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THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN INDIVIDUAL SPEAKING EVENTS

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RESEARCH

As school administrators face increasing pressure to provide a rigorous rationale for funding requests and a strong accounting of the benefits from funds expended, the forensic community will need to adopt an offensive posture, if the activities program is to remain a vital part of the overall communication program. Therefore in adopting an affirming stance, the forensic community will need a viable data base to sustain its case. The need for integrating an active research component into the life space of the forensic community is rapidly becoming a necessity. To help the forensic community sustain itself, not only is there a need for additional research but a commitment to facilitate the research via participatory support. This theoretical article affords a rationale for new research by isolating some aspects of forensic activities which might prove to be important areas of research; explores some of the problem areas for researchers that need to be overcome, as well as discussing a role which forensic organizations might play; and offers some guidelines for assessing research projects.

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

The rationale for research in forensics ought to find its genesis in the philosophy of the forensic activity. Principally, forensic activity is designed to represent an educational endeavor (Parson, 1984, p. 5). The student is afforded an opportunity to experiment with the theoretical notions of communicating with others in a particular context, research in forensics ought to help the forensic community gather the necessary data to defend forensics as a legitimate educational enterprise.

There are a number of directions researchers might travel in an effort to document the educational worth of the forensic experience. Three specific areas which might lend themselves to documenting the value of the forensic experience are assessing the intellectual development of the participants, assessing the interpersonal growth of the participants, and assessing the contribution of forensics to the development of the skills and knowledge needed to function effectively as a good citizen in society. Each of those research areas might af-

ford information the forensic community could utilize in the process of establishing the importance and necessity of the forensic program.

In assessing the intellectual development of the forensic participant, researchers might seek to focus on the development of one's cognitive skills: the ability to analyze and selectively utilize information when creating messages for others; the ability to evaluate information; the ability to comprehend and respond to questions; the ability to demonstrate problem solving skills; the ability to organize speech and interpretive materials; the ability to communicate an understanding of issues; and to demonstrate an ability to research and edit materials for competitive events. If research projects on the forensic experience can be developed to help generate a data base which helps underscore the intellectual development of the participants, a solid foundation for legitimizing forensics as a worthwhile educational endeavor can be developed. Bloom's taxonomy might help afford researchers with a viable list of cognitive skills to be researched (1956, p. 18).

An important educational corollary of one's intellectual development is the social and emotional development of the student. Forensics may be making an important and enriching contribution to the lives of many students. It is important for researchers in the forensic community to focus some attention on the matters of the social development and adjustment of participants. Among the items which might be studied are those related to the contribution(s) of the forensic experience to: the development of one's self esteem; feelings of life satisfaction; tolerance of ambiguity; feelings of belonging; feelings of open mindedness; exhibiting flexibility in dealing with others; acquisition of a set of ethical principles of communication; and feelings of being in control of one's self as opposed to feeling helpless when interacting with others. Whatever facets of human behavior which can be linked with the forensic experience could prove useful and afford opportunities for researchers to cultivate additional grounds for documenting the worth of the forensic experience. One dimension of the research effort might be that of developing testing instruments which assess human behavior, even though some tests are already available (ISR, 1970).

While often written-off as an abstract or obscure phenomenon, cultivation of one's citizenship skills may be another topic area of forensic research. How do the students participating in the forensic activities compare with other students when looking at the skills needed to function as an effective citizen in a democratic society? Does the forensic experience make a positive contribution to the prospect of sustaining a democratic form of government? Items related to the issue of developing citizenship skills which could be researched include: acceptance of social responsibility; acquisition of leadership skills; acquisition of culturally accepted values; acceptance of others; exhibiting trust in others; attitudes related to involvement in the governmental processes; discrediting

feelings of ethnocentricity; beliefs about the distribution of power; or perhaps feelings about equal opportunity for all citizens. While establishing firm cause-effect relationships between the forensic experience and one's development of citizenship skills may not be possible, that should not deter researchers from attempting to detect correlations which may prove to be significant.

While there are many other possibilities to be researched, the creation of a data base which can be used to defend the legitimacy of the forensic experience as a worthy component in the educational endeavors of the school is certainly a reasonable part of any rationale of research.

