"Do You Know Why That's Funny?" Connecting the Scholarship of Humor to the Practice of After-Dinner Speaking

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Forensic educators have a unique opportunity to connect students with centuries of scholarship, yet it remains unclear how coaches utilize communication research to aid students in constructing events. This article questions how studies of humor can enhance connections between the forensic student and the broader field of research. Through applying theories of humor to the practice of After- Dinner Speaking (ADS), this paper indicates studies of humor in classical and contemporary scholarship provide useful frameworks in the construction of ADS, and offers suggestions for making more explicit connections between theory, pedagogy, and practice.

Encouraging a student to write their first after-dinner speech is a herculean task. While national out rounds of After-Dinner Speaking (ADS) are some of the most well-attended performances at national tournaments, yet they represent fewer number of speakers in competition when compared with Persuasion and Informative speaking events.[1] The novice forensic student relates to ADS in two ways: Novice students are sometimes drawn by the luster of making jokes to a captive audience and the opportunity to use skills developed from high school humorous interpretation. In this case, students fail to draw an appropriate distinction between argumentative humor and the practice of comedy; therefore, much negotiation is necessary to avoid humor solely for the sake of entertainment. At the same time, students fear they lack an inherent sense of comedy, retreat to other public address events, and never make the attempt. Students believe the event is best calibrated toward "naturally funny" (Dreibelbis & Redmon, 1987) and that success in the event does not involve learned behavior. Conversely, new forensic educators, graduate students and judges struggle with how to properly instruct and evaluate student performance in the event. As a result, students and coaches can be left to their own devices without understanding that, like other individual events, the use of humor in public speech has a home in academic research. While other public address events—notably Rhetorical Criticism and Persuasive Speaking—retain a fairly close connection with the communication discipline, students in ADS largely avoid centuries of research related to humor as a communicative phenomenon.

The gap between forensic pedagogy and research is a frequent topic among forensic scholars and practitioners (Croucher, 2006; Worth, 2002). Some have suggested

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[1]While Dreibelbis & Redmon (1987) found that ADS had the fewest number of competitors, a review of the entries competing at the NFA national tournament in each event from the years 2010-2014 reveals ADS tends to rank in the bottom four individual events every year. While ADS has more participation than Rhetorical Criticism, it is still below Persuasive and Informative Speaking in popularity. The author would like to acknowledge NFA Tournament Director Dan Smith for his assistance in procuring this data.

that forensics offers an ideal place for participation and ethnographic study (Worth, 2002), or that forensic research has largely focused on how-to treatises on forensic pedagogy based upon experiential and anecdotal evidence (Croucher, 2006). A perceived lack of theoretical rigor has been correlated with a supposed "brain drain" (Preston, 1995, p. 16) as well as burnout of forensic educators that inevitably decreases the credibility of forensics as an academic function (Gill, 1990). Others suggest the bend toward circular research is motivated by the fact that individual events research is inextricably linked with a drive for competitive success (Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003). In their meta-analysis of forensic research, Kerber and Cronn-Mills (2005) warn "articles on individual events are applicable to their own area within forensics and not to the forensic community at large or to communication theory" (p. 77). Adding his voice to the growing concern, Croucher (2006) prefaced a special edition of the *National Forensic Journal* by articulating a void of theory in forensic research. Croucher described the need for forensic communities to incorporate communication theory into individual events research. Croucher posits forensics functions as an "educational laboratory that offers opportunities for scholars to study organization decision making and speaking skills in the real world" and calls for individual events research to provide a means of enhancing communication research (p. 6).

If forensics is to fully apply itself to the theoretical body of communication theory, then it is also imperative to apply communication theory to forensic practice. Forensic educators and coaches are gifted with a unique opportunity to draw connections between communication praxis and the practice of forensic performance. In the words of Kerber and Cronn-Mills (2005), forensic scholarship must "substantiate, extend, and integrate communication theory into the core practices of the individual events curriculum" (p. 79). While it is important to strengthen the connection between theory and research, the process of coaching forensic events also offers an opportunity to explicitly connect students with centuries of scholarship. Yet the question remains; what are the best ways for coaches to utilize communication research and help students construct events?

In the academic tradition of Gruner's (1985) "Advice to the Beginning Speaker on Using Humor," this article argues that studies of humor in classical and contemporary communication scholarship provide helpful frameworks in the construction of ADS. I question how rhetorical and interdisciplinary theories[2] of humor enhance connections between the forensic student and the broader field of communication studies. Through reviewing the literature and theories of humor, before applying these findings to the practice of ADS, this essay makes two simple but valuable observations. First, the study of humor in classical and contemporary scholarship provides a useful framework for the instruction of After-Dinner Speeches. Second, the process of making explicit connection between communication research and the coaching of communication is a fruitful and necessary endeavor for the progress and sustainability of the activity. The goal of this

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[2] While this essay is presently focused on communication in a public forum, interpersonal communication, philosophy, and psychology are also interested in the ways humor impacts the receipt of a message, speaker credibility, and enhancing the relationship between those who use humor in communication processes. Thus, forensics students who desire for mastery of humor in public communication can gain advantage from understanding how humor functions in a variety of areas.

