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Defining Success: Examining What it Means to be Good in Forensics

By

David J. Brennan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

Communication Studies

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Defining Success: Examining What it Means to be Good in Forensics

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

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ABSTRACT

DEFINING SUCCESS: EXAMINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE GOOD IN FORENSICS

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For decades college students have been competing in forensic activity (forensics), spending countless hours researching, writing, and performing speeches. Forensic scholars have never created an overarching definition of what it means to be successful in forensics. A survey was created and sent out on the individual events listserv, asking competitors and coaches to define success. Analysis reveals both competitors and coaches believe success in forensics is a combination of competitive achievement, building communication skills, and personal growth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the help and support of some really fantastic people; if only I had room to thank each one individually.

Throughout my years as a competitor and student, I have been most fortunate to be taught and directed by six amazing coaches:

Keith – introduced me to debate, argumentation, research, and professionalism; his subtle humor keeps me laughing even today.

Jan – allowed me to teach her as much about Speech as she taught me about being a responsible coach; she helped me grow and be accountable from day one as an assistant.

Dan – the most intense and knowledgeable instructor I've ever had; he never gave up on me throughout my 11 years of mistakes...many, many mistakes.

Jim – facilitated my growth as a rhetor and a thinker, advanced my debate skills, and advised this humble project; his guidance has been invaluable.

Brian – my most trusted mentor and friend; showed me that this activity is all about the people and that making connections with students is worth more than any trophy.

Leah – whose administrative skills are only rivaled by her dedication to this activity; throughout these many years she has continued to be a source of inspiration for me as a coach, teacher, and mentor.

I also need to thank the continued support of my family and friends – your camaraderie makes me a better person each day; you know who you are!

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Finally, this project is dedicated to my mother, who taught me I could do anything I wanted and supported me every step of the way. Though her time with us was short, her impact is eternal. You are missed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Shooting a ball through a hoop, pinning an opponent, crossing a finish line in the fastest time—it's easy to tell how to win in most sports. Athletic competitions are filled with a number of objective ways to determine success both as a team and as an individual participant. However, the world of competitive forensic speaking isn't so lucky. Collegiate forensic speaking (forensics) has rankings and trophies like many other activities, but determining who does well can be much more subjective than other collegiate competitions.

In forensics, students compete in a number of events ranging from memorized formal speeches, to think-on-your-feet limited preparation speeches, to interpretation of literature. Each speech is unique to the student and judged on an ever-changing range of criteria (Klosa & DuBois, 2001; Mills, 1991; Scott & Birkholt, 1996). Unlike athletics, where the winner is generally determined by some objective measure—who crossed the finish line first, who jumped the furthest—the winner of a speech competition is the one the judge determines to be the winner. Winning is entirely at the discretion of the judge, or judges, and although one may appeal to objective standards, there is an ineliminable element of subjectivity. The winner is the one determined by the judge, whose decision is final. Moreover, different judges may employ different criteria. What wins in one round may lose in another. Standards inviolate to the judge of one round are of little consequence to the judge in the next. This subjective nature of determining a winner in competition is one of the major differences between forensics and athletics.

Co-curricular Activity

An important distinction between forensics and other types of competition is while many athletic activities claim to have some educational value, forensics is a co-curricular activity. Bishop and Walters (2007) described extra-curricular activities as activities which go beyond the traditional classroom (e.g. internships, volunteer work); co-curricular activities, however, are linked to direct classroom teachings (e.g. science bowl, academic decathlon). Not to say sports teams have no educational focus; athletes are often required to maintain grade averages, study together, and build unity. Athletics teach skills, teamwork, how to properly develop physically, and an understanding of good physical health. However, forensics is not something students do in addition to college; it's something they do *with* college. Thornton, Tarrant, and Williams (2009) explained co-curricular activities as, "capable of providing rich learning opportunities for students" (p. 2).

The co-curricular nature of forensics teaches students valuable critical thinking skills, non-competitive public/group speaking skills, and can boost confidence levels (Freeley, 1990; Sellnow, 1994). Forensics may be superior to a conventional classroom setting because, "unbridled by the limitations found within the traditional lecture-oriented classroom situation, [forensics] participants must learn to invent, organize, and articulate thoughts... to improve their quality thinking and how to critique the arguments and conclusions of others" (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999, p. 19).

Within the forensics community, one of the most contentious debates is the battle between educational objectives and competitive goals. Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) credited Ehniger (1952) as being the first to promote forensics as a co-curricular

activity. At the second developmental conference in 1984 McBath said, “forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people” (as cited in Burnett, Brand & Meister, 2003, p. 14). But Burnett, Brand, and Meister pointed out,

In fact, the discourse of forensics is all about competition. In preparation for *tournaments, competitors practice their events with coaches*. Forensics educators refer to themselves as *coaches*, who prepare *competitors*, not students, for week-end-long *tournaments* that give out *awards to top competitors, trophies to programs* that receive *sweepstakes points*, and *qualifier legs to competitors for national tournaments*. While at *tournaments, coaches judge competitors*, providing critiques on *ballots* that reflect a *competitor's school code*. Ultimately, the *judge* gives each *competitor rank and rate points*. Moreover, a *tournament director* and a *tab room staff*, whose sole purpose is to ensure that the *tournament is on time* and that results are *tabulated* correctly, *run tournament*. (p. 15–16).

Arguing the other side of the issue, Hinck (2003) contended forensics is intrinsically educational:

Tournaments invite comparison and evaluation according to standards for judgment. What wins reflects community standards for excellence. Our concern should be on what standards the community applies to performance, the rationale for using those standards, and a willingness to reflect on how well these standards prepare students for communicating beyond the narrow confines of tournament participation (p. 63).

