

## The Liminal Graduate Student

Adam Gonzales-Weightman  
University of Northern Iowa

The purpose of this paper is to expand individual event (IE) terminology. Expanding the terminology in which our IE community uses is essential to the growth of the IE community. This paper was inspired by people in the IE community who have realized how important it is to expand IE research and academic publications.

There is a strong need for IE members to remain academically conscious. Self-reflexivity and self-referentiality are terms graduate IE coaches in should understand. Understanding these concepts will work toward a positive growth in the IE community. Anthropologist George Marcus argues that “liminality [is] sparked during the process of understanding self-reflexivity and self-referentiality where one [...] questions the ways in which power and structure articulate identity (Marcus 70).” Before further development of the terms self-referentiality and self-reflexivity, I would first like to expand on the idea of liminality.

The term liminality is used in various academic fields (i.e. performance studies and anthropology). Most fields refer to liminality as an *in-between space* or *being in between*. Feminist theory argues that liminality possess a positive meaning. Liminality refers to a transformation in which one solidifies their identity at a time in which their identity is in between two points (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolowitz 150). Cultural theory refers to liminality as “a state of transitioning in identity (Brooker 150).” Jon McKenzie argues that we come to understand the effectiveness of our own societal positions terms of liminality—“that is, a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic “in-betweenness” allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged and perhaps even transformed (McKenzie 27).” I believe the key word in McKenzie’s argument is *transformed*. To put it simply, liminality is sort of like crossing a bridge. One enters a bridge from a particular area of life and eventually crosses over to a completely new position. Liminality is the transformation that takes place during the journey across that bridge. Victor Turner describes ‘liminal entities’ as people living in-between the societal positions fashioned by law, convention and ceremony (Turner 89). During the time working in a program that offers graduate assistantships in coaching IE, one’s social identification as a performing competitor crosses over to that of a coach and mentor.

In her book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, Ruth Behar recog-

nizes herself as a “women of the border” living between “places, identities, languages, cultures, longings and illusions with one foot in the academy and one foot out (Behar 162).” Graduate student coaches pass through a liminal site, where boundaries maintaining academic goals are set and liminal lines are crossed into. Cultural theory defines a site as a place where “meaning is produced by an interaction or conflict of forces focused at a particular point (Brooker 234).” Coaching IE for two teams in the same year may be a liminal site, where values, morality and cultural codes of conduct conflict. According to cultural theory a “site is an intersection or conflict of forces focused at a particular point.” In other words, a site is a place where knowledge derives (Brooker 234). For example, graduate school is a site for knowledge.

Jackson Miller suggests that teams create a strong sense of communal identity through their cultural codes (Miller 3). Once confrontation is resolved or a rite of passage has occurred, individual constructs of identity are fashioned. Every team has its own traditions or ‘rite of passage’ which create identification with their team (Kelly 98). Moving from one team to the next could be seen as a liminal experience. Victor Turner argues that all rites of passage or ‘transitions’ are marked by three phases; separation, threshold and reincorporation.

Brinden Kelly has recognized the relationship between symbolic convergence theory and forensics teams. Kelly says that “over time, teams develop a collective consciousness with shared feelings, motives and meanings” which take part in the development of team identity (Kelly 98). Group story telling also adds to the collective consciousness of a team. Narratives by current team members about previous competitors and coaches make up the history of the team (Croucher, Thornton and Eckstein 2). My ex-room and teammate Brandon Wood is a great example of someone who uses narratives the past to construct my identity as a roommate and crazy team member.

Teams create codes that give themselves (and others) cultural meaning to identify with. Robert Westerfellous might argue that forensic lingo, as outlined by Charles Parrott, can be seen as semiotic code constituting the content of our cultural forensic practices (Westerfellous 107). Cultural rites of passage usually imply that there is an acceptance or promotion in societal perspective within their culture. Graduate students experience this upon gra-

duating with a degree in higher learning. More interestingly they may experience it when transferring to be on another forensics team. The assimilation of one's identity into a new team may be initiated in rites of passages or team traditions.

