

FORENSICS IN TIMES OF CRISIS. REFRAMING CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL CHANGE AS “WINNING”

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Abstract

This article extends the challenge I offered at the National Communication Associate (NCA) Annual Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah in November 2018. During the conference I posed the following challenge: The Speech and Debate community should shift our idea of “winning” from solely competition success, and trophy accumulation, towards a renewed sense of citizenship—primarily, by engaging social change, as an outcome, throughout the competition season. This challenge arose from a perceived malaise about gun control discourse. I argue competitive speech and debate provides a robust venue to engage current discussion on gun control and the community to embrace our focus on advocacy. Connecting Asen’s (2004) “discourse theory of citizenship” to my challenge furthers speech and debate’s commitment to increasing our student’s role as engaged citizens. These arguments are followed by two important implications and some ideas for increasing student advocacy.

KEY TERMS: speech, debate, citizenship, advocacy

At the National Communication Associate (NCA) Annual Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah in November 2018, I posed the following challenge: The Speech and Debate community should shift our idea of “winning” from solely competition success, and trophy accumulation, towards a renewed sense of citizenship—primarily, by engaging social

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change, as an outcome, throughout the competition season. The convention theme, *Communication at Play*, “was a theme designed to provide ambiguity for flexible interpretation, a positive space in a scene of dark and disturbing events and forces” (Muir, 2018, para. 2). My challenge emanated through the convention theme’s demand for Communication Scholars to reconsider our interactions throughout typical scholarly activities.

Despite the upbeat tone of the convention, a direct response to the dour assembly two years prior—which convened a day after the election of President Trump, there were portions of the convention focused on recent national tragedy. Nine months prior to our engagement in Utah,

Nikolas Cruz opened fire on students and staff at his high school in Parkland, Florida. The shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School became the deadliest high school shooting as 17 people were killed and another 17 wounded (Andone, 2020). Emerging from this tragedy, however, was a renewed national conversation on gun control led by a cadre of Stoneman Douglas students. Many of these students credited participation in a recent debate course as preparing them to engage various audiences in an effort to influence social change on gun control. Their advocacy, derived from debate participation, constituted my desire to challenge the speech and debate community to enlist new methods to broaden the reach of our students' messages with a focus on citizenship and social change. In this essay, I briefly argue a malaise surrounds contemporary gun violence and establish the ability for speech and debate participation to help dispel our current debility by fostering our students' capacity to engage and advocate for social change. I then connect these skills into what Asen (2004) terms "a discourse theory of citizenship"—a move away from solely understanding citizenship as institutionalized acts (i.e. voting, protest, etc.), instead "theorizing citizenship as a mode of public engagement" (p. 192). I conclude the essay by arguing two significant implications accompanying this change in our understanding of "winning" and provide a few practical ideas to advance the reach of our students' social advocacy.

Speech and Debate as a Light in Dark Times

Questioning my conference audience about the length of time between the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting and the NCA Convention, the majority opined the shooting happened over a year ago. However, the event took place a mere nine months prior. What felt like ages ago had actually taken place in February of the same year. A potential reason for the belief that the Stoneman Douglas shooting was, perhaps, "old news," was the fact that between Feb. 14th and the start of the NCA Convention six additional school shootings occurred in which there was at least one casualty ("School Shootings in 2018," 2021). Repeated exposure to an experience diminishes our reaction to similar events. Thus, causing us as a nation, where such events have become alarmingly commonplace, to become numb to reports of gun violence. Our numbness has reached the point where, during an address to the nation, former President Barack Obama (2015), in 2015, declared, "The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. The conversation in the aftermath of it. We've become numb to this" (para. 7). Note that Obama's comments came close to three years prior to the events at Stoneman Douglas High School.