Concept of Success

At the heart of the debate is the question of what forensics is and what it means to succeed in forensics. If the forensics community does not have a sense of the objective of the activity, then it is difficult to know exactly what it means to succeed in forensics. Thus, success is a difficult concept to define in forensics and no one seems to have tried to define success without referencing the above education/competition dialectic. In forensics, success may mean winning trophies, writing a solid speech, becoming a better speaker, etc.; the possibilities are numerous.

The debate community has made an effort to define what it means to succeed in collegiate debate. Articles such as “The Successful Intercollegiate Debater” (Dalton & Pross, 1954), “Success in Debate” (Hensley & Strother, 1968), “Evaluation Criteria as Predictors of Debate Success” (Burgoon, 1975), and “Debate-A Way of Training for Success” (Mazilu, 2002), use success as a synonym for winning rounds or gaining speaker points. Debate professionals have correspondingly defined success this way for more than 50 years.

In order to develop as an activity, it is important the forensics community determine what it means to succeed in forensics. But definitions should not be imposed on the activity from the outside. As Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) pointed out, forensics is a community with its own history, myths and ideographs. Thus, a definition should come from the community itself, as we are the most knowledgeable and dedicated scholars concerning forensics. This motivated my first two research questions:

RQ1: How do competitors define success in forensics?

RQ2: How do coaches define success in forensics?

Comparing the differences and similarities between how students define success and how coaches define success may reveal an insight into the motivations of each group in the activity. The comparison may help determine the dialectical severity of education and competition in forensics. With this in mind, I propose my final research question:

RQ3: Can we formulate a measurement of success independent of competitive ranks and rates?

Justification

More than 20 years ago, Aden (1990) wrote about the importance of forensic research on the activity and our academic profession, “Forensics research... provides is [sic] with additional perspectives for coaching—many of them offered by opinion leaders in the forensics community” (p. 57). Research can greatly shape the future of our activity, impact how students and coaches work to attain success in the activity, and even transform the discipline itself (Goodnight & Mitchell, 2008).

My analysis includes a review of literature in Chapter Two focused on the educational value of forensics and the competitive conflict within the activity. Chapter Three outlines my method as I researched what success means in forensics, and justifies my use of an electronic survey. Chapter Four examines the results of data and Chapter Five discusses those results in relation to the activity, as well as proposes avenues for future research on success in forensics.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Competitive speaking is not a new activity; generations of students and coaches have worked tirelessly to perfect the art of the public presentation. In fact, speaking competitions are among the oldest contests of any college activity still in existence. According to the American Forensic Association (2011), the Interstate Oratorical Association's annual contest has been running since 1872—displaying the best college speakers in the country. Over 140 years later, our activity has evolved into a multitude of different individual and debate events involving thousands of students every year. Even so, forensic scholars have had a difficult time defining exactly the end goals of forensics. This review of literature examines research surrounding the educational value of forensics and the competitive conflict within forensic publications.

Educational Value

Ehninger (1952) first defined forensics as a co-curricular activity. Writing specifically about debating he said although there were some who, ...still believe that the success of a school's forensics program may be measured merely by counting the number of cups in its trophy case...the majority are now more interested in the contribution which that program makes toward the intellectual, social and moral development of the students who participate in it (p. 237).

Ehninger went on to describe the activity as co-curricular rather than extra-curricular because the former term “emphasizes the fact that activities outside the classroom are not

mere adjuncts to formal class instruction, but are an integral part of the total educative process” (p. 237).

Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) noted at the first developmental conference—the 1974 Sedalia retreat—forensics was defined as “an educational activity” (p. 14). They cited resolutions which defined the activity as a form of “humanistic education,” as “furthering the knowledge of argumentation theory” and “developing students’ communicative abilities” (p. 14). A decade later, at the second developmental conference held in 1984, McBath suggested, “forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people” (p. 5). The activity has changed over the last few decades, yet McBath’s definition remains a central statement of how forensics should be understood.

Considerable research has been done to support the belief that forensics is inherently educational. Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, and Loudon (1999), for example, identified no fewer than 30 studies looking at competitive forensics participation (they use “debate, discussion, individual events, mock trial, or other types of participative competitive events” (p. 22) in their definition of forensics participation). They concluded involvement in forensics moves education beyond the typical classroom setting because, “unbridled by the limitations found within the traditional lecture-oriented classroom situation, participants must learn to invent, organize, and articulate thoughts subject to scrutiny by others” (p. 19). An increase in critical thinking ability is just one justification why forensics is an important activity on the college campus.

Forensics students take an active role in their education, which has been shown to

have a positive impact on academic achievement (Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Active students create relationships with peers and faculty, and hold each other accountable to certain goals and progress in the classroom and the activity. As forensic educators, we all have personal experiences which we use to convince students, administrators, and ourselves of the importance of forensics as a co-curricular program; these experiences are crucial to the continuation of forensic activity. Simply put, “because forensics can change lives more dramatically than any subject we teach, it should remain an integral part of language arts co-curricular activities” (Shaw, 1995, p. 53).

Forensics is not the only collegiate activity which has a positive impact on the life of a student. After all, a plethora of different teams, social groups, and school organizations all build various skills and keep students actively involved in college. However, forensics has the added benefit of crossing departmental lines and the skills students learn in forensics are applicable to numerous occupations. Other academic-based activities tend to be focused on a single area of educational development. The Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) for example, is educational but focused on advertising and business proposals; a Science Bowl team is dedicated to textbook knowledge of their specialty; and Future Farmers of America (FFA) draws agricultural students. As such, these activities draw only students who are focusing their educational goals in that specific realm.