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paper is not to make the specious assertion that all forensic educators do not incorporate theory and research findings into practice, nor is this to suggest that all forensic educators are without proper exposure and education to this literature. Rather, as Reid (2012) examined the connection between oral interpretation of literature events and their role in exemplifying performance studies literature, this article continues to connect our forensic events within the larger bodies of communication scholarship. Therefore, the goal of this article is to articulate opportunities to make the connection between communication research and the coaching of communication an explicit activity to help the forensic student understand the forms and function of humor in public speaking.

ADS in Individual Events Research

Scholarly analyses of ADS largely focus on the history of the event, conceptual issues regarding event description, judging paradigms, and persuasive practice. The tradition of competitive after-dinner speaking traces its roots to 1931 when the Intercollegiate Forensic Association of Oregon sponsored the contest at its state tournament (Mahaffey, 1940). In 1937, a Linfield College tournament held its after-dinner rounds during the dinner break of the tournament to give students experience with this difficult, yet commonplace, speaking experience (Mahaffey, 1940). Then in 1973, nearly forty years later, ADS became a nationally recognized event when it was added to the National Forensic Association's (NFA) national tournament. ADS was added under the justification of creating an event that incorporated the use of humor in speech communication research while creating "an extension of what is taught in the classroom" (Mills, 1984, p. 11). Since then, various national organizations have incorporated the event into tournaments with similar, yet distinct, event descriptions. For example, NFA defines the purpose of ADS as "a speech designed to entertain by advancing a relevant point through the use of humor" (NFA, 2014). According to NFA, after-dinner speaking is characterized by "humorous content development, creativity, uniqueness, timeliness, clear organization, significance, credible sources, and vocal and nonverbal delivery choice that reflect the speech's purpose" (NFA, 2014). Meanwhile, the American Forensic Association (AFA) describes after-dinner speaking as "an original, humorous speech by the student, designed to exhibit sound speech composition, thematic coherence, direct communicative public speaking skills, and good taste" (AFA, 2013). In essence, these definitions suggest the purpose of the event is to evidence effective public speaking ability, good taste, and the ability to make a serious, yet entertaining, point through the enactment of humor.

Further, the AFA event description explicitly discourages speeches that resemble nightclub acts, impersonations, or comedic dialogues. This discouragement potentially encourages students to ignore the contributions of comedic writers and performers who adeptly confront serious societal issues through expert deployment of humor. Stand-up performers like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin confronted larger social issues of censorship through their craft, and in so doing enabled larger conversations about the utility of social practice, a goal worthy of any ADS performer. Yet, directing performers to avoid nightclub-esque performances is better interpreted as directing students to endow their messages with implications of meatiness and gravitas. While these definitions offer a starting point for beginning public speakers, they also raise larger questions as to

precisely how one engages serious argument through humor, and how one determines the supposed elements of good taste. As national trends and mythical norms of forensic practice elide towards comedy appealing to the lowest common denominator, there is a need to distinguish ethical uses of humor throughout our rules and expressed pedagogy, as well as our practices. These questions and others are best answered through the literature of communication and humor.

Outside of definitional concerns, ADS research examines competitive standards and implementation. Billings' (1997) survey research revealed 35% of coaches and judges felt humor serves an integral part of the speech. Likewise, Holm (2001) conducted a survey of forensic judges and coaches to determine what audiences look for in an after-dinner speech. Holm concluded the top criteria for ADS were structure, organization, delivery, and, most notably, use of humor. In terms of speech content, Billings (2003) analyzed potentially offensive humor to develop specific humor categories in ADS. Using survey research of 71 judges and coaches, Billings determined the respondents deemed identity-based humor (racist, sexist, homophobic) to be the most offensive and intolerable. According to the same study, the types of humor deemed more acceptable included age, forensic, and political humor, though there are some differences in what audiences find offensive versus tolerable. In terms of competitive paradigms, Billings (1997) argued for the use of judging criterion in assessing after-dinner speeches and suggested, "ADS speaking criteria and formula have become hopelessly mixed" (p. 40), thus causing confusion and a perceived lack of creativity. In the same manner, Richardson (1999) wrote that despite the creative potential of after-dinner speaking, current conventions in the event, such as "narrow paradigms and paint-by-number, cookie cutter approaches reward imitation over imagination" (p. 1). While competition becomes stagnant, the activity gains traction through injecting new ideas from communication research.