Graduation marks their separation from their previous positions in society. The time spent between the first and last semester of graduate school, puts graduate students in a liminal position, where they float between being a student and an official forensics coach. Reincorporation can be seen as positioning one's self once more with a solid identity in society. Getting a job as a coach stabilizes cultural identification in forensics. Having the official job as a forensic coach in the circuit positions you as a mentor, leader, boss and worker of the state.

In her article "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodies Methodological Praxis," Tami Spry argues autoethnography is a valid form of academic work carrying "a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes" (Spry 710). Autoethnography as a micro-narrative resist "Grand Theorizing" and opens up new ways of analyzing cultural life. Micro-narratives, autoethnography and self-reflexivity (when done well) has the potential to keep the growth of cultures in motion, shake up hierarchies and keep 'academic disciplines alert and on the edge' (Maddison 282). Personal narratives construct group identity. Autoethnographic structuring of academic work in forensics reflects the semiotic expressions gained from one's experience with their forensic circuit. Understanding the growth of our activity can come from analyzing micro-narratives. If a body of narratives in forensics was to grow in collaboration, then a better understanding of the cultural codes that make up different team identification can be accomplished. Geroge Marcus argues that multi-sited ethnography is a cultural formation of a 'world-system' and cannot be understood only in terms of conventional single sited representation (Marcus 83). Forensics as a whole, exist in multiple pieces. It is not a culture made up by one *mis en scene* provided by the award ceremony at nationals. Forensics activity during regular season competition is a site that plays out the inner workings of forensics micro-cultures and how they effect the whole.

Depending on one's experience with forensics and their graduate institution, recognition of a liminal experience can lead to personal growth in academia. There are different ways one can become "aware" of effective routes to take as a graduate student coach.

Experience with crossing geographical borders (or district regions) in forensics can give way the personal experience of Miller's 'culture shock.' Moving from one team to another and then to another, having experienced the extreme differences in each teams micro-cultural conduct, I would argue graduate student coaches can benefit immensely from a

multi-sited approach to coaching forensics and completing the academic task of a graduate student learning. With this said, I feel that I have benefited a great deal from the experiences I've gained from working with three entirely different districts (1 5 and 4).

Because mentoring can be mutually beneficial for both "mentor and mentee, as each moves toward increased self-actualization" (White 89) it is essential that graduate programs with forensics assistantships focus on maintaining the effective traits that can be used to mentor graduate student coaches. Mentoring graduate students is essential to gaining a positive experience in forensics.

Ironically enough, I entered into graduate school between the fall and spring semesters of 2006 and 2007. Having just moved from my previous school, I was still very much indebted in the cultural codes that made up my identity as a competitor and as a member of a specific team in the Midwest.

Geographically, I did not experience too much of a culture shock, but in terms of values, goals and expectancy a lot changed. At this point I felt responsible for the success of both teams I was on that season. At the end of the competitive season I had come around to accept my position as a coach only for my current team and not for another this could be proven by the departments records of coaching hours I enthusiastically committed myself to. Turns out I put in hundreds of extra hours I was not suppose to put in. But, hey nobody told me I was doing too much work. As a result my grades for the first semester kinda' sucked. After I was told that my hours had been abused things started to change a bit. The biggest change was my focus toward my academic experience.

I experienced culture shock the most when I transferred from my community college to the four year university I attended. There were tons of conflicts that arose from this transformation. Arguments over the individual event titles of Communication Analysis and Rhetorical Criticism was among the conflict, right next to the beverage labeling battle of pop and soda. Four students including myself transferred out to the Midwest to compete in district 5. Only two of us stuck through to graduate. Yeah, going from the place where all the movie stars live, to a place known most for its speech teams and corn was pretty rough.

As a long term aid meant to heal the pain of culture shock and balloting problems, graduate students are most likely to face, I propose that all graduate IE coaches consider learning the terms examined in this paper. Positive growth in IE forensics is in the hands of those who care about the activity most. It is essential undergraduate, graduate assistants and coaches work together to create and spread knowledge about the IE community. Teaching new members and current members about past forensics

research is essential to the growth of the IE community. If we do not spread already existing knowledge and apply it to new terms and personal experiences then we will be trapped in a stagnant activity— pastiche at its best.

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