result of instruction” (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 212). Divided into six categories (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), the taxonomy represents a cumulative hierarchy that students move through as they achieve mastery at each level – beginning with knowledge and culminating in evalua-

tion. Research skill acquisition, as outlined above, accesses each level of Bloom's taxonomy, thus facilitating growth in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning domains.

The first skill of locating resources taps into the first two levels of the Taxonomy. The act of locating encourages students to move through level one, knowledge, by increasing their understanding of a topic in terms of specifics and generalizations, and level two, comprehension, by teaching students how to translate, interpret, and extrapolate information.

The skill of examining progresses students to the fourth and sixth levels of the taxonomy. The process of examining accesses level four, analysis, by teaching students to explore characteristics of their research, such as appropriateness and clarity, and level six, evaluation, by pushing students to critically engage their research and the research of others based on external standards of acceptability.

Finally, the act of applying accesses the remaining levels of application and synthesis. Characterized by applying knowledge to current situations and the production of unique communication, a set of operations, or the creation of abstract relations, the levels of application and synthesis require students to implement what they have learned (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 213). Students access these levels of learning simultaneously as they integrate their raw research into a finalized product, such as a prepared speech or debate case.

### **Formulating Educational Objectives**

Understanding how research skill acquisition facilitates student learning at all levels is only a partial step towards heeding the call established earlier to articulate the connection between forensics and the educational expectations of the institutions which house these programs. As Kelly (2010) furthers, "programs throughout the United States will be challenged by their institutions to demonstrate their functional effectiveness in teaching and learning in order to justify their funding and resource streams" (p. 131). Accordingly, it is necessary to establish educational objectives "describing the characteristics and specific skills that the [we intend] students to develop" (Scannell & Tracy, 1975, p. 28) through research in forensics.

Educational objectives are conceived of in relation to three domains of learning: cognitive, psychomotor or behavioral, and affective. The cognitive domain "relates to the capacity to think or one's mental skills" (Reeves, 2006, p. 295). The affective domain is constituted by a student's ability to internalize information, values, and beliefs (Reeves, 2006, p. 295). Finally, the psychomotor domain "is concerned with the mastery of physical skills" (Reeves, 2006, p. 295). The following table provides a sample of educational outcomes for each skill set: locating, examining, and applying; these outcomes are not intended to be comprehensive, however they do demonstrate the range of outcomes that forensic educators can expect their students to develop through participation in forensics.

### Learning Objectives Derived from Research Skill Acquisition in Forensics

	<b>Cognitive Domain</b>	<b>Affective Domain</b>	<b>Behavioral Domain</b>
<b>Locating</b>	<p>Identify resources needed.</p> <p>Select resources from multiple information outlets.</p> <p>Compile information for the preparation of an event.</p>	<p>Understand the importance of needing source material.</p> <p>Realize the necessity to keep information organized.</p> <p>Adhere to standards of acceptability when selecting sources.</p>	<p>Recognize one's research abilities and limitations.</p> <p>Locate information quickly and accurately.</p> <p>Modify research habits based on the event.</p>
<b>Examining</b>	<p>Distinguish between sources based on clarity, appropriateness, and timeliness.</p> <p>Critique resources based on author and or source qualifications.</p> <p>Assess the value of selected resources.</p>	<p>Recognize the characteristics of appropriate source material.</p> <p>Question the potential biases of source materials.</p> <p>Justify the appropriateness of selected sources.</p>	<p>Display competence in analyzing source material.</p> <p>Detect when more information about a source is needed.</p> <p>Make claims pertaining to the quality of source material.</p>
<b>Applying</b>	<p>Summarize information from gathered materials.</p> <p>Compose a speech utilizing research materials.</p> <p>Support your argument with appropriate resources.</p>	<p>Display a commitment to ethical research practices.</p> <p>Demonstrate awareness of plagiarism.</p> <p>Appreciate the role information plays within performances.</p>	<p>Duplicate information obtained during research.</p> <p>Create an original work with the aid of resources.</p> <p>Alter the use of information based on feedback</p>

The educational objectives above give educators, administrators, and students concrete outcomes to achieve through their involvement, and in doing so, ground forensics as a site of higher-level learning. Thus, by exploring the three dimensions of research across the three domains of learning, a template for instruction and learning research skills in forensics now exists.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The articulation of specific research skills student's gain through competing in forensics, and their correlation to desired educational outcomes contributes to our understanding of forensics as a useful activity in two primary ways. First, articulating the specific research dimensions students gain through their participation in forensics enables students to provide a concrete explanation of the benefit of forensics when pursuing opportunities outside of forensics; with the vernacular created by this paper students now have a concrete way of explaining the research skills they learned while in forensics.

Second, although previous scholarship has asserted that research skills are gained via participation in forensics, this paper is the first to explain what those skills are and how they connect to broader academic aims. As such, this study serves as a model for future scholarship which can and should break down, largely taken for granted, benefits of forensics participation (i.e. critical thinking skills and decreased communication apprehension) into specific dimensions that correlate to the domains of learning. Future research should also conduct empirical studies with these educational objectives, and others like it (see Paine, 2010), to measure the effectiveness of forensics programs in meeting their established learning outcomes.

Research of this kind is critical in the tense educational climate surrounding many forensics programs around the nation. As Kelly (2010) suggests, "Higher education is being reshaped by standardized assessment practices, and collegiate forensics must reshape practice accordingly" (p. 131). Now, more than ever, researchers must take on the task of articulating how forensics enables students to access multiple dimensions across all three domains of learning to avoid losing support and resources to programs which can, and do, articulate their place of value in an educational setting.

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*Author's Note:*

Jessica L. Furgerson is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at Ohio University. The author may be reached at [jf148010@ohio.edu](mailto:jf148010@ohio.edu)