Forensic research attempts to address the larger conceptual issues of ADS, as well as to utilize theory to establish boundaries between after-dinner and other public-address events.   Dreibelbis and Redmon (1987) attempted to provide recommendations for the organization, style, and "treatment of the serious point" (pg. 96). Through advising students to humorously exaggerate examples to create a sense of affect, Dreibelbis and Redmon recommended students "make a point by changing attitudes or behavior" and "treat the event as a humorous persuasive event" (1987, p. 97). Similarly, Preston (1997) elaborated conceptual issues with ADS related to the operational practice of using humor to make a serious point. Preston (1997) applied Fisher's narrative theory to differentiate ADS from persuasive or informative genres of speaking. In addition to differentiating the event, other scholars attempt to address the effective use of humor in making a serious point. Lawless (2011) proposed the following goals and objectives for the competitive event:

1. Students should be able to understand and effectively use humor as a vehicle of persuasion.
2. Students should learn and be able to use a variety of different types of humor.
3. Students should be able to use humor extemporaneously.
4. Students should demonstrate the ability to create a coherent argument/thesis. (p. 169)

These goals and objectives, while certainly not exhaustive, engage the event's unique

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ability to mobilize humor to strengthen argumentation and provide a springboard for the following synthesis of humor theories. Though these studies make important contributions to the body of forensic research, scholarly treatment of ADS has yet to properly position the event within the larger body of research related to the theories and practices of humor in communication. This essay is an attempt to facilitate that connection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While rhetorical scholarship has tried to determine the persuasive nature of humor, empirical data offers limited conclusion as to how humor in a speech enhances the effectiveness of persuasion. Gruner's (1985) tips for the speaker on using humor synthesized empirical studies on humor in public address to conclude that "a modicum of apt, relevant humor" produces favorable reaction from audiences (p. 142). For example, Chang and Gruner (1981) conducted survey research following informative and persuasive speech examples and found the use of humor enhanced speaking credibility. Humor has also been shown to increase audience interest in perceivably dull speeches; however, speeches that already include elements of interest to an audience have an unrelated effect on audience enjoyment (Gruner, 1970). Yet, early social scientific explorations of humor and persuasion often failed to report statistically significant effects (Markiewicz, 1974). While empirical research struggles to reach a conclusion, theories of humor offer useful conclusions for application to forensic practice, and advancing forensic research. Whether one signifies the pedagogical and competitive purpose of ADS as the ability to either "use humor as a vehicle of persuasion" (Lawless, 2011, p. 169) or "make a serious point through the use of humor" (Dreibelbis & Redmon, 1987, p. 95), both classical and contemporary communication theory offers theoretical advice to the student and instructor.

Classical Theories of Humor

Classical rhetorical scholarship, from which we get our forensic tradition as well as our name, provides a conceptual framework for understanding how one makes a serious point through humor. Aristotle addresses humor in the *Rhetoric* through his discussion of witticisms as a potentially dangerous subject. Aristotle affirms the rhetorical power of using humor as a persuasive device so as to "spoil an opponent's seriousness with laughter and his laughter with seriousness" (trans. 1994, III.18.1419b). In this sense, clever humor can promote persuasion through enactment of unforeseen comparison. Witticisms can destroy an opponent's argument, as long as the joke is worthy of a free man and not "buffoonery" (Aristotle, trans. 1994, *Rhetoric,* III.18.1419b). For Aristotle, humor provides the opportunity to draw attention to social failings or the judgment of character without ignoring his youthful audience's need for entertainment in speech. Applying Aristotle's suggestions to modern forensic practice encourages a forensic student to examine the counter argument to their speech's position and generate humor from the foundation of weakening the opposing side. For example, speakers can make comparisons between the status quo or the opposing position, and establish connotations of poor character to relevant elements of youth culture. Thus, a speech that likens a

counter-argument to an established condition of poor judgment, like Miley Cyrus twerking on the MTV music awards, provides an example of how to undercut opposing arguments through humor.

In his translation of Aristotle's long lost treatise on comedy, Janko (2002) summarizes Aristotle's position that humor derives from either speech or action. Aristotle offers speakers a list of tactics to incorporate into an after-dinner speech as a means of inciting humor. These include homonymy ("when the same word has two or more different meanings," qtd. in Janko, 2002, p. 94), synonyms, repetition, paronyms ("when an extraneous element is attached to the standard term, or by subtraction," p. 94), parody, and the manner of speaking. Similarly, Quintilian's *Institutio* treated humor as an opportunity for "new rhetoric" by allowing the rhetor to deceive the audience through ambiguity, presupposition, and irony without losing character (qtd. in Graban, 2008, p. 40). Hence, Aristotle and Quintilian provide a list of easily adopted linguistic practices to allow the forensic student to learn the craft of persuasive humor.