Coincidentally, Joshua Gunn, a former policy debater, argued during the NCA Carroll C. Arnold lecture, the day before I issued my challenge, we have become a nation glued to mass tragedy, in particular tragedy created by gun violence. Connecting to Lacan's conception of "perverse structures," Gunn stated we have entered a cycle of tragedy, mourning, and waiting for a reoccurrence (p. 9). Such behaviors, Gunn (2018) notes, entails "a disposition of character that repeats certain relational patterns that many of us would describe as transgressions" (p. 11). The perverse structure then is created when the audience, society in general, knowingly

acknowledges that repeated acts are wrong but keeps allowing the events to happen anyway. Gunn (2018) attributes the continuation of the perversive structure of gun violence to the “U.S tendency to resign the responsibility of violence to individuals” rather than look at systemic causes (p. 13). Through this structure we always have a “pervert” to hoist responsibility upon rather than look at what solutions may be available to counteract the predictors associated with these acts. Similarly, “behaviors deemed ‘perverse’ have changed dramatically over time...,” but, “Lacan argues that the perverse structure has not” (Gunn, 2020, p. 107). Not only have we grown accustomed to these tragic events happening over and over and over, but we have also become used to these events being replayed ad nauseum. Gunn refers to this media replay as “active shooter television . . . [a] public addiction to reruns of real-time catastrophe” (p. 12). We have become so numb to the events that rather than act to counter the issue we have simply become viewers unable to turn the channel.

Despite our societal numbness to gun violence the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School initiated a national shift in the gun control debate as support for increased gun control laws arose to the highest level since the early 1990s (Gallup, 2021). A primary reason for this shift was renewed leadership of gun control discourse. Specifically, students from Stoneman Douglas emerged as leaders for renewed discussion about sensible gun control reforms. On March 24, 2018 some of these students helped organize the “March 4 Our Lives” rally in Washington DC. These students, and many of their peers, including at least one ardent gun control opponent, acknowledged their participation in a recent debate class for providing the foundation to articulately voice their beliefs and advocate for social change (Lithwick, 2018). What they learned in their class they enacted on the national stage and, like them or not, were influential in advocating, potential, changes in social policy.

The value of forensics participation is not lost on this journal’s readership since numerous articles have noted the ability for forensic participation to increase political and social awareness, an active participation in social change, and presentation skills (Rogers, Freeman, and Rennels, 2017). Rogers (2002) analyzed over 680 speech and debate articles and conventions papers artifacts and found consistent themes that supported student outcomes in enhanced critical

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thinking, presentation skills, increased self-confidence, social responsibility, and leadership skills, to name a few, due to student participation in speech and debate. Kuyper (2011) further found support for speech and debate participation leading to increased humanistic student outcomes. Morris (2011) expanded support for the division between

academic and humanistic outcomes when noting forensics participation fosters both “good competitors” and “good human beings” (p. 1). Additionally, White (2017) found speech participation increases student’s ability in gaining life direction and appreciation of process. These documented benefits examine skills students engage throughout and after their participation in speech and debate and also investigate some of the societal benefits associated

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with student participation. Freeman and Rogers (2013) contend speech and debate participation fosters “hope for more positive long-term benefits to the self and society as we educate our forensic students to be [citizens]” as we teach “social responsibility and advocacy on behalf of the less fortunate” (p. 4). While Rogers, Freeman, and Rennels (2017) find evidence demonstrating that speech and debate participation offers the ability for students “to uniquely extend education beyond the walls of the classroom” we, as the speech and debate community, oftentimes struggle to demonstrate these benefits to those who do not directly participate in the activity (p. 20). Speech and debate participants are, rightfully, continually contemplating ideas to expand our societal influence.

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The question of how to expand our influence beyond direct participation in speech and debate is not unique to our contemporary situation. Grace (2011) edited a volume of the *National Forensics Journal* dedicated to methods to enhance “service-learning” as a way for forensics programs to “provide another way to demonstrate learning outside of the classroom and [connection] with their communities” (p. 3). The various articles provide multiple methods for speech and debate teams to enact participation beyond the classroom. Walker (2011) provides insight into motivating students to undertake action to “get students actively involved in the issue they are speaking about”—prompting them to gain firsthand experience with their topic (p. 20). Foote and Holm (2011) contend service-learning events such as “on-campus presentations and debate forums takes the applied skills of forensics and puts it back in a public forum . . . while providing a meaningful community service . . . [and] teaches civic responsibility and participation while strengthening the campus community” (p. 66). Though these, and the remaining articles in the volume, provide valuable examples in which the benefits of speech and debate participation can be expanded beyond the classroom, I argue shifting our understanding of “winning” towards a framework of citizenship can further our societal impact.