Students of all academic backgrounds and emphases can and do participate in forensics. The activity, “. . .is inherently interdisciplinary, capable of serving students regardless of major” (McBath, 1984, p. 7). Communication itself is interdisciplinary, everyone uses communication and everyone could be better at communicating. This

interdisciplinary advantage translates well to life beyond academia. Forensic participants have been found to have an easier time getting through interviews, gaining employment, and even receiving promotions over their non-forensic counterparts (Rogers, 2005). Additionally, Dreibelbis and Gullifor (1992) argued forensic students are well qualified and prepared for positions in electronic media, on-air journalism, politics, and law.

Competitive Conflict

Evidence points squarely in the direction of educational importance when evaluating the purpose of forensics, yet some researchers have argued the competitive nature of the activity diminishes forensics' educational impact. Forensic publications examine the clashing dichotomy between competition and education – debating if the two goals can peacefully coexist. Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2001, 2003) published two articles critical of the growing focus on competition. The authors contended program administrators often set aside our agreed upon educational goals in favor of techniques which will win rounds and tournaments.

Two important themes emerge from the analysis provided by Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2001, 2003): the desire to cheat and the lack of experimental events. Ethical dilemmas are a problem in any competition, and forensics is no different. Multiple studies have completed detailed analyses of the use and citation of evidence in public address rounds at the highest level of competition (Cronn-Mills & Schnoor, 2003; Frank, 1983; Perry, 2003). Each article revealed detailed evidence of plagiarism by the competitors; though the authors could not identify motivation for the violations.

Second, Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) critique experimental events because, "... placings in the event do not always 'count' for sweep-stakes points, and rules are

unclear, making the event more difficult to win. Additionally, experimental events cost money which, with limited budgets, makes them a competitive threat” (p. 17). Even at a national level a lack of importance on experimental events is true, when an experimental event does become a part of the National Forensics Association’s National Championship Tournament, a school may only enter two students in the event, the event is scheduled outside of normal individual event patterns, and the event counts for no sweepstakes points (NFA Bylaws, 2002). For these reasons, and most likely others, experimental events are rarely a priority for teams. Experimental events are important because they facilitate activity growth and inventiveness; activity stagnation is a main factor of stifling creativity in forensics (Gaer, 2002).

A strong focus on competition and a lack of experimentation does not mean the activity has gone “to the dark side” and is no longer capable of all the educational benefits listed above. Scholars contend programs should find a balance between competitive and educational natures (Hinck, 2003; Wood & Rowland-Morin, 1989). Winning need not be mutually exclusive from gaining educational ground as a student; competition can drive students to do better and in turn provide intrinsic knowledge for other projects. Forensic educators should avoid falling into a formulaic trap just because the formula may be competitively successful (Gaer, 2002). Even though changing habits may be easier written than done, finding new perspectives and exploring new ways to craft speeches may assist teams from becoming overly formulaic (Brennan, 2011; Kelly & Richardson, 2008).

With the forensics community decidedly in agreement of favoring education as the primary purpose of the activity, and using competition as a means to achieve said

education, then the majority of forensic research should focus on education.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Publications dealing with competition and/or education tend to fall into one of two categories: how to win and who wins.

Every few years an article comes out which completes a detailed analysis of hundreds of ballots from dozens of judges contributed by multiple schools (e.g. Klosa & DuBois, 2001; Mills, 1991; Scott & Birkholt, 1996). The authors found common themes from judges such as comments on delivery, emotional development, gestures, literature choice, reason for decision—and the list goes on. While none of these authors suggested their findings should be used to gain a competitive advantage, the results can be interpreted in such a way. Students and coaches could use the information to educate themselves on the important aspects of a solid speech. However, without a proper focus on what educational outcomes can be developed from these findings, such research can be used as a how-to-win guide.

Second, forensic scholars focus on who is winning and why some students are more competitively successful than others; forensics norms provide one avenue for such research. Paine (2005) wrote a groundbreaking paper questioning the impact of unwritten rules on the activity including the use of the little black book in oral interpretation events, conservative appearance, and how to sign-in on a board. At one time such norms may have been instilled to improve the quality of the activity, but now they have become so static and “required” that, “...unless coaches and students are willing to courageously duel the norms, judges will have no choice but to continue rewarding ‘the same old thing’” (p. 86).

Gender has emerged as a popular frame for analyzing competitive success in

forensics. Researchers have examined the reasons why males are perceived to be the dominant gender in forensics (Friedley & Manchester, 1987), how female competitors have to conform to masculine styles in extemporaneous speaking (White, 1997), and the male/female participation levels in forensics (Manchester & Friedley, 2003). Each article provides a stellar critique of the activity and vital comments on forensic competition.

It's only natural to wonder why certain people win and how students can improve their odds of winning. These studies failed to begin with a clear definition of success. Questioning who is successful, what it takes to be successful, and discovering the formal and informal barriers to success all presuppose we know "success." The existing research uses "success" as a synonym for winning, all focused on competition (Friedley & Manchester, 1987; Gaer, 2002; Klosa & DuBois, 2001; Manchester & Friedley, 2003; Paine, 2005; Swift, 2006; White, 1997).