A second major component in a rationale calling for an increase in forensic research is couched in the need of the forensic community to have some critical feedback on the practices currently being employed in the forensic tournament situation. Does the tournament setting, for example, let the student test some of the theories of communication, or is the tournament a situation where compliance behavior with expected tournament norms is what is expected of the participant? Questions of that nature are deserving of answers, as well as the attention of researchers in the forensic community. More specifically, however, a critical review of the effectiveness of particular strategies related to the composition of one's speech might be tested by researchers. Does one's organizational format impact the evaluative assessment by the critic-judge? Does the amount of evidence used in the speech or the amount of material excluded from an interpretation impact on the evaluative rating assigned by the critic-judge? Does the choice of material or topic have any particular bearing on the outcome of a student's performance? Does the student's choice of language impact on the critic-judge's assessment of the student's performance? Issues related to compositional concerns need to be assessed by the forensic researchers to help both coaches and student participants gain greater insight into effective participation in competitive tournaments.

Another area of current practices which needs additional feedback relates to the perceptions surrounding what constitutes an effective mode of delivering one's material. Researchers might seek to explore what are the perceived norms related to the delivery of a speech or reading. Is overt body movement an important element of one's style of delivery or is overt movement a source of distraction to listeners? Should gestures be programmed into a speaker/reader's performance? What are the norms of visual contact between speaker/reader and audience, as perceived by the contest judge. Obviously, the performance items which might lend themselves to research are numerous. It seems only appropriate that some research effort beyond intuition ought to be a part of the overall assessment of the communication practices of students involved in forensic tournaments.

Beyond the individual practices of the competitor, an additional area for

research is found in the arena of tournament practices. Some research has been conducted in the area of tournament practices which affords future researchers with insights into possible topic areas, methodologies, as well as a foundation from which to begin. Many questions involving the interfacing of tournament practices and the realization of the educational objectives of the forensic experience could be researched. Does the practice of permitting double or triple entries in a single time slot, enrich or detract from the educational experience of contest participants? Does the practice of non-randomized sectioning of contestants in preliminary rounds create a fair opportunity for all participants? Does the practice of using non-educator judges constitute a fair evaluation of a student's performance? Does the practice of no oral criticism after the round of competition detract from the overall growth of the student? Does the practice of using an open-ended ballot foster a more comprehensive critique of the student's performance than does a criteria-referenced ballot? The list of practices deserving the attention of researchers may serve as a source of new research.

Another possible area of research which has received only limited attention in the past involves the acquisition and application of a set of ethical behaviors by tournament participants. Is the behavior that helps a contestant win a round of competition or a tournament the behavior which establishes an ethical norm for other participants? For example, is the practice of using a previously prepared and memorized speech the ethical way to win in the contest category of impromptu speaking? Is the use of staged movement in the oral interpretation events an ethical way of communicating the literature? What are the ethical concerns regarding the nature of an oral interpretation cutting or the proper use of evidence in a public speaking event? Again, the topics for research revolving around the ethical behavior of tournament participants are extensive.

One final component of a rationale for further research in forensics relates to the developmental nature of research. The forensic experience ought to be one which is enriched with experiments. Research projects might attempt to test new theories of forensic practice; test new approaches to tournament management; explore new modes of formatting and hosting tournaments - should the tournament of the 1990's be a telecommunication experience? If the forensic experience is thought of from a systems theory notion, research projects could be the vehicle through which new ideas are introduced to the system. Study of how the new component is impacting on the system could afford an opportunity to strengthen the forensic experience through innovation and experimentation.

The need for an active research component in the forensic community is very strong. The rationale underlying a call for more research is far reaching. In part, the research effort in forensics can be linked to the very survival of the forensic experience. Another element of the rationale for further research

underscores the need for the forensic community to create an ongoing critical review of its practices. Finally, a portion of the rationale for additional research can be linked to the need for establishing a commitment to innovation in the forensic community. To remain a vital educational activity, the forensic community cannot afford to remain static. Research, as an active component of the forensic community, can help sustain the livelihood of the activity.

#### PROBLEM AREAS IN RESEARCH

In assessing some of the current obstacles to an active research program in the forensic community, a number of variables can be identified. One of the most crucial obstacles confronting most people in the forensic community is the factor of time. Can one realistically travel most weekends, coach students during the week, teach one's classes, advise undergraduate and graduate students, serve on departmental or university committees, and still find time for research? The administrative answer to that question is often times "yes". A realistic response to such a question is probably "no". Nevertheless, the commitment to engage in research remains a part of most coaches' contracts with their respective institutions. The Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics did active coaches no favor when they argued that coaches ought to be expected to meet the qualitative standards of all other faculty members (Parson, 1984, p. 28). That point-of-view seems to totally ignore the time constraints faced by the forensic coach. It would be interesting to investigate whether the professional organizations of other activities programs advocate that their coaches and directors be held accountable to the academic standards of other faculty. It would seem that the forensic community ought to be arguing that service ought to be the principal element in the evaluation of a forensic coach. Faced with a time crunch, the research interests of the forensic coach are often relegated to the back burner.