Although the ability for speech and debate participation can lead to skills which permeate the walls of academia, I contend, we limit our opportunity to expand our reach. I cannot help but feel we, as the speech and debate community, take many of these benefits for granted as we navigate the competition season. Many of the benefits to speech and debate participation are skills we evaluate creation of student performances prior to competition—writing, revising, practicing—or skills that transfer outside of speech and debate competition—creating good citizens. Even the activities noted in the discussion on service learning involve action undertaken during the creation of a piece or additional activity beyond competition. The students of Stoneman Douglas are verifiable contemporary examples of the benefits of speech and debate participation can have on influencing real-world discourse about political policy and demonstrate how such skills adequately help students adapt to times of crisis. These students also provide an example for the speech and debate community to extend our influence by finding new ways to have our student engage political discourse as part of competition. I challenge the speech and debate community to continue striving to reach a greater audience and one way we can do this is by reframing citizenship as “winning”—moving away from trophy collection and toward engaging contemporary political discussion in an effort to affect social change.

Framing “Winning” as Citizenship

Part of this challenge arose from the theme of the 2018 NCA Annual Conference—Communication at Play. As attendees were invited to “play around” with traditional scholarly activities, I wanted to advance an idea about how speech and debate can focus on social change outcomes. We, as stakeholders, are invariably seeking approaches to expand the influence of speech and debate. At the same time, I had been following the discourses presented by the Stoneman Douglas students with a learned interest in how they actively were utilizing their debate participation to influence political discussion and public policy. Their advocacy caused me to question, why are we not pursuing advocating for social change to a greater extent during the competition season? Of course there is the potential for students to utilize the work they created for competition after the season is over or, as Walker (2011) argued, during the process of speech creation; but, I suspected we could broaden our community’s significance by encouraging our students to engage advocacy for social change during the competition season.

The additional component of this challenge arose from the axiom a colleague imparted on their team as the skills of speech and debate participation were shared – *forensics is always about winning, it’s just not always about winning trophies*. Oftentimes, because it is certainly an easy way to gauge success, we measure winning in speech and debate by the amount of hardware we take home. Repeatedly we fall into the pattern of writing, revising, practicing, competing, and then letting our student’s pieces die upon the completion of our season. We thus provide students the ability to gain skills that will better serve them and, potentially their community, but we end up limiting engagement with our student’s work to the accompanying competition season. Work that consistently strives to affirm the importance the topic has on society and, as noted above, regularly seeks to advocate for disenfranchised groups needs should be employed beyond just a desire to win trophies. In order to better serve our students and communities, I contend, we should reframe “winning” as citizenship.

The work of Robert Asen can help reconceptualize our understanding of “winning” with the previously mentioned notion of “good citizens” and citizenship. Asen (2014) “calls for a reorientation in scholarly approaches to civic engagement from asking questions of what to asking questions of how” (p. 189). Traditionally citizenship has been viewed as an institutional endeavor—voting as the primary institutional act. However, Asen contends “[r]ather than asking what counts as citizenship, we should ask: how do people enact citizenship? Reorienting our framework from a question of what to a question of how usefully redirects our attention from acts to action” thus, “citizenship does not appear in specific acts per se but signals a process that may encompass a number of different activities” (p. 191). Meier (2017) defends Asen’s argument, asserting “citizenship as performance is not constrained by traditionally accepted forms of public engagement like voting or attending political rallies. Instead, it recognizes creative or a playful mode of engagement as equally significant to the life of a healthy democracy” (p. 266). To demonstrate his point, he uses stand-up comedy as an example of enacting citizenship by critiquing aspects of society. Emphasizing the role of discourse as citizenship “recognizes the fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments of citizenship in a multiple public sphere” (Asen, 2004, p. 191). Finally, Asen (2004) notes citizenship does not ask

for “people’s unlimited energy and knowledge, but for their creative participation” (p. 196). Speech and debate participation fundamentally cultivates energy and knowledge needed to create and deliver effective arguments, so we now must look for ways to engage in increased participation—to move beyond the quest for a state or national titles (trophies) and engage with various publics as new form of winning (citizenship). Another potential advantage of political election debates for democracy is the opportunity for clash between candidates. By “clash” we do not simply mean attack, but a juxtaposition of an attack by one candidate with a response by the opponent. When it occurs, clash illuminates the differences between candidates’ positions in greater depth. Candidates often stubbornly stay “on message” (see, e.g., Benoit et al., 2011), repeating their pre-planned campaign themes and sound bites remorselessly. However, debates do provide the *opportunity* for clash, where the two candidates contrast their positions; when it does happen, clash is healthy for democracy.