Because education is crucial to forensics' purpose, a true definition of success must be determined. The following chapters illuminate the definition of success by identifying a research method, examining the results, and generating discussion about success in forensics.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Reviewing forensic literature motivated me to ask my three research questions. As demonstrated in the review of literature, little scholarly research has been conducted on the subject of success. The first two research questions (How do competitors define success in forensics?; How do coaches define success in forensics?) will distinguish to what extent, if any, a difference exists between the way both students and coaches define success. My final research question (Can we formulate a measurement of success independent of competitive ranks and rates?), will attempt to craft a workable definition for scholars to use in continued forensics research.

To answer the questions, a survey was created with demographic and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). This method of analysis was selected for several reasons. I disregarded Likert-type surveys because it would require me to predetermine categories and could potentially limit responses. As Jacoby and Matell (1971) pointed out, more narrowly constructed scales reduce the “rater’s discriminative powers” (p. 496) and allowing respondents to “record [their] own responses (open-ended) to each item without a previously prepared rating format being provided” would cater to the “idiosyncrasies” of respondents “allowing them to respond as they desire” (p. 499). Jacoby and Matell believed the open-ended approach would contribute to a greater number of responses which is important. I also believed it was important to let respondents generate their own categories and definitions of success rather than imposing my own values on the rating system.

Another way to gather respondent generated definitions of success would have been interviews. Beatty and Willis (2007) pointed out schools of thought about interviewing fall into two paradigms; the ‘think aloud’ paradigm requires very little intervention by the interviewer and the probing paradigm requires the interviewer to ask direct questions. Both forms of interviewing, “entail administering survey questions to a participant while collecting additional verbal information relevant to survey responses” (p. 290). I believe both methods would have met my goals with respect to the type of data I wanted to collect, but would have had three draw backs. First, given the nature of this research, subjects might feel inclined to give answers they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Neuman (1997) called this “demand characteristics” or the tendency of subjects to “change their behavior to what they think is demanded of them...in order to please the researcher” (p. 194). Second, interviews would dramatically limit the number of subjects who could contribute to the definition of success in forensics. In order to generate a broad based definition, I believed it would be important to survey a broad cross-section of the field and to get as many responses as possible. A third dilemma relative to the use of interviews concerns the sample population to be interviewed. Interviews would almost certainly mean interviewing subjects who were readily available, what Ferber (1977) called a convenience sample, including members of the team I have coached or colleagues I worked with or my friends in the forensics community. These subjects would not be truly representative of the community as a whole and would very likely share my own biases and beliefs about forensics and success.

Given these factors, I determined while all research tools have advantages and disadvantages, surveys are the best method of collecting user-generated responses from

the widest number of people with the lowest level of researcher bias.

I created a survey designed to elicit open-ended responses from subjects about success in forensics. Survey participants were first asked to define themselves as part of one group: current competitor, current coach, or other. This required question split participants into the two defined groups from my research questions. Participants who selected “other” were able to identify how they were involved in forensics, but would not be used for primary analysis. All participants were then asked to provide their gender, with the option to “prefer not to say,” in an effort to determine if answers varied between the genders. Gender was used to identify male or female, a standard developed in the literature (see Manchester & Friedley, 1985; White, 1997).

Current competitors were asked in which year of competition they were currently participating and the size range of their team. Asking demographic questions of the competitors may help distinguish if definitions of success are different between levels of experience and/or squad size. Competitors were asked open-ended questions relating to success in forensics. Competitors were allowed to provide as much or as little detail for each question, or to skip a question altogether.

Current coaches were asked to identify gender, team size, and the time range of their coaching experience. Likewise for the competitors, these questions provided data for analysis of differences between experience and team-size levels. Coaches were asked four open-ended questions, three of which had the same wording as the competitor questions. The other question focused on the coach’s team, which may reveal if program success differs from individual success.

The final group was left open as “other,” participants were asked to define their

connections to forensics and to identify their gender. “Others” were asked only one open-ended question to define success in forensics. The responses may provide a perspective not found amongst competitors or coaches currently involved in forensics, but are not the main focus of the research.

In disseminating the survey, I kept in mind the three criteria for good survey research as identified by Ferber (1977). First, “the relevance of the...target population to the topic under study needs to be firmly established” (p. 57). This means the survey would need to be targeted to people whose interests and opinions about success in forensics matter to my research, such as members of the forensics community including judges, present and past competitors, coaches, etc. The second criteria is sample size, which “must be adequate for analytical purposes” (p. 57). Third and finally, the survey “subjects should be representative of the population being studied” (p. 57).

In order to satisfy these criteria, the survey was created using the GoogleDocs form function and the link was distributed in two ways. First, the link was sent out electronically over the Individual Events listserv. The IE-I serves a large portion of the active collegiate forensic population. Second, personal emails were sent to coaches at multiple colleges and universities across the nation, asking to distribute the link to team members. Coaches who received personal emails were individuals I either knew or who were affiliated with programs I knew from experience to be supportive of research. The use of the listserv and personal emails can be defined as a judgment sample, which Marshall (1996) describes as, “the most productive sample to answer the [qualitative] research question... based on the researcher's practical knowledge of the research area” (p. 523).

All survey participation was voluntary and no identifiable information was uploaded with the survey, making each submission anonymous. Digital consent was provided via submission of the completed survey. The survey was left active for more than three weeks to assure ample time for response. Seventy-one surveys were completed for analysis. After analyzing the responses, I agree with Marshall (1996) when he wrote, “an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question,” (p. 523).

