

When a Global Pandemic Gives you Lemons You Dig Deep and Find a Way to Make Lemonade Better

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When a Global Pandemic Gives You Lemons You Dig Deep and Find a Way to Make Lemonade Better

Todd T. Holm

Editorial: So far, the year 2020 has been fraught with obstacles. Australian brush fires burned over 18 million hectares of land, thousands of buildings, and killed hundreds of people. Indonesia, Japan, Puerto Rico, and parts of the continental US saw massive flooding. The Taal Volcano in the Philippines erupted and caused the evacuation of more than 300,000 people. There have been 45 earthquakes over 6 magnitudes in Turkey, The Caribbean, China, Iran, Russia, Philippines, India, and other countries. Algae blooms in Antarctica have caused the snow to turn green, and there are literally swarms of locust in parts India, Asia, and Africa. The US has seen the Boy Scouts of America file for bankruptcy, race riots, extreme stock market volatility, and murder hornets. But all of that has been eclipsed by the COVID-19 Corona Virus Pandemic. The global pandemic has closed borders, cancelled the Summer Olympics, cancelled professional sports in most countries. The pandemic has caused people to work from home, self-quarantine, and wear face masks to go to the store. It also caused the cancellation of all national college forensics tournaments and is well on its way to reshaping higher education and intercollegiate forensics forever. I would argue, that is not a bad thing.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has arguably had a more significant impact on intercollegiate forensics than any other external event in history. Interstate Oratory was started in 1875 and has held competitions and crowned champions every year for 145 years. They didn't miss a beat for two world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the 9/11 terrorist attack the Russian Flu of 1889, the Spanish Flu of 1918, the Asian Flu of 1957, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or the SARS Pandemic of 2003. The competitions persisted through changing political administrations, social movements, the addition of more than a dozen states to our country, and a dozen constitutional amendments. But the COVID-19 Pandemic interrupted that 145-year tradition.

The largest and oldest forensic honorary, Pi Kappa Delta, started its first national convention in 1916 and—with the exception of a five-year interim for World War II—it has never failed to have a scheduled national convention or tournament (initially they were held every other year, but that was part of the schedule). This year the National Forensics Association (NFA) and the American Forensics Association (AFA) broke their respective 49- and 42-year streaks of hosting national tournaments because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. We live in unprecedented times. A whole cohort of first year competitors had their national experience swept away and a cohort of graduating forensic students were robbed of their culminating experience. It is not just about competition. For many, the last national tournament is about bringing closure to their involvement in an activity that has taken up a good portion of their adult life.

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I competed in forensics for four years in high school and for another four years in college. Then I spent 25 years as a coach. I owe as much to the activity as anyone could. I respect the activity as much as anyone could. I had some of the absolute best times of my life because of this activity and for the first time since I left the activity nearly 10 years ago, I can honestly say I am glad I am not coaching. I say that because I do not know how I could look at my graduating seniors and say, “I’m sorry, your national tournament has been cancelled.” I have the greatest respect and admiration for the coaches who had to have that talk with their students. In my heart I know that cancelling the tournaments was the right thing to do. I also know many of the people who were a part of making that decision, and I am sure it was heartbreaking for them as well. They did it because it was the right thing to do.

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As we look ahead, we are uncertain of what the next competitive year, and the one that follows, will look like. We might have virtual tournaments, we might try recorded performances, or we might do something else entirely. That uncertainty can create a great deal of anxiety and fear. But if you think about it, that is where we—as an activity—do our best work. This activity does not teach students to hide fear or not be afraid. It teaches them to harness anxiety and turn it into positive energy, it teaches them to ride the wave of fear rather than fight it. That is what the leaders, coaches, and students of this activity need to remember. This is the environment in which we thrive.

Things will be different in the fall of 2020. What higher education looks like will be different, and what forensic activities look like will be different. But we get to decide what *different* looks like. We have always had the power to change the activity, but we have not always had the incentive to change. My 30 plus years in the activity has shown me that a lot of people work ridiculously hard to keep the system exactly the way it is. AFA and NFA event descriptions today are almost exactly the same as they were when I first started competing in intercollegiate forensics in 1983 (we have added Program Oral Interpretation, that’s it). But this fall will be different, it is up to us to determine *how* it will be different.

The applecart has been upset and it is up to us to decide if we are going to right the applecart and return all the apples to the neat and orderly display of red, yellow, and green apples we had or if—since it has already been upset—we going to decide now is the time to also offer apple cider, apple pie, apple butter, and apple jelly, or maybe branch out to other fruits like pears and plums. Maybe we could even add some fruits that don’t grow on trees, maybe this cart will be virtual, and our customers will get free one day shipping. How we right the applecart is up to us.

We have allowed ourselves to stagnate a bit as an activity. Unlike 30 years ago, virtually every classroom has the ability to project electronic slides onto a screen. Yet the prevalent mode of presenting visual material to an audience in a forensics competition is via pictures glued to a foam board. You would be hard pressed to find any other venue where that is common. Former national champion in persuasion (NFA 2000 and AFA 2000), rhetorical criticism (NFA 2000), and pentathlon champion (NFA 2000) Dan Hungerman wrote an article challenging the activity

to move away from using this approach in 2016 (Hungerman, 2016). But we have seen little change. We are comfortable with foamboards. Sure, foam board backed pictures are difficult to take on airplanes, they are expensive to make, they get damaged and need to be remade before nationals, and in large auditoriums (like the ones used for national final rounds) you really cannot see them. But we are comfortable with them. They are the devil we know. They are impractical, ineffective, and obsolete, but comfortably familiar.

We continue to use them because we know how to coach that. We understand what that looks like. We have seen all the pitfalls and found ways to work around their disadvantages (and forgive what we cannot fix). Besides, slides on a screen are boring. We have all been *slide-swiped* or fallen victim to *death-by-PowerPoint*. But if there is one group of people who can find the best practices for using slides during presentations, it is the forensic community. If you have ever wondered why there isn't a definitive set of rules for effective slide development, consider the idea that it could be because the forensics community hasn't tackled the issue. We are the laboratory for testing this kind of advancement. Give coaches two years and they will have identified the ten best practices based on their educated understanding of the communication process and in-round testing by hundreds of students in literally thousands of rounds of competition.

The level of stagnation is perhaps best illustrated by the hours many of us spent in meetings at the national level discussing the seemingly critical issue of the use of notecards in extemporaneous speaking. People argued the wording of the event description needed to be exact because that would determine how judges judged the rounds. Should notecards be *allowed*, *permitted*, *not punished*, *encouraged*, or *required*? This seemed to be the keystone question in the community. That level of administrative minutia further entrenches our activity and reinforces the idea that there is one right way to do things and we should all do it that way or be punished in some manner. We have spent hours trying to institutionalize the stagnation.

We are at a unique point where the opportunity to leap ahead has presented itself. PowerPoint and Prezi slides can be the new norm. We can teach people how to remain the focus while using the slides to augment, not replace, the human element. A rhetorical analysis of a 10 second public service announcement could actually include that 10 second video. That is an easy change. But other changes could strike at the very foundations of our conceptualization of the activity.

If one of the goals of forensic activities is to prepare students to give public presentations, then the types of presentations they are asked to give should reflect the presentations people will need to make in their futures. Events like extemporaneous speaking and impromptu speaking are good training for "real world" presentations. Rarely does one get the opportunity to stand and deliver an uninterrupted, 10-minute speech asking an audience to change and attitude, belief, or value or even to talk about a new discovery. Unless you are lucky enough to give a TED Talk, that is just quite rare. Yet all the prepared public speaking events are geared to a 10-minute, uninterrupted, presentation format. More realistic might be a five-minute pitch, a 90-second

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elevator speech, or an interactive presentation (where you are judged on your questions of others as well as your presentation). Maybe this is the opportunity to change oral interpretation events to divide them along a performative style rather than a literary category. Maybe then they will not all sound the same.

If ever there was an opportunity for change, this is it. It is raining lemons and it is time we not only make lemonade—but make lemonade *better*. There is no question that the future of communication will include virtual elements. With the global pandemic forcing companies that were opposed to telework to allow (even require) workers to work from home, the work-world has been forever changed. Out of necessity we have found ways to collaborate online, field customer service calls from our living rooms and home offices, and we have seen the benefits of working from home firsthand. Communication in this new work environment will be more crucial than ever. The power of a person’s voice will never have been more critical. We need to prepare our students for this new environment. That means we need to seize this opportunity to change. Necessity, the well-known mother of invention, has forced us to change. What we change into, what this activity becomes as a part of the change, is completely in our hands.

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I understand that change is scary and forensic competitions online are not the same as face-to-face competition. But we might find that we have more students interested if they don’t have to miss school as much and that they can have part of their weekends free (or all of it free if we hold “prose tournaments” on Wednesday nights). We might find it is easier to get judges if they can join from home to judge just one round rather than driving several hours to judge all day. Coaches might even find that they do not miss climbing into a van at 10:00 pm and driving students four hours home only to be back in their offices for an 8:00 am class.

The new world might be a better world for all of us. Maybe coaches will not burn out. Maybe more students will be involved. We can have larger judging pools. Tournaments will not have to take up our entire weekend. The events can be better training grounds for success after college, and ultimately, we can be better and stronger because we found a way to not just make lemonade from lemons, we found a way to make lemonade *better*.

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