Cicero as ADS Handbook

Perhaps the most substantial treatment of humor as persuasive argument in classical rhetorical theory comes from the Roman, Cicero. Cicero's *De Oratore* (trans. 1970) argues against the belief that humor could not be taught, a fight contemporary forensic practitioners will find consistent with their experience. Within his treatise, Cicero primarily uses the voice of Caesar to provide a discussion of wit and humor. He explains humor serves a function in rhetorical argument, describing the practices as "pleasant and often tremendously useful to employ humor and witticisms" (Cicero, trans. 1970, II.247). While wit may be seen as a useful tool, it is not to be used without purpose, for that will earn the speaker the title of "buffoon" (Cicero, trans. 1970, II.247). Cicero attests orators use humorous language "for a specific reason, that is not to seem funny, but to achieve something, while buffoons go on all day without any reason at all" (trans. 1970, II.247). Similarly, the forensic event of after-dinner speaking is congruent with Cicero as considerable effort is made to ensure students avoid speeches that resemble a night club act. The norms of forensic performance encourage students to use humor to advance the argument and judges frequently criticize a student appearing to use non-topical humor. Cicero's account teaches us that a well-constructed humorous speech must begin with a clearly defined purpose that can be found within the rhetorical tradition of informing, praising, or persuading.

Further, Cicero recognizes the effect of humor on audiences and judges. Cicero observes that "cheerfulness by itself wins goodwill for the one who has excited it; or because everyone admires cleverness," thereby indicating that humor generates positive rapport between a speaker and an audience (trans. 1970, II. 236). This passage suggests the speaker utilizes humor and proof of his cleverness to win over the audience. Cicero offers an additional purpose for the inclusion of humor in oratory, by claiming, "when someone is more elegantly witty than anyone else" this person is "seen to have more authority and dignity than anyone else," suggesting that humor adds additional credibility to the speaker (trans. 1970, II.228). This purpose is applicable to forensics in that an unwritten judging criterion for ADS involves "who was funnier" (Olson, 1989, p. 435). Cicero expounds on the choice of topic that a speaker employing humor should use, asserting "each and every commonplace that I may touch upon as a source for the

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humorous can generally speaking serve as a source for serious thoughts" (trans. 1970, II.248). This precept, that the best source for humorous topics should be serious topics provides a tangible connection to the modern speaker. As NFA's event description indicates, the better topics in after-dinner are ones that provide some social significance which would otherwise evoke serious thought, yet is arrived at through the use of humor. Finally, Cicero advocates the best sources of humor and wit are those topics of universal feeling that relate to the audience but does not offend them (trans. 1970, II.236). ADS competitors can take away from Cicero that the best sources of topics have serious connections to everyone. Cicero's point has contemporary applications to competition as forensic judges are known to continuously search for the student to "make a serious point in a humorous way" (Olson, 1989, p. 435).

Though Cicero provides useful precepts for the purpose and topic of humorous argumentation, his guidance for constructing humor is the most applicable for forensic speakers. Cicero lays out two types of witticism: one that is spread evenly through the whole discourse, called banter, and another that is pointed and concise, called sharp-wittedness. He states strategic use of both humor types is required for effective humor. This is reflected in the conventions of after-dinner speeches as speakers employ ongoing jokes which continually build upon the humor, colloquially known as a vehicle, and pointed punch lines that typically fall at the end of each argument. Cicero developed a rhetorical system for the purpose of creating laughter to advance forensic speech:

> For laughter is provoked by deceiving people's expectations, by mocking other people's character, or giving a hint of our own, by comparison to something worse, by irony, by saying slightly absurd things, and by censuring stupidity. Accordingly, anyone who wants to speak with humor must be permeated, so to speak, to nurture a character that is suited to these types, so that his facial expression can also be adapted to each type of humor. (trans. 1970, II.289-290)

Cicero's account of how laughter is provoked provides a useful framework for the creation of humor for the purpose of ADS in terms of content. Initially, Cicero explains laughter involves deceiving people's expectations, and encourages the most effective form of joke is the "unexpected turn," suggesting laughter occurs when we "expect to hear one thing but another is said" (trans. 1970, II.28). This position provides meaningful advice to the forensic speaker who creates a sentence structure that encourages the audience to rely on familiar phrases so the speaker can then turn it around for the purpose of creating a joke. Take for example the statement: "We must question the value of our jokes. For instance, my jokes are priceless, because no one will buy them."[3] This creates an unexpected turn, as it takes the meaning of priceless as above value and turns it to mean the opposite.

Cicero's notion of irony is also relevant to the construction of humorous speeches. While modern use of irony distorts the original meaning, Cicero confirms irony is "saying something different from what you think" (trans. 1970, II.269). Likewise, after-dinner speeches should employ rigorous use of irony in the hopes of creating moments of laughter. Cicero encourages the use of what the Greeks called "paranomaia," in which a slight alteration of a word or letter within a common phrase helps incite laughter (trans. 1970, II. 256). Further, censuring stupidity becomes a useful technique in the application

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[3] The author would like to acknowledge Patrick Campbell for his suggestion of this joke for inclusion in this text.

of joke construction. The ADS speechwriter should seek out areas of his or her topic that displays a nonsensical thought or an idea containing limited amounts of intelligence. This provides the speaker with an ability to persuade through drawing attention to an inconsistency, which Cicero cites as a cause of laughter.

In addition, Cicero's position on what should constitute a joke emphasizes topical humor that results from the content of the speech. He encourages that a joke should be based on content as "it remains witty no matter what words you use to express it; one that loses its bite when the words are changed owes all of its humor to the words" (trans. 1970, II.259). His advice speaks to a common problem within Roman oratory of speakers attempting to encourage laughter by using non-topical forms of humor, an issue routinely felt in modern forensics. To the forensic student, this advice should instill a sense of searching for the most effective content on which to create the jokes. A reliance solely on simple one-liners and funny phrases will not, according to Cicero, amount to much. By pointing to theoretical models from Roman antiquity, coaches can encourage students to avoid the creation of humor that is absurd, such as the wearing of silly costumes, use of unrelated visual aids, or speaking in a silly tone of voice. Convincing students to stray from this type of humor proves difficult when students can point to competitively successful speeches involving stick ponies, watermelons, and other examples of rewarding behaviors scholarship says to avoid. However, through an understanding of Cicero, coaches are armed with the knowledge that while these behaviors may cause initial laughter, "we also laugh at the clown" (Cicero, trans. 1970*,* II.259). We are unlikely to seek the counsel of a clown for societal issues, nor are we to follow their lead in the direction of social change. Additionally, the last profession a public speaker should be associated with is a clown.

Moreover, Cicero's "Excursus on Wit" provides a guide for the appropriateness of after-dinner speeches (trans. 1970, II.225). Cicero implores remaining appropriate is vital to effective humor. He advocates speakers "take into account the people, the cause, and the circumstances so that our joking does not detract from our authority" (trans. 1970, II.221). ADS speakers, however, frequently make use of "blue" and inappropriate humor hoping to enact laughter through shock. A common practice within the event is to rely on "too soon" jokes, in which seemingly off limit ideas such as a celebrity death, national tragedy, or disease becomes the point of the humor. Cicero advises against this tactic, warning "that is in fact the most difficult thing for humorous sharp-witted people to do: to take account of people and circumstances, and to refrain from saying what occurs to them even if it would be extremely funny to make the remark" (trans. 1970, II.221). Cicero's position encourages speakers to approach humor with temperance, as a remark that seems to shock the audience will, in fact, damage their opinion of the speaker as witty. He holds the best forms of humor do not mock those who are held in high esteem with the public; otherwise the audience may turn against the speaker.

Modern forensic students should take heed of this notion and beware that "the audience wants villains to be wounded by a weapon more forceful than humor, and do not want the miserable to be mocked" (Cicero, trans. 1970, II.237). As such, an effective ADS will avoid using humor to vilify an individual with little social recourse and should certainly cease any jokes about subjects the audience associates with pity as a material for humor. This is corroborated by Billings' (2003) findings that ADS humor typically labeled offensive are often related to marginalized groups. While this practice may

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produce laughter from an audience, Cicero holds they will still view the act as "buffoonish" (trans. 1970, II.246). Current forensics rules and regulations hint at this in stating students use good taste; however, it should largely remain the job of the student to ensure his or her humor is fitting to the case and audience at hand. Incorporating this interpretation of Cicero into forensic instruction allows coaches to point to thousands of years of evidence as proof off-color jokes can potentially damage their credibility. This loss of ethos by the speaker is almost impossible to retain once lost in the course of a ten-minute oration.

While Cicero's treatise provides insight for the forensic competitor in regards to the purpose, topic, and construction of humor, Cicero's work provides understanding of what many believe to be a modern innovation. He affirms the practice of "calling out" other competitors, or what Billings (1997) refers to as "spontaneous jokes," as an inventional tool (p. 45). A common practice in ADS national final rounds involves using the topics or speeches of the previous competitors to make a joke that downplays their speech, more commonly referred to as "calling out" another competitor. This practice was apparently also commonplace in the forensic speeches of the classical era. Cicero does not deny this practice is effective, claiming "it is neat when the one who has made a joke is mocked by the same kind of joke that he made" (trans. 1970, II.277). However, he cautions the speaker to poke fun at the fellow competitor's case, or his argument, rather than resorting to "stinging insults" that make fun of the opponent himself. In this regard, Cicero's guidance can be interpreted to mean the speaker should analyze the argument the competitor attempts to make and use humor derived from that specific argument. The laughter that derives from this action will, in Cicero's eyes, win the round. He describes the use of this type of humor in competitive orations in the following excerpt:

> Laughter crushes the opponent, obstructs him, makes light of him; or because it shows the orator himself to be refined, to be educated, to be well bred; and especially because it soothes and relaxes sternness and severity and, often by joking and laughter, dismisses offensive remarks that are not easily refuted by arguments. (Cicero, trans. 1970, II.236)

Cicero explains creating a point of laughter creates an advantageous position for the ADS speaker. Cicero's approximation is correct, as the moments most remembered from final rounds are often the improvised remarks. These remarks invoke the topics and arguments of the competition and generally allow the audience to feel the speaker dominated the round.

