

Performing for the Audience Putting the Public Back Into Individual Events Training

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Abstract

Forensics would benefit from utilizing more nontraditional judges at tournaments. The paper argues for creating more diverse judging pools. Specifically, the benefits and challenges of including community judges are addressed. Although the issue of including more nontraditional judges has been raised in the literature on debate, there has been less discussion in the Individual Events community.

Why is it Important to Bring the Public Back into Forensics?

What is the true purpose of forensics? For some speech and debate participants, there seems to be an obsession with winning (Greenstreet, 1997). However, surely forensics' genuine goal is more about learning important communication skills and less about winning. In addition, coaches would argue forensics should play a prominent role in teaching students important "real world" skills (see Derryberry, 1991) to succeed in their academic, professional, and personal lives – research, teamwork, perseverance, critical analysis. Participation in forensics should teach students about the issues of the day, expose students to important literature, and prepare students to present in a variety of professional settings. Forensics should be about preparation for life! As such, there is a need to put renewed emphasis on the benefits accrued from participating in forensics. In addition, the forensics discipline should work to foster the notion of public discourse among competitors.

One strategy to center forensics more in the public realm would be to include more community, or nontraditional, judges at tournaments. A community or nontraditional judge is defined as a person who has either limited training in contest judging or limited current experience in judging (Bartanen, 1994). Weiss (1985) claims that the forensics community remains relatively hidden, that far too few community members ever see a speech and/or debate performance. Of course, using additional nontraditional judges does present some challenges, but on the whole students benefit from outside perspectives. Community judges provide a fresh look at the activity and their presence can remind both students and coaches of the importance of audience analysis. The tendency to overlook the vital role of audiences in forensics training has been noted as a frequent mistake (Derryberry, 1991). Hence, providing a more

diverse judging pool would put the audience front and center and provide opportunities for speakers, interpreters, and debaters to get experience communicating with a variety of listeners.

Additionally, forensics is not a private activity, nor should it exist in a vacuum (Weisz, 1985). However, without the energy and ideas offered by nontraditional judges, the forensics community can become isolated and even inaccessible. As such, it is important to critique the forensics activity from time to time. Hawkins (1991, as quoted in Derryberry, 1991) argues that "forensics must constantly justify and defend itself against budget cuts, career-obsessed students, and apathetic administrators." The forensics community must continually ask important questions about its practices and purpose.

Furthermore, among traditional judges "technique" sometimes trumps delivery, organization, writing skills, or subject matter. Traditional judges are increasingly homogeneous in their judging expectations (Bartanen, 1994). Weiss (1985) writes that "weird practices luxuriate in rank profusion, unchecked by the vigorous pruning which public exposure would require." In other words, in a closed system, winning techniques often become norm-based and it is important to question "norms" to understand how forensics relates to life outside the tournament circuit.

Some of the norms that have developed over the years in forensics include the following: rapid delivery; reliance on an over abundance of sources; transitional movement between main points in a speech; and the almost obligatory use of crisp and appropriate book technique. If one were to dare break from the norm, s/he might even question the use of books at all, and if one does choose to use a book, what is considered an appropriate book? What color should it be? What size? There are also unwritten rules about dress and expectations for literature, organizational formats, and topic choices. Additionally, the forensics community seems to be confused regarding the necessity of an implications section in Informative Speeches or if it is necessary to include some type of political commentary in a literature program. There is also an ongoing debate regarding what organizational pattern is best for an Impromptu Speech—a 3-1 or 2-2 format? Community judges help us to recognize the tacit norms of forensics and give us reason to consider the purpose and value of these practices.

Another question that should be asked is can we perform our pieces in public? And how would they be received? Our students need to be able to adapt to and connect with their audience. Are our performers anticipating their audience? Are they adapting to the audience during their performance? Do they respect the audience's decisions? In addition, it is important that students remember performance is an art, not a science. Our students must be willing to admit that others are often right and be able to accept criticism regardless of the source.

Reasons for Including More Community/ Nontraditional Judges

Community judges increase educational opportunities by providing a 'real world' perspective in the round. While some critics of community judges assume such judges are incompetent, no empirical evidence demonstrates that nontraditional judges are less capable than traditional judges of critiquing individual events (Bartanen, 1994). Diversifying the judging pool would expose the students to a greater array of opinions and ideas regarding their performance. Surely one of the purposes of forensics is to teach students how to speak to diverse audiences and how to adapt speeches for particular audiences. Community judges 'force' students to conduct an audience analysis and to consider the public.

Utilizing community judges also provides an opportunity to create connections with the larger community. Further, judges from the community will be likely to discuss their experiences with other community members, thus providing important publicity for forensics programs, which could result in greater support for the activity.

Third, nontraditional judges enhance cultural diversity. One important step to increasing diversity in participation is to increase the diversity of the judging pool. Judging diversity provides important role models and listeners who share cultural backgrounds. A diverse judging pool might also serve to welcome more participants from underserved communities. Additionally, nontraditional judges are more likely to offer new ways of understanding and performing in forensics (Bartanen, 1994).

Finally, instating community judges means the forensics activity will be able to give as well as receive. Insofar as forensic performances are exemplary, they should be made public. Insofar as speech and literary content may be enriching, it should be shared. Going public and creating a community discourse can help the audiences as well as the participants (Weiss, 1985).