The open-ended survey answers were analyzed using a thematic analysis method developed from Grounded Theory. I will first, describe Grounded Theory and its importance to qualitative research, and then describe the steps of a thematic analysis. Grounded Theory was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in an attempt to break away from the standard quantitative research methods and the positivist assumptions made by researchers. As Glaser (2002) describes it, Grounded Theory, “is a general method that cuts across research methods (experiment, survey, content analysis, and all qualitative methods) and uses all data resulting therefrom” (p. 24). Grounded Theory is often used when an area of research has gone relatively unnoticed within its discipline (Moghaddam, 2006), making it a suitable methodological basis for investigating the definition of success in forensics.

Grounded Theory makes use of raw data, in any number of forms, to interpret a message or set of ideas. While not limited to qualitative research methods, most of what we traditionally think of as qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations) provide the best data for analysis. This focus on the data, and not on preconceived notions or hypotheses, allows the researcher to create a story from the data.

Or, as Charmaz (2003) explained, "...data represent objective facts about a knowable world. The data already exist in the world, and the researcher finds them" (p. 313).

Grounded theorists do not simply present data, they must find a way to organize and interpret the messages within the data. To do this, researchers must spend time coding their data. "Grounded theory coding is a kind of content analysis to find and conceptualise the core issues from within the huge pile of the data" (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 56). Codes are found by closely examining data for repetitive words, phrases, or ideas and then grouping them together for later interpretation and conceptualization. Coding is explained further during the description of thematic analysis.

Grounded Theory is a very broad methodological approach, and thus an exact series of steps is difficult to follow for many projects, including this one. Even one of the developers of Grounded Theory, (Glaser, 2002), acknowledges, "The researcher can use his or her own concepts generated from the data...actually generating a concept is very exciting and it is where many an effort at [Grounded Theory] stops" (p. 23). Methods in Grounded Theory, "provide a set of inductive steps that successfully lead the researcher from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 312). While Grounded Theory may be a method in itself, using Grounded Theory as a theoretical basis for a more specific method is more suitable for my data/analysis. This project began with raw data collection in a Grounded Theory fashion before moving into a more specific approach via a thematic analysis.

The use of a thematic analysis is appropriate because the, "...goal is to organize a large quantity of specific details into a coherent picture, model, or set of interlocked concepts" (Neuman, 1997, p. 420). The method of analysis allowed identifying themes to

be revealed as participants define success in forensics. Braun and Clarke (2006) described the steps necessary to complete a thematic analysis.

The first step of a thematic analysis is to get familiar with the data; this is accomplished by meticulously reading and re-reading each piece of data looking for commonalities and responses significant to the research questions. The researcher should begin by writing down ideas for themes or possible codes. Preliminary notes were taken during the first step to prepare for the second step of identifying codes. Codes are the foundation for the most apparent themes which emerge from the data, because, “codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18). Thus, the second step requires meticulous analysis of the data and preliminary notes, followed by writing down codes. Typically, keywords are recorded during this phase, which are then combined into common themes in the third step of the analysis.

The third step of a thematic analysis is to sort the list of codes into primary themes. As Ryan and Bernard (2003) explain, “Themes come in all shapes and sizes. Some themes are broad and sweeping constructs... other themes are more focused and link very specific kind of expressions” (p. 87). For example, coded keywords such as “apples,” “lemons,” and “melons” could be sorted into a theme of “fruits.” This step usually forms the foundation for the major themes of the analysis, however, nothing is set in stone at this point and all themes and data should be reviewed often to assure all data has been thoroughly analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Review is the fourth step of thematic analysis; each theme is thoroughly analyzed to assure the correct codes have been placed into the correct themes and that no themes

were overlooked. Once all themes and codes have been reviewed, the fifth step is to define the themes. Defining describes what each theme represents in the study; the researcher, “formulate[s] theme statements to develop a story line” (Aronson, 1996, p. 2). This story line is how the researcher explains the data to the audience and crafts the discussion section of the study.

In the final step of thematic analysis, the researcher reviews all of the data and completes the analysis by describing the themes and explaining how the themes generate the answers or results of the study. Specific data examples should be picked out to be used in the results section; as Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, the researcher should, “choose particularly vivid examples, or extracts which capture the essence of the point you are demonstrating, without unnecessary complexity” (p. 23).

The third research question was answered using the complete story line and thematic definitions crafted using the thematic analysis approach. The coding process was repeated based on the demographic subgroups (gender, team size, experience) to identify themes specific to the subgroups.

Finally, I must also recognize my own personal interest in the research and the activity. As Roberts and Pettigrew (2007) noted, “content analysis is particularly susceptible to researcher bias” (p. 357) and thus it is especially important to be aware of the biases I bring to the research. Although there are many ways to address researcher bias, the approach I relied upon was reflexivity which, as Guba and Lincoln (2005) described, “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives” (p. 210). As a “life-long” participant of this activity, I know my

own experiences will shape how I examine my data and craft my results. My familiarity with forensics culture has led me to believe competition is the highest priority for most teams and competitors, forcing the educational aspect of the activity to be placed on the back burner. However, acknowledging my own biases is an effort to minimize them as much as possible during the coding/analysis process. The final two chapters reveal the results of my analysis and final discussion of my research.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The survey was approved by Minnesota State University, Mankato's Institutional Research Board (Log #3736) on February 17, 2011. Surveys were sent out through the Individual Events listserv and by personal emails to various coaches at multiple colleges and universities across the nation.

Seventy-one participants responded to the survey; respondents reflected a broad cross-section of the individual-events forensics community. Of the respondents, 32 identified themselves as current competitors, 36 as coaches, and three identified as "other," which includes people who may regularly judge or attend forensics tournaments. Tables 1–3 further break the respondents down based on gender (Table 1), team size (Table 2) and years of experience in collegiate competitive forensics (Table 3). The respondents represent a wide range of competitors and coaches from a variety of experience levels and program sizes. The wide-range suggests the survey population is a good representation of the individual-events forensics community.

Table 1*Self-Reported Gender*

Participant	Competitor	Coach	Other	Total
Male	13	20	2	35
Female	19	16	1	36

Table 2*Team Size – Number of Individuals Participating on the Respondent's Team*

Participant	1 – 10	11 – 20	21 – 30	More than 30
Competitors	9	12	11	0
Coaches	14	13	5	4

Table 3*Years of Experience**

Participant	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years
Competitors	8	7	5	12

Participant	1 – 5 Years	6 – 10 Years	11 – 15 Years	16+ Years
Coaches	11	8	7	10

*College students may compete for up to four years; Table 3 does not include any previous experience in competitive forensics participation (e.g. secondary school).

Open-ended Question Results

My first research question sought to determine how competitors define success in forensics. Competitors' responses to the first open-ended question, "How do you define 'success' in forensic activity," varied between a few words to multiple paragraphs. After coding the data, I was able to identify seven themes within the competitor responses (see Table 4).

Table 4

Competitors' Responses to "How do you define 'success' in forensic activity?"

Theme	Number of Responses
Competition	17
Growth	9
Satisfaction	8
Education	5
Skill Development	4
Goals	3

Competition was the most commonly developed theme amongst all competitor responses. Competitors defined competitive success as breaking to final rounds and/or outrounds at both regional and national tournaments. Competition was acknowledged as “quals” (qualifications for national tournaments) and “hardware” (physical trophies or medals awarded at tournaments). One student wrote success was, “regularly placing at tournaments and qualifying for national tournaments.” Although competition is the largest theme pulled from the competitor data, multiple responses acknowledged competition was not the sole factor in determining success.

Growth was identified on both the individual level and the team level. Participants focused on how competitors/teams became better speakers or, the more socially conscious response, better people over the course of a season and career. One second-year competitor wrote, “Success in Forensics I feel is the growth you see within a competitor as a speaker. The amount they progress in their ability to speak in public and

becoming comfortable in what they are doing.”

Growth as a theme was directly related to the theme of skills, although “skill” was directly referenced fewer times amongst competitors, the description of growth and skill was often similar. Students expressed the importance of developing various skills while participating in forensics. Example responses included general communication skills, critical thinking skills, writing skills, interpersonal skills, and the ability to speak well. Growth and skills differed while coding due to specificity in the data; skills referred to a specific item a student would improve upon, while growth was described in more general terms and included a personal component.

Satisfaction emerged as an independent theme in the competitor data. Satisfaction was defined in a number of non-quantifiable ways, such as making an impact on the audience, having fun or enjoying the activity, feeling good after a round, and impressing judges, coaches, and fellow competitors. Satisfaction references often linked to the relationships theme—these students believed success in forensics stemmed from the relationships (e.g. friendships and national networking) they developed while participating. A fourth-year competitor wrote, “I believe what has defined me more as having been successful are the bonds I've made with people all across the country.”

The final two themes identified within the competitor responses were education and goals. These themes were used in a very broad sense, such as, “Forensics is a co-circular [sic] activity, which stresses the education value of speech,” or in terms of goals, “Success in forensics is about meeting personal goals.” In most instances, these themes were used in conjunction with one of the more specific themes above, such as setting competitive goals.

Many of the seven themes identified by the competitor responses emerged in the responses from current coaches. Five major themes (all extant within the competitor themes) emerged after coding the coach data (see Table 5).

Table 5

Coaches' Responses to "How do you define 'success' in forensic activity?"

Theme	Number of Reponses
Competition	17
Skill Development	13
Growth	12
Goals	12
Education	8

Five additional themes/values appeared, each being raised only a single time. The five single-time themes could not be grouped with the five major themes appearing in Table 5. The five themes are fun, confidence, respect, drive, and leadership. The major themes will form the answer to my second research question which seeks to determine how coaches define success in forensics.

Of all the major themes provided by the coaches, competition was again the most prevalent; much like the competitor responses, coaches defined competition as breaking to outrounds, qualifying for national tournaments, and bringing home hardware. In some forms, competition was stipulated with an individual student component, creating different levels of competitive achievement to be successful. One coach wrote, "Breaking

to out rounds is the goal for most students. For Novice competitors, simply competing and learning Forensics [sic] is successful.” Among all coach responses with a competition component, only one identified competition as the sole criteria for defining success, responding simply with, “National out-rounds. National finals.”

Multiple responses identified the themes of skills, growth, and goals as being the major determinant of success in forensics. Definitions of the themes emerged in much the same way as it did in the competitor responses. Many coaches explained skill, growth, and goal themes to be equally weighted with competitive achievement when determining if a student is successful in forensics. Skill, growth, and goal references may attribute to the lack of direct references to education, as learning and growing are a part of education. Besides the few minor themes which did not repeat in coach responses, relationships was the only major thematic difference between competitors and coaches. No coaches attributed making friends or social connections to being successful in the activity.

When asked how they determine if they have a successful forensic program, coaches replied with many of the same themes for defining success in general. Again, competition and growth were the most common responses (22 and 20, respectively), followed by retention, cohesion, consistency, reputation, and service (each with fewer than eight references). The major difference in the descriptions of the successful program themes from the general success themes concerned the impact upon the institution. Several coaches identified a need for competitive achievement by their team in order to keep the program alive within their department or institution. One coach wrote, “We strive to be in the top 20 schools in the nation. To our program and our administration [this] speak[s] to our success as a program.”