Contemporary Theories of Humor

While classical rhetorical theory offers templates for the instruction of ADS, contemporary scholarship builds from psychology, classics, and philosophy to provide a workable body of research relating to both the theory and production of humor. Understanding the development of humor as explored in a variety of disciplines arms the student and educator of after-dinner speaking with a wealth of knowledge for use in speech construction. Despite their disciplinary origins, cross-applying contemporary theories of humor with the practice of communication enables the student to adequately address what a particular audience may find funny. Therefore the remainder of the essay

examines the following theories of humor and their application to the construction of ADS: superiority, relief, incongruity, and affective absurdity.

Humor as Superiority
Superiority theory proposes humor is inextricably linked with cultural position of dominance over others (Gruner, 1997; Rapp, 1951). Superiority theory was originally developed from the philosophy of Hobbes (1996 [1651]) who posited that people please themselves through gaining enjoyment of those beneath them. Morreall's (1982) seminal study and theorization of laughter engages Hobbes' notion of the subject of humor and suggests "the oldest and still the most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person's feeling of superiority over others" (p. 243). Citing the philosophy of Plato, Voltaire and Hobbes, Meyer (2000) asserts people laugh at others to "feel some sort of triumph over them" (p. 314). The concept of superiority affirms humor results from "seeing one's self as superior, right or triumphant in contrast to one who is inferior" (Meyer, 2000, p. 315). Jesting or joking provides a "powerful strategy for communication across social difference" (Holcomb, 2001, p. 2). Drawing from the philosophy of Bakhtin (1984), Holcomb (2001) affirms humor allows the speaker to gain control of an audience, thereby unleashing social forces beyond traditional forms of control. He asserts jesting "confers power on the speaker and increases their ability to manage diverse social situations"; however, this affective form of power comes with a price, as speakers must subjugate themselves to their audience (p. 26).

The theory of superiority offers a troubling position for the forensic speaker, as students must be careful to create humor that allows the audience to feel superior over the oppositional argument as opposed to constructing humor that affirms dominant ideology. However, superiority theory also indicates the power of those in lower social position to generate humor through prevailing over those in higher social positions. While superiority theory indicates humor as a means of correcting social behaviors, Meyer (2000) elaborates there is a subversive component to superiority theory that enables the speaker to see themselves as triumphant over one who is wrong. For example, a speaker from a socially marginalized group may employ humor that illustrates the fallacies of a hegemonic culture. This could be achieved by a student of color pointing out the incongruities of racial privilege, or through a female speaker poking fun at the heterosexist assumptions of her higher pitched speaking voice. Holcomb's (2001) notion of humor and jesting as a form of unleashing social forces provides a justification for the common convention of addressing societal issues or value-based topics in ADS. For example, previous national final round topics have included arguments for the rights and experience of transpersons, as well as consciousness-raising for able-bodied privilege. By engaging these societal issues through the safety of ADS, the forensic student embarks on a particularly liberating journey of social change all through the action of humor.

Humor as Relief
Building from psychology and psychoanalysis, scholars suggest humor functions as relief in the reduction of stress (Berlyne, 1972; Morreall, 1982; Raskin, 1985; Shurcliff, 1968). Meyer (2000) offers humor results "from the relief experienced when tensions are engendered and removed from an individual" (p. 312). Therefore, humor essentially results from the creation or tension and resolution of cognitive dissonance. Relief theory

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builds from the perspective of Freud (1960) who suggests we laugh as a means of releasing subconscious desires. Lynch (2002) posits humor as relief comes from reducing tension and providing liberation from the posture of normative practice. In his overview of theoretical constructs, Meyer (2000) reports studies of humor emphasize rhetorical exigency and makes "the situation seem more elastic, or more manageable, by showing that difficulties are not so overwhelming as to be out of control after all" (p. 312). Therefore, relief humor offers insight into ADS through establishing tension surrounding a social idea or problem. This tension is managed by the speaker and ultimately relieved through humor. Therefore when the speaker provides an opportune element of humor the audience is able to establish resonance with the topic, engage its tensions, and ultimately feel the relief when the speaker ruptures the tension. Through this cycle of tension and relief audiences come to identify with the speaker and their topic in meaningful ways. By creating identification with their audience ADS speakers can also use relief humor to encourage the audience to feel personally connected with forms of solvency.