Returning to the Parkland students who have taken up campaigns to get others to vote and engineered one of the larger political rallies in our nation’s capital; however, they have also been active in other venues advocating for social change. Of course, social media is one area where they have shared their speeches and writings and have engaged detractors (Cottle, 2018). Often written off as mere “slacktivism” this discourse can, nonetheless, serve as an enactment of citizenship. “Citizenship should not be reserved for special occasions” Asen (2004) writes, but rather “[d]iscourse practices present potentially accessible and powerful everyday enactments of citizenship” (p. 207). Broadening our perception of how we enact citizenship allows for the dissemination of our students’ work to take on a greater purpose beyond winning at competitions. As a community we have a unique opportunity to engage political discourse with minimal extra effort. We must look for ways to broaden the reach of students’ advocacy. We have been provided an example on how we can do this on both large and small scales.

Onward, May Our Students Lead Us

There are two important implications tying this together in terms of reorienting “winning.” First, the reimagining of citizenship as “winning” opens up the venues to which we currently rely on sharing our messages. Though Asen’s work focuses on modes of citizenship, it is unruly. He argues a discourse of citizenship does not rely on outside guidance of traditional institutions. Instead this discourse lies in our everyday engagement with others—an often-messy practice. It does not mean that we actively engage in enacting citizenship all the time, but it does imply a more robust understanding of citizenship. Instead, Asen (2004) argues discourse is not intrinsically an act of citizenship but rather the meaning and significance arise in how it was enacted. The

First, the reimagining of citizenship as “winning” opens up the venues to which we currently rely on sharing our messages.

Stoneman Douglas students have become adept at exploiting social media to benefit their social change advocacy as they routinely disseminate awareness to their cause and call out faulty arguments. Not all social media usage is an act of citizenship, but there is the ability for social media discourse to enact citizenship. For instance, my own dissertation work contextualizes citizenship and political discourse within the realm of social media. The political conversations

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on social media, especially in terms of dissent, I argue, constitutes active citizenship (Foote, 2019). There is, of course, an undeniably immense amount of nonsense, and potential information overload, one must wade through to find the worthwhile discourse(s). Despite these negative variables there are various modalities and moments to enact a discourse of citizenship with our already created performances.

Second, this reimagining of citizenship allows our students to engage a discourse of citizenship without traditional gatekeeping structures. In his book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière (1991) argues the structural nature of education often creates barriers to equality through the institutionality of those who can and cannot participate—even arguing that the most progressive systems continue to perpetuate the classification of pupils opposite of teachers. We should encourage students to find contemporary venues to engage others with their arguments. Speech and debate already emboldens our students to advocate as “good citizens” but we should not wait until they are out of the activity to measure if they are enacting these practices. We should also encourage them to remodel success based on enacting a discourse of citizenship. Some tournaments have provided similar opportunities (i.e. Pi Kappa Delta’s Persuasion Works event, Interstate Oratories printing of winning speeches, etc.) but these require “winning” before a greater dissemination of the student’s work. It would behoove us to experiment with methods, and methodologies, to invert this system and see what students can create beforehand—in potentially more within more everyday methods and situations. Asen (2004) notes, citizenship, and by extension democracy, is found in the everyday actions of people; thus, “to situate democracy in this way invests democracy dramatically in ordinary folks, not leaders or elected or appointed officials” (p. 197). Engaging positive social advocacy throughout all stages of the speech and debate competition can only increase the value of our community.

The challenge to reframe winning away from competition success and trophy accumulation and towards a focus on citizenship requires both coaches and students to discover new opportunities as a means to engage moments of social change advocacy. Placing the emphasis on us allows us to take the risk of “genuinely engaging difference” (Asen, 2004, p. 200). The potential for risk always accompanies engaging political discourse and social change; however, increasing our engagement of these practices may ultimately lead to innumerable positive outcomes—especially if we engage these actions during all stages of speech and debate participation. Winning will always be a part of participating in speech and debate, somewhere, just not always connected to winning trophies.

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