The fact that the active coach is often times too busy on a day-to-day basis to conduct research should not be used as reason to excuse the lack of an active research program in the forensic community. There are a host of faculty populating departments of Speech Communication whose roots are linked to forensic activity programs. Many of those individuals may now occupy positions of importance because of their past ties to forensics. Why are those individuals not assisting with the research needs of the forensic community? Former forensic coaches ought to form the corps of those conducting an active and an ongoing research effort in the forensic community.

Another variable which can be associated with limited research in the forensic community is the lack of support for research among active coaches and student participants. How many researchers in forensics have been discouraged from conducting future research, simply because coaches and students exhibited an attitude of indifference when they were asked to complete a survey? The importance of assisting with research needs in the forensic com-

munity is seemingly very much undervalued by active participants.

A fourth major variable which has contributed to the limited amount of research in the forensic community, especially in the individual events community, is the lack of initiative in forensic organizations to facilitate the collection of research information. National organizations have made few, if any policies, which encourage research or facilitate the collection of information at the national tournament. The forensic organizations ought to work together to help establish a policy for evaluating research proposals, and encourage research as a part of a tournament.

A fifth major variable which seems to limit the amount of research pursued in the forensic community is the amount of recognition afforded those who publish research. Should research published in the preferred journals of the forensic organizations be valued less than that which is published in some of the other national journals related to speech communication? Obviously, if the research related to forensic activities is to be treated as research of lesser importance than the research found in other journals, fewer individuals will pursue research projects related to forensics. Organizations like the American Forensic Association will need to be more active in their support of research in individual events if they expect to sustain the commitment to research by those scholars working in the area of individual events. Active support requires more than patronizing lip service which has sometimes surfaced during the AFA's annual business meeting.

Additionally, journal editors representing all of the various forensic organizations will need to make a commitment to uphold high standards in the kind of materials they seek to publish. Further, it does not seem particularly wise to turn away articles because they appear to be "too scholarly" for the perceived constituency of the journal.

While there are probably a number of other variables which have adversely impacted on the amount of research being conducted in the forensic community, the factors of time, principal investigators, organizational support, valuation of the research process, and proper recognition would appear to be significant problem areas confronting new research.

#### GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

While it would seem presumptuous to say that a research project should not be pursued, it is incumbent on those requesting the assistance of others in research to be professional in their treatment of the research activity. The forensic community needs a set of uniform guidelines which can be used by organizations to help them review the requests to gather information at regional or national conferences and tournaments. Often times the procedure to employ in requesting an organization's permission to gather information is either unclear or has simply not been formalized by the organization. Ad hoc treatment of proposed requests to gather information may have been satisfac-

tory at an earlier point in time but it is not particularly workable in the forensic world of today. Collection of information for solid research proposals has sometimes been jeopardized by having to complete for the respondents' time with projects which were hastily put together at the last minute at a national tournament. Our national organizations owe it to the forensic community to do a better job managing the research component of the forensic experience. What follows are a few thoughts intended to serve as a starting point for some guidelines when assessing research proposals.

1. Research requests submitted to the national organization ought to have been previously endorsed by the Institutional Review Board of the principal investigator's local university.
2. Each national organization ought to have a stated policy on procedures to be followed when requesting permission to gather information at their respective tournament.
3. Research proposals ought to be sanctioned by the national organization in an advanced time frame.
4. The principal investigator should furnish sample copies of the instrument being used to gather the information along with a rationale for the proposal.
5. Materials to be distributed to students, coaches, administrators, etc., ought to be professional in appearance or not be used.
6. Specific times, if during the course of a tournament, ought to be formally set aside for the distinct purpose of collecting information.
7. Penalties should be created to deal with Research investigators engaging in unsanctioned research.
8. Principal investigators ought to have a chance to present their requests in person to the sanctioning committee of a national organization.
9. Forensic organizations ought to establish a set of guidelines to be used in reviewing and selecting research projects which are to be incorporated into a tournament schedule. Such guidelines might judicially limit the number of projects to be sanctioned for use in a given tournament situation.

Overall, this theoretical article has sought to afford a rationale for future research in forensics; discuss some of the obstacles which need to be overcome before an active research component will become a regular part of the forensic community; and offer some guidelines which might help facilitate research endeavors by scholars in the forensic world. It is the obvious opinion of this writer, that the forensic community is in serious threat of losing its identity as a viable educational enterprise if research is not forthcoming which helps establish a data base to provide the information needed to establish the issue of legitimacy. If the forensic community acknowledges the importance of a research component and takes affirmative action to help establish a commitment to research, the forensic experience could be an important opportunity of the

next century too.

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