Humor as Incongruity

Perhaps the most broadly embraced theory of humor posits humor results from incongruous interpretations (Berger, 1976; Deckers & Devine, 1981; Meyer, 2000). Meyer (2000) observes, "people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is odd in a nonthreatening way" (p. 313). In this, surprise is a key element of humor as audiences must be able to have some expectation violated for humor to occur. Lynch's (2002) review of incongruity theory noted the ambiguity of humor is important "for understanding the use of humor in social organizations and as a communication phenomenon" (p. 429). In this sense, incongruity motivates an understanding of the "duality or the paradox of humor" (Lynch, 2002, p. 433). Exposing incongruous relationships in society allows humor to function as a persuasive output of resistance (Greenbaum, 1999). In her ethnography of stand-up comedy, Greenbaum (1999) found humor builds identification with the speaker's world-view and thus "persuades audience members to adopt particular ideologies" (p. 33). Hence, from a functionary standpoint, incongruity theory highlights normative evaluations of society an effective speaker can utilize to prove a point.

Incongruity theory also is useful to the forensic speaker in understanding how one is to prove a serious point through humor. Too often after-dinner speeches rely on adjacent humor not related to the topic at hand. For example, students are prone to the practice of constructing the argument for their speech and then inserting "jokes" after the fact. These so-called jokes often take the form of similes that, like Ke$ha's fashion sense, is surprising but not necessarily humorous. Perhaps upon reading this last sentence a reader might give pause or chuckle; however, the reader might then ask what the pop musician Ke$ha has to do with theories of humor. Hence, interjecting jokes into a rhetorical argument will not necessarily prove an argument, enhance a point, or produce humor. Instead, incongruity theory proposes the ADS speaker utilize ambiguity, paradox, and dissonance to persuade an audience to adopt the ideology being advocated within the speech.

Humor as Affective Absurdity

Veatch (1998) attempts to construct a post-positivist theory of humor that defines,

measures and predicts humor as an outcome variable. Echoing incongruity theory, Veatch proposes humor arrives from a dialectical tension of things perceived as normal and, at the same time, having a strong affective response of what is being violated. While not considered a major theory of humor, Veatch's (1998) Affective Absurdity Theory (AAT) provides an accessible and clear model for humor production that is useful in the education of ADS speakers.[4] In short, Veatch's theory of affective absurdity declares "humor occurs when it seems that things are normal, while at the same time something seems wrong. Or in an openly apparent paradox, humor is emotional pain that does not hurt" (1998, p. 164). This theory is based upon three necessary conditions for humor that, if present in the individual's mind, will indicate a humorous situation: violation, normalcy, and simultaneity. First, in order for someone to find something funny they must have some cognitive perception of the situation as normal. Second, the perceived normal situation is violated in a simultaneous process that produces the feeling of humor. Third, this violation occurs through "simultaneity" in which the violation of the perceived norm is instantly confronted with emotional attachment to the norm being violated (p.164).

Veatch's (1998) emphasis on subjective moral violation provides insight into the types of humor that produce a positive response; it helps us determine what an audience might perceive as funny. According to Veatch, what we find funny is largely dependent on our subjective moral values—we are not likely to laugh at violations of principles we hold dear. Affective absurdity theory predicts when two individuals are exposed to the same communicative act, and one finds the situation funny and the other finds it offensive, the offended individual will have a stronger attachment to the normative principle being violated. Likewise, the individual who found the communicative act to be funny must have some attachment to the normative principle that outweighs the attachment being violated. Veatch (1998) posits "the more moral a person is, the more serious their attachment to moral principles, and the less those attachments can be broken through humorous interpretations" (p. 172). Where there is an inverse relationship between normalcy and violation interpretation, Veatch points out "even something quite offensive or threatening can be made to seem funny if, for example, a joke is told by someone felt to be safe" (1998, p. 178).

Affective Absurdity Theory (AAT), as proposed by Veatch (1998), offers insights into the construction of ADS and the attempt to prove a serious point through humor. First, the theory connects the practice of building ADS speeches around value and sociocultural topics. Applying AAT affirms humor helps to highlight normative convention, thus allowing for social critique. Take, for example, a 2008 NFA championship after-dinner on "How to Date a Fat Girl." While on the surface the informative nature of this example seems to detract from an emphasis on proving a serious point through humor, the overall topic can be said to address a larger societal issue through the organizational pattern of a how to speech. As body image is not a principle most audiences have strong moral connections to, yet there is a strong normative principle being violated, the humor proved successful in achieving its effect. The humor used throughout this speech highlighted the normative abjection of the female

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[4] For more information on other theories related to humor production see Gruner's (1997) Games Theory, as well as derivatives of Veatch's Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010; McGraw, Warren, Williams, & Leonard, 2012).

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form by creating humor exposing the audience's normative conceptualizations of romanticizing ideal body types. In directing attention to her figure, the speaker in this example is able to argue for societal change through humor by first capitalizing on the audience's normative expectations of full-figured women, and then violating that norm by explicitly discussing the values of these women in romantic situations. Further through exposing the audience's violation of bodily norms in the first place, the speaker in this example is able to simultaneously generate a reflexive awareness in her audience of their own biases and normative constructions. Thus, the speaker capably generates productive social critique through humorous exchange.

Further, the relationship between normative violation principles also offers explanatory mechanisms for how some performers are able to get away with certain types of humor when others are not. For instance, the preceding example of "How to Date a Fat Girl" is predicated on the relationship between the speaker and the subject matter; the speaker provides agency for the audience to accept the violation. Application of AAT to ADS encourages students to search for normative violations through their individual experience, thus creating safe spaces for students to engage their lived experiences while at the same time combating societal norms through humor. AAT posits that after-dinner students should avoid humor predicated on violating norms outside their individual experience. In addition, AAT also serves as a reminder to the forensic student that successful humor must be relatable and address some normative principle. This idea is in opposition to a student wishing to advance absurdist humor and the post-structuralist form of joke construction, as an audience must be able to comprehend the normalcy being violated in order to laugh.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

It turns out academic treatment of humor isn't all that funny. This article provides tentative and tangible connections of forensic practice to the larger theoretical body of literature on humor and public speech. The classical theories of rhetoric offered by Cicero, Quintilian, and Aristotle indicate the art of using humor to advance argument is an ancient practice harkening back to the days of the first forensic speeches. The theories of Superiority, Relief, Incongruity, and Affective Absurdity also enhance our understanding of forensic practice and improve the pursuit of creating humorous argument.

Circulating this body of research and its application to forensic events makes an important contribution to the field of forensic research by articulating why choices made by coaches and students in ADS are ineffective. Too often forensic educators attempt to circumvent communication research and justify the use of techniques on the auspice of adhering to supposedly unwritten rules, or norms, of forensics. While these unwritten rules provide some educational advantages in helping students construct events (Paine, 2005), they also carry the potential to stifle creativity through an emphasis on established competitive conventions (Gaer, 2002). In reality, competitive conventions and unwritten rules can be cogently explained through a brief nod and understanding to communication and humor theory. If forensics practitioners expose students to this literature throughout the process of speech construction, we can better direct a student's choices and offer tangible introductions to the discipline of communication and the value of research. This

alone broadens the academic impact of forensics in the field and can draw better connections between research and forensic educators within academic departments.

When a student asks *why* we do what we do, it has never been sufficient to answer, "That's just how it works." As members of the forensic community, and stewards to the power of speech, we must challenge ourselves to make the connection between theory, research, and competition a clear and explicit component of our activity. Conversely, forensics can serve an epistemological function to this literature as forensics researchers and students can directly test the functionality of these theories in practice and help to negate theoretical suppositions and broaden humor constructs.

Forensics could study the validity of Affective Absurdity Theory by studying ADS humor that bombs. Forensics offers a readily available sample of students who regularly experience the failures of humor. For example, scholars could design a scale to measure the impact and effectiveness of student's humor construction. This scale could be mobilized through a survey circulated to current and former forensic competitors. To avoid research dependent on recall of particular humor, a survey could be distributed immediately as individuals exit out-round performances of ADS at a variety of tournaments and ask students to evaluate the use of humor in real time. This survey could include scales and measures designed to correlate the normative and violation principles of AAT within the forensic environment. Qualitatively, scholars could generate open-ended surveys and in-depth interviews with current and former forensic competitors asking them to describe humor they performed that did not meet the desired expectation. Moreover, as forensics increasingly becomes a digital endeavor, scholars could solicit students for textual examples of what they felt was the least effective use of humor. These examples could be coded, and using a grounded theoretical approach, produce exploratory frameworks for emerging themes of failed humor construction.

Moreover, the recordings of national final rounds offer potential use in research design. Researchers could design experiments to see if the humor within the forensic community is seen as successful to those outside its boundaries. National final round speeches could be shown to a randomly selected sample of participants who would then fill out a survey to assess their individual receptions of humor, as well as the effectiveness of the speeches at achieving a serious argument. These brief discussions of research pragmatics could have the added benefit of arming students with knowledge that extend beyond forensic eligibility. As students continue to place their forensic accomplishments on resumes and vitae, it is important they become fluent in the research and theory that coincides with their practice.

This essay testifies that while the activity may be a living laboratory for research, it must also be a living classroom for theory. Forensics is already an advanced course in self-confidence, performance, research skills, and small group communication. Likewise, by encouraging students to understand why the events function the way they do by developing a more thorough knowledge of scholarship, we can acculturate a new generation of scholars into the power and applicability of theory and research. To the degree to which forensics educators tangibly connect forensics to other areas of the disciplinary research, they can begin to build a case for stronger institutional and departmental support. Thus, through the engagement of communication theory in ADS, scholars, coaches, and students can strive to ensure the only time people laugh at forensics is in a round.

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