After identifying the major themes in competitor and coach responses, I compared how the groups' answers overlapped each other in an effort to answer the third research question concerning an all-encompassing definition of success in forensic activity. To create a definition, I compared the analyses from above and asked the competitors to describe how they believe their coaches define success in forensics. Interestingly, the competitor descriptions of how they believe their coaches define success and how the coaches actually did define success were almost a complete match. Competition and growth were the most common references with 20 each, followed by cohesion, goals, and fun referenced fewer than five times each; numbers which are nearly identical to the actual coach responses. Finally, 17 competitors wrote their coaches define success the exact same way as the competitor.

Discussion

One of the original intentions of researching success was to compare responses based on gender, team size, and years of experience as a competitor. I anticipated there may be differences based on the demographic factors. For example, Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) suggested men are generally more competitive than women. I expected men would more be more likely to indicate competition as a measure of success. I anticipated larger teams would differ from smaller teams in terms of values. For example, one might predict larger teams, which represent larger investment of institutional resources, place greater emphasis on objective measures of success (e.g. trophies, rankings). Finally, I expected some change in definitions based on the number of years of experience. I anticipated the longer one spent in the activity, the more one's perspective would change; meaning participants would become more cynical or more idealistic, for

example.

Unexpectedly, the demographic variables seemed to have no impact on how participants responded to the survey. Gender, experience, and team size did not create any differences in the results. The only meaningful difference existed between coaches and competitors; which may have some connection to time spent in the activity. As Table 4 indicates, the average competitor had a little more than two-and-a-half years of experience, while nearly half the coaches indicated they had been in the activity more than 11 years. Time spent in the activity might be a significant variable, but the impact of time as a factor independent of coaching and competing was not assessed.

After completing analysis of the data, I returned to my first two research questions:

RQ1: How do competitors define success in forensics?

RQ2: How do coaches define success in forensics?

With respect to RQ1, competitors emphasized competitive outcomes balanced by growth and a sense of satisfaction. With respect to RQ2, the responses from coaches were similar. Although coaches placed the greatest emphasis on competitive outcomes, coaches tended to balance competition with more educational outcomes. Analysis of competitor and coach responses brings me to the third, and most important of my research questions:

RQ3: Can we formulate a measurement of success independent of competitive ranks and rates?

The considerable overlap between the responses of coaches and competitors, along with the uniformity between respondents regardless of gender, team size, and time in the activity suggested forensics as a community and culture has a well-defined, if rarely

articulated in the research, sense of success. Based on the themes which emerged from the data, I offer the following multi-faceted definition of success in forensics:

Success in forensics may be defined as a healthy balance of competitive achievement, the personal growth of a student, and the development of crucial communication and critical thinking skills.

This definition, while complex, gives equal weight to the major themes identified during my analysis. Balance of the major themes of success should be evaluated by students, coaches, and teams in advance; this is in an effort to convince readers to take an active role setting goals and crafting their own competitive/educational equilibrium.

Competitors, at least the ones who responded to the survey, seem to have a solid grasp of the differences between winning trophies and growing as a speaker and student. Coaches are leaving a positive mark on students by explaining all the benefits of participating in forensics, which directly impacts how students define success—as indicated by the many “coach thinks the same way” responses. At the same time, the results recognize competition and awards are a driving force for students and coaches alike. The new definition may assist forensic participants to recognize the complex and contextual nature of success, and lead to more uniform analysis of the activity in the future.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

What is surprising about the results is how not surprising they are at all.

Competitive achievement was valued just as much as educational achievement (in the forms of skill building, reaching goals, etc.) by both competitors and coaches alike. If the results are accurate, then the battle between education and competitive dynamics in forensics should not be problematic and yet, as ably demonstrated by Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) and Hinck, (2003), it does. We continually reaffirm we wish to balance competitive and educational goals in our research and developmental conferences. One cannot help but feel as though we “protest too much.” The results led me to one of three possible conclusions: narrow sample population limited my results, demand characteristics reactivity interfered with participant responses, or the extreme nature of forensic publications inflates the existence of a real problem.

As a researcher, I must admit the limitations of my project. While the IE-I listserv is the easiest way to reach a large number of active participants in forensics, the respondents are a convenience sample of the entire individual-events population, ones which are not a random slice of the community, but could be easily reached. The population which regularly monitors the IE-I may not be representative of the population as a whole. Population representation explains, for example, why coaches make up about half the respondents even though students far outnumber coaches in the community, and explains why so few individuals who are neither coaches nor competitors responded. They may have a significant impact on the activity, especially at regional tournaments,

but not regularly follow forensic listservs. Even so, participant numbers were relatively similar between the various subgroups, allowing for as much generalization as possible with the method.

My results may be susceptible to *demand characteristics*, or the effect of participants answering questions in the way they believe the researcher wants them to be answered, and not necessarily truthfully. As previously noted, demand characteristics are the tendency of respondents to modify their responses to conform to what they believe the interviewer wants to hear or what they believe to be the most socially acceptable answer (Neuman, 1997, p. 194). While the surveys may have reduced demand characteristics, respondents may have answered questions in a way which would sound selfless and promote the most “higher-learning-esque” definition of the activity. Respondents, undoubtedly aware of the tension between competitive and educational goals in the activity may have responded honestly (emphasizing competition) but then tempered the responses with lip service to the educational outcomes so as not to appear cynical or hyper-competitive. *Demand characteristics* was minimized as much as possible because the participants had no direct contact with the researcher and the survey provided complete anonymity to the participants. Neuman (1997) posits a lack of contact would minimize the demand characteristics.

The research I have conducted should not be considered the final word on success and what it means to be successful. Future research could approach the same questions from different perspectives to see if similar results are found. For example, a focus group wherein participants are encouraged to freely discuss the meaning of success with other competitors and coaches. Other projects utilizing methods, such as interviews or

ethnographies could help further refine the definition I have crafted—leading to a more generalized conclusion. Researchers could utilize surveys from other disciplines in conjunction with my definition to achieve a greater depth of analysis. Adapting a survey created by Catina and Iso-Ahola (2004), which examines the perception of success in athletics, to fit forensic competition would be a start.

Furthermore, the study may be a starting point for additional research in forensics. One of the most frequently cited studies in forensics literature is the Cronn-Mills and Golden (1997) study on the unwritten rules in forensics. Coupled with my study on how success is defined, we may be able to move past Cronn-Mills and Golden's insightful, but often tongue-in-cheek description of norms and practices in order to engage in a more systematic study of forensics as a culture. My research suggests considerable uniformity of values may exist between coaches and competitors, men and women, large teams and small teams, newcomers and those with decades of experience. The extent of an apparent uniformity and how it is achieved is worth studying.

If competitors and coaches value both the educational and competitive aspects of forensics, then perhaps forensic publications are too negative, focused on what is wrong in the activity. Rarely are articles published which simply explain everything in forensics is stable and well. And why would we see such articles? Coaches and students all want to make forensics the best it could possibly be, so researchers may simply focus on the perceived problems within forensics. However, when all we as a community read are negative impacts—we may forget our activity is still producing more positive than negative results. The outcome of my research suggests the competitive/educational dynamic may be problematic at times, but students and coaches both recognize the

existence of the dynamic and have learned how it can be navigated.

Competition will always be a part of forensics, competition is often what drives us to become better speakers and to build different skills—competition and education is a symbiotic relationship, we cannot have one without the other. Clearly students are driven to succeed in forensics, based on personal growth, development of skills, as well as competitively. Schnoor (1995), addressing the Pi Kappa Delta Developmental Conference said, “These personal values accrue from our learning to compete intellectually...students in the activity cannot lose as they have tournament experience, and receive feedback on their performances from a variety of critics” (p. 5).

While other activities are lucky enough to be able to determine success in a very objective manner (points, wins), forensics should embrace its subjectivity and continue its long history of being a co-curricular activity—one which strives to meet institutional goals and prepare students for the future. My hope is that students, coaches, and teams will reflect upon the conclusions of the study and establish a balance of competitive goals, skill development, and focus on personal growth. That would be a win for me.

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APPENDIX A

Survey and Consent

You are invited to participate in research on the definition of “success” in forensic activity. This survey should take about 5 to 10 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary and responses will be kept anonymous. The online survey contains no identification information, therefore the risks to your physical, emotional, social, professional, or financial well-being are considered to be 'less than minimal'. The researcher provides no direct benefits to participants.

You have the option to not respond to any questions that you choose and you may exit the survey at any time by simply closing the window. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato. Activation of the link below and submission of the completed survey will be interpreted as your informed consent to participate and that you affirm you are at least 18 years of age.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact David Brennan via email at brennan.davidj@gmail.com or Prof. James Dimock at james.dimock@mnsu.edu. If you have questions about the treatment of human subjects, contact the IRB Administrator at 507-389-2321. If you would like more information about the specific privacy and anonymity risks posed by online surveys, please contact the Minnesota State University, Mankato Information and Technology Services Help Desk (507-389-6654) and ask to speak to the Information Security Manager.
Thank you for your time.

I am a:
Current competitor
Current coach
Other

Current competitor questions:

I am: Male, Female, Prefer not to say

This is my _____ competing: First year, Second year, Third year, Fourth (or more) year.

How large is your team (based on number of active team members)? 1-10 students, 11-20 students, 21-30 students, 31+ students

How do you define success in Forensic activity?

How do you believe your coach(es) define success in forensic activity?

Why do you participate in this activity?

How does the above answer relate to your definition of success?

Current coach questions:

I am: Male, Female, Prefer not to say

How long have you been coaching forensics? 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16+

years

How large is your team (based on number of active team members)? 1-10 students, 11-20 students, 21-30 students, 31+ students

How do you define success in Forensic activity?

How do you determine if you have a successful forensic program?

Why do you participate in this activity?

How does the above answer relate to your definition of success?

“Other” questions:

Please define your “other” status (How were/are you involved in the activity?):

I am: Male, Female, Prefer not to say

How long since your involvement in forensics? Currently involved, 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16+ years

How do you define success in Forensic activity?

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions please contact David Brennan at brennan.davidj@gmail.com or James Dimock at james.dimock@mnsu.edu.

APPENDIX B

Email Text

Greetings colleagues,

I would like to invite you to participate in my research surrounding success in forensics. My survey should only take about 5-10 minutes and is completely anonymous. Further consent information is available in the actual survey.

Please distribute this link to your team, teammates, and/or fellow coaches - all can participate!

<https://spreadsheets.google.com/viewform?formkey=dHVHSS1yN3VJRDRUd2VhLWs3bVpfOEE6MQ>

If you have any questions, feel free to email myself (brennan.davidj@gmail.com) or Jim Dimock (james.dimock@mnsu.edu).

Thanks and have a great weekend!

- David Brennan