Reasons for Including More Community/ Nontraditional Coaches in Forensics

Community members might also be useful in coaching roles. According to Boylan (1995), forensics programs receive relatively little support from com-

munity judges. Additionally, when community members are recruited, they are often uncomfortable jumping into a round as a judge or have inflexible schedules. Regardless of these challenges, they do have important insights to share with forensics participants. Community coaches can attend squad meetings and/or forensics showcases to provide critique and offer suggestions. In addition, after some time as a coach, some individuals may decide to begin judging, thus increasing the judging pool. Plus, students often complain about the lack of personal coaching time, so adding community coaches could help to alleviate this problem.

Who Might Be a Community Judge?

Forensics coaches may find interested community members in a variety of arenas. College professors and staff provide an immediate pool from which to draw coaches and judges. Certain departments, including Communication, Political Science, Theatre, English, Career Preparation, and Law/Pre-Law are logical first contacts, but qualified faculty may reside in any department on campus. High school teachers may also be interested in assisting with collegiate forensics. Community organizations including the Rotary, Toastmasters, League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, and Chamber of Commerce may provide pools of community participants. In addition, professionals such as attorneys, elected officials, business leaders, and members of the religious community can provide useful insights. Local theatre groups could be helpful as well. Parents of past forensics competitors can be effective coaches and judges, particularly if they were involved their own children's forensics careers. Even former students can be useful community assistants. If a program chooses to use students, it is advisable to use students who have graduated, and therefore are not immediate peers of the competitors, and have had some experience and/or training in performance. With any kind of community participant, however, it is assumed s/he will have had some knowledge of, experience with, or training in performance activities.

Other Methods for Bringing the Public Back to Forensics

Speaking, interpreting, and debating before a variety of public audiences ranging from literature classes, political science seminars, service clubs, and religious organizations would be another method for giving performers experience in adapting to a variety of audiences (Derryberry, 1991). On our campus at the end of the spring semester, we host a Forensics Showcase to highlight our students and to provide an opportunity for them to perform for a different and much larger audience. Open audience performances can be a valuable method for seeking audience feedback and gaining a new perspective on a

topic. Some forensics programs also schedule their students to present their informative or prose, for example, for business and community groups (Derryberry, 1991).

Challenges Posed by Community Judges

Some critics claim community judges do a disservice to our students because such judges do not ‘understand’ forensics. Regardless of one’s viewpoint on the inclusion of community judges, it is true that all nontraditional judges share one common trait – they tell the contestant how a “normal” person would respond to their effort. This vital perspective helps to ground forensics experience in actual life experience.

Despite beliefs to the contrary, research reveals that traditional and nontraditional judges use a similar paradigm when evaluating students. According to Evans (1963), as published by Evans & DeLozier (1966), in ranking a series of orations, the decisions of groups of undergraduate college students with no formal speech courses or with one speech course correlated significantly with the decisions of a group of speech teachers. In other words, differently trained evaluators judge speeches in similar manners.

Another challenge might be that the nontraditional judge lacks expertise on an event. This challenge can be met by providing training and informational sheets prior to the competitions. Tournament coordinators may decide to schedule brief informational meetings to discuss the rules of the event as well as what is appropriate feedback, etc.

Another criticism voiced is that nontraditional judges lack expertise on the topics of discussion. However, given the range of topics discussed on the forensics circuit, it seems obvious that most people are not experts many of the subjects covered. Traditional judges are as likely to be unfamiliar with a particular topic as nontraditional judges.

Finally, C. T. Hanson (1988) provides criteria for what makes a “good” judge:

1. Writes concrete, helpful, truthful comments in a sufficient amount that you can learn from them.
2. Pays attention, shows genuine interest in the speaker.
3. Not prejudiced, biased, or partial against a school or a contestant but gives fair treatment to all.
4. Actively listens, looks at contestant, doesn’t just write but gives feedback.
5. Makes contestant feel comfortable, smiles, is polite.
6. Knows the event and its rules.
7. Objective, doesn’t refute while listening.
8. Provides constructive criticism in a tasteful and tactful manner, doesn’t cut the person down.

9. Gives reason for low rank/rating.
10. Write both positive and negative constructive comments.
11. Grades on ability to do selection, not preference for material.
12. Open-minded.

When examining this list, it is clear both “traditional” and “nontraditional” judges can meet the criteria provided. Perhaps these traits should be included as part of tournament/judging orientation sessions for community members. Surely a present judge who does her/his best to explain her/his decision is considered a worthy critic.

As a result of the analysis provided, this paper argues that the Forensics community would benefit from making an attempt to include more nontraditional judges—who are properly trained and instructed—in the judging pool. Finding out what reaction the performances genuinely elicit will strengthen the activity.

In the end, a fair question to ask is: “Wouldn’t Forensics be changed by including more community judges?” The answer would be, “certainly,” but it would be a positive change. Our students would be readier, more capable of performing and being effective regardless of what audience he/she might encounter. Utilizing public coaches and judges would also give the forensics community another reason and method for creating connections in the community. And these are two reasons for working to put more public back into forensics.

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