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Best Practices in Forensics: A Case Study of a Southern California High School Speech & Debate Team

Sean Patrick Connor, MA[1]

1 Assistant Professor, California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Introduction

In 2005 I was introduced to the activity of speech and debate through a friend that was currently a member of both the speech and debate team and the theater program. As a self-described "theater geek," my initial perceptions were skeptical that an activity necessitating debate would inform my understanding of what it meant to be a "good actor." I simply could not comprehend the educative overlap between what appeared to be a rigorously academic center of speech and debate and the aesthetic center of theater. My misconceptions, however, met a swift demise.

Background

Forensics, known more colloquially as Speech and Debate, is an activity open to high school and collegiate competitors throughout the United States. One of the oldest forensics organizations, The National Forensics League, has been in place since 1925. It has as its vision and goal to "spark transformation in the lives of students, to help them become effective communicators, critical thinkers and engaged, ethical members of a democratic society" ("About Us," 2013). While these goals are commendable and should be recognized as such, there remains an important caveat that needs to be addressed: forensics competitions are, by definition, competitive. This competitive paradigm suggests a two-fold goal: educational growth and competitive success.

The roots of forensics competition can be traced back to ancient Greece, when Aristotle discussed three forms of discourse in *The Art of Rhetoric*: deliberative, epideictic, and forensics, where forensic speeches entail either an accusation or a defense of a particular topic. While the purpose of forensics has seemed to retain its focus on

accusation or defense, the form in which it is presented through speech and debate has expanded. McBath (1975) describes forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people…forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences" (p. 11). Not only are more traditional approaches such as Oratory, Advocacy and Debate functionally included, but more diverse forms and even aesthetic forms are given legitimacy through the interpretation of literature such as poetry, prose, and drama. The importance of forensics to academia has not gone understated, and has often been referred to as a "co-curricular activity" as opposed to one that is simply "extra-curricular" (Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003, p. 12).

But this "co-curricular activity" has not been without its skeptics. Padrow (1956) declared in a scant referendum that, as academics, we should "stop deceiving ourselves and our administrators about the educational value of forensics," and that we must take a less hypocritical approach to the activity (p. 205).

As a former competitor, and current forensics coach, I can attest to the existence of this dichotomy. Questions abound: How can I sincerely argue for something I care about and want to change in our world when another of my goals is making it to a 'final round' of competition? Do I argue for a topic that is important to me, or do I argue for a topic that I know is 'competitive?' As a coach, do I suggest that students choose topics that they relate to, or topics that will 'win rounds?' How involved should I be in the choosing, constructing, cutting, and writing of students' speeches? These types of questions are constantly debated through and within the forensics community, and ultimately are left up to the discretion of competitors and coaches. There are, of course, explicit rules implemented by the California High School Speech Association as well as by the National Forensics Association and American Forensics Association to address areas of contestation in regard to ethical practices (see Article IX & Article XI of the CAHSSA By-Laws; see National Forensics Association Code of Ethics), but loopholes seem to exist. These include what constitutes published literature in an era of the internet, how to reasonably justify 'author's intent,' and the inability to reinforce regulations concerning student originality of speeches. Therefore, most of the rules governing forensics competitions are "unwritten" (Paine, 2005), devolving into a veritable 'honor system.'

So then, the question that becomes pertinent to address is: how do team pedagogical practices concerning the tension between education and competition reflect and perpetuate the overall organizational structure? This question seems to address concerns about the efficacy of competition in education (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), and extends arguments that both praise (Hinck, 2003; McBath, 1984) and criticize (Burnett et al., 2001; Burnett et al., 2003) the implications of the tension. This paper will first discuss possible pedagogical practices in forensics, both competitively and in the classroom. This discussion will be followed by an exploration of the tension between competition and education, specifically noting the potential implications resulting from this tension. Next,

we will outline "best practices" being formulated in the field of instructional communication, as well as a theoretical model for explaining the structure of a competitive team and the link between that micro-structure and a macro-organizational structure. Finally, an exploration of a specific case study will be presented to help solidify our understanding. I intend this discussion not to be a prescription, but rather an investigation, and perhaps an honest approach to addressing these seemingly ethical conundrums.

Pedagogical Approaches in Forensics

When the National Forensic League was initially established in March of 1925, it was constructed as more of an honor society for high school students. It wasn't until 1931 that the first high school national tournament was held to determine national rankings between students and schools ("NFL History," 2007). As it developed into inter-school competition, many discussions were held to determine the pedagogical merit of forensics within education, not the least of which centered on 'academic credit' given to students for participation (Keefe, 1987). Three ideas seem crucial to the overall pedagogical framework of the forensics program: service learning and outreach, educational and experiential innovation, and a sense of unity.

Since academics were dealing with an activity that is self-described advocacy, they sought outlets for this advocacy including 'service-learning' where "students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). These "service-learning projects" provided directors of forensics an opportunity to implement pedagogical practices that would strengthen the tie between forensics and advocacy (Hinck & Hinck, 1998). Service-learning even became a way for many struggling forensics programs to justify themselves to administrations looking to cut funds (Grace, 2011).

Programs also justify their presence on campuses through their commitment to educational innovation (Sellnow, 1994). A 'Special Topic' campaign organized by the National Forensics Journal illustrated how forensics provides significant creative and innovate outlets, both pedagogically and experientially, through the different events offered. Indeed, many of the communication departments owe their inception to an established forensics program, although many have distanced themselves from those programs as though they were "an unfamiliar relative" (Swanson, 1992, p. 49). However, the point remains that forensics provides a significant outlet for experiential learning.

Furthermore, as a team, forensics fosters notions of unity, serving as a veritable "home" environment for students (Carmack & Holm, 2005). Many teams utilize rhetorical images of a "family" (Hughs, Gring, & Williams, 2006) or a "legacy" (Orme, 2012) to communicate a sense of belonging and longevity. These metaphors serve to solidify unity and can become powerful motivators for students. They can begin feel like they are a part of something greater than themselves (Freidley & Manchester, 2005), reinforcing their position on the team. Of course, these rhetorical messages are not

uncommon to any other competitive teams on college campuses. So what makes forensics unique?

Competition *v.* Education

As we have seen, initial thrusts of rationalization for the forensic team on a school campus have centered on the pedagogical positives for students. Students can put their education into practice through 'service-learning,' they are provided significant innovative experiential and educational outlets, and they build a sense of 'unity' in a team environment. However, many of these positives can be seen in other venues within the education system, including but not limited to many sports programs. What sets forensics apart appears to be the intrinsic emphasis placed upon education *within* competition (Rich, 1988). However, much criticism has been directed specifically at the dialectical tension between these factors: competition and education.

This debate does not appear to be a new one, and in fact, some have traced it back as far as 1915 (Wood & Rowland-Morin, 1989). Indeed, Frank H. Lane declared in the first issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Public Speech* that one thing that complicates the situation is the fact that we are working under two ideals: one to win, and the other to educate" (p. 14). As we saw earlier, Padrow (1956) opened another dialogue where he makes similar claims, and this incipient discussion has traversed to multiple dialogues fairly recently (Burnett, Brand & Meister, 2002; Hinck, 2003). Whether the rewards are intrinsic or extrinsic, the fact remains that any competitive activity is first and foremost about winning over losing, otherwise it would not be competitive. Hinck (2003) identifies four crucial tensions that serve as a starting point for grasping the complexity of this divide.

Initially, the tension between *artistic response v. utilization of formulas* can be seen through the performance in individual events. Specifically, do students and coaches approach their events with the idea that they will be open to innovation and creative expression, or are they tied to certain institutionalized norms and standards, those unwritten rules? Ribarsky (2005) warns that defaulting to the latter may champion homogeneity and restrict possibilities of change within the activity. However, if there is too much diversity then standards for judging will devolve into heightened subjectivity.

Second, *authentic engagement v. artificial engagement* calls into question issues of sincerity within the arguments and performances presented by students. Competition encourages students to present topic areas and arguments that are 'competitive,' and thus perhaps not sincere; however "it is a misplaced assumption to think that the performances our students give at tournaments necessarily have no genuine audience members" (Hinck, 2003, p. 68). It is often difficult to locate the intrinsic qualities that make up students' mental frameworks; however there is agreement that the way in which students visualize their performances greatly impacts the actual outcome of that performance (Gotcher & Honeycutt, 1989).

The third tension refers to the ultimate goal expectations from the students in relation to their overall success. The tension between *public-oriented goals v. personal-oriented goals* focuses on the divide between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Some discussion has occurred over the impact of trophies in the activity, and whether or not this is a negative motivating factor as students are more focused on *having* the trophy than on what the trophy represents (Lowery-Hart & Simmons, 2008). Of course, the trophy is also useful for promoting the activity to the administration, as it shows tangible proof of program success (Williams & Gantt, 2008). This tension contrasts whether students should want the trophy as a sign of extrinsic material success, or because it represents the intrinsic reward of hard work.

The final tension centers on the dichotomy of *reflexive awareness v. uncritical concern*. A student's participation within the activity will undoubtedly impact the student in some fashion. However, whether the student is aware of that change and is committed to accentuating those skills, or if they simply do not care how it is impacting them seems to be a source of constant frustration amongst coaches and educators (Hinck, 2003). This final tension is particularly crucial to the overall effect of forensics on the actual competitors and whether they are actively using the skills they have learned in other areas of their life.

These four tensions as suggested by Hinck (2003) are illustrative of many concerns that students, parents, coaches, and administrators have when it comes to the educational outcomes of students. So then, how can programs be constructed in order to address these tensions in a positive and productive fashion in order to foster the most development in students' learning and motivation?

The "Total" Forensics Program

Derryberry (1991) explores the successes and failures of different forensics programs, drawing certain conclusions about the structure of programs that seem to provide the 'best of both worlds' to their students, what he calls "the 'Total' forensics program" (p. 19). In his explication he posits four key ways in which a program can be constructed in order to best "justify itself and defend against budget cuts, career-obsessed students, and apathetic administrators" (Hawkins, 1989, p. 5).

First, the program must be multifaceted, meaning they need to offer students the ability to compete in speech *and* debate. Indeed, students are more motivated when they feel as though they have access to multiple outlets in competition (McMillan & Todd-Mancillas, 1991).

Second, educators must encourage students to approach their events as though they will be talking to heterogeneous audiences. While some regions of the country may be particularly homogenous communities, allowing students opportunities to consider and perform for audiences with diverse backgrounds and world views is crucial for their development as speakers (McNabb & Scholten, 2007).

Third, some concern has been raised over the elitist nature of forensics (Swanson, 1992). Therefore, attention must be paid to the access and development of students in an egalitarian way.

Finally, if coaches of a forensics program want to frame the activity as educational, then there must be particular concern regarding productive feedback to students. This last criterion suggests reflexivity in regard to the maintenance of the program. In other words, coaches "must continually examine the rationale underlying forensic participation" (Derryberry, 1991, p. 27).

Of course, the effectiveness of this "total" forensics program is contingent upon the level of attention paid to each of the criteria presented by Derryberry. He concedes that there are significant limitations that also must be addressed, not the least of which is funding. However, his approach is suggestive of a more pedagogical framing of the activity, perhaps providing a framework for justifying forensics as co-curricular. Therefore, a further exploration of general pedagogical practices should inform our discussion.

Best Practices

The educational focus in American civic life prior to the Civil War was largely tied to religious institutions (Bok, 2007). This implied a strict regulation of behavior, and a limited range of subjects; in other words, "formal education was sterile" (Bok, 2007, p. 12). It was not until Harvard President Charles W. Eliot sought a more student-oriented approach to education that we were able to see a curriculum that more closely resembles the 'major' driven one that we have today in many American colleges and universities. Whereas prior to this shift students were subjected to a strict curriculum that emphasized uniformity, pedagogical philosophies post-shift emphasized diversity in subject specialties, affording students the ability to choose which areas of education they sought to highlight. This called into question the typical 'storage-bin' approach to learning, and instead opened a discussion of education as "constructed, not received" (Bain, 2004, p. 26).

A much more critical and reflexive approach to pedagogical practices required that teachers and researchers pay significant attention to how we learn and how teachers teach (Cooks, 1993; Bain, 2004; Waldeck, Plax, & Kearney, 2010). The department of Instructional Communication took root in many institutions, focusing on the communicative practices teachers can use in order to foster both cognitive learning in students (Sprague) as well as affective learning (Fink, 2004). Not only did instructors want students to learn skills that could be useful for their future careers, they also wanted students to *want* to learn, and take charge of their own education (Kiewra). This notion of affective learning informs our understanding of student motivation in that the more learners are motivated, the more likely they are to continue their educational endeavors (Tannanbaum et al.). In fact, students seem to learn best when they feel that their opinions or values are highlighted within their work (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991; Wentzel, 1997), and thus motivation in learning is crucial to how educators approach education.

Motivation presents itself in various nuanced forms within the classroom; the most salient forms for our discussion involve the trichotomy of student interactions manifested through the individual, cooperative, and competitive learning (Johnson, & Johnson, 1994). Individual learning entails self-guided and self-motivated learning where "success depends on their own performance in relation to established criteria" (p. 31). Competitive learning is described as "negative goal interdependence where, when one person wins, the other loses" *(ibid.)*. Finally, cooperative learning entails interpersonal contact where "interaction is characterized by "positive goal interdependence;" what Johnson & Johnson illustrate is the idea that the group will 'sink or swim together' (*ibid*.).

Cooperative learning necessitates certain tenets for it to function properly, what could be called 'best practice.' First, the interaction between students must have "clearly perceived positive interdependence." This first tenet assumes that, in order to achieve this 'positive interdependence,' every student 1) is required for overall success, and 2) provides a unique set of skills (*ibid*.). Second, there must be "considerable promotive interaction" and this interaction must be face-to-face. These social interactions are crucial to fostering a positive climate for learning (*ibid*.). Third, students must have "clearly perceived individual accountability and personal responsibility" towards the achievement of the group's goals (*ibid*.). Fourth, students should be afforded considerable opportunities to apply appropriate "interpersonal and small-group skills" (*ibid.*). Finally, there must be frequent assessment of the goals and effectiveness of the small group, and that assessment should foster discussion of improvement of current practices or reevaluation of the group's goals (*ibid*.). These five tenets provide a pedagogical framework for potential 'best practices' within a small group.

Structuration

Of course, pedagogical practice is only part of the overall picture given to us by the forensics program. Forensics is situated uniquely as a small group because it possesses contextual properties that situate it within multiple frames; forensics is all at once individual, interpersonal, small-group, and organizational. Therefore, a theoretical framework that accounts for the diversity and complexity of this 'structure' should prove salient to our understanding.

Giddens (1976) provides such a framework, as he explores the way in which groups are created and maintained, and suggests that the structure of an institution and the actions through and within that institution are inextricably linked. Three guiding dimensions are useful for our understanding: signification, legitimacy, and domination. These rules guide our actions by 1) requiring us to interpret or make sense of a particular situation, 2) determining what must be done in a particular situation, and 3)defining how we go about exerting influence over the situation. A structure of a group is produced and reproduced through everyday practice within the group, and as members make strategic, purposeful actions to reach certain goals, those actions create or reinforce future actions that can be taken. This is not to say that structure necessarily restricts its members, but instead members act as 'knowledgeable' and 'enabled' agents that "put their structurally

formed capacities to work in creative or innovative ways" (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). Giddens (1976) suggests that social 'structures' should not be conceived of as rigid and unmoving, but as an ongoing and shifting process. Also, structure provides insight into relationships at both the macro-social and micro-social levels (Bastien, McPhee & Bolton, 1995).

The concept of the 'structure' has been useful to social psychologists, sociologists, and humanists in that it provides a way of looking at the conglomeration of human activity as an ongoing series of actions and activities that are both *created by* and *create* the structure. Some theorists find the initial conceptualization lacking, however, in that it provides little insight into the "engagement of organizations within plural and overlapping social systems" (Whittington, 1992). Extensions of the theory suggest ways of addressing this issue (Whittington, 1992; Sewell, 1992; Bastien, McPhee & Bolton, 1995).However, the most salient extension is the organizational conceptualization proposed by Poole & McPhee (1983). Particularly useful are the ideas of organizational structure and climate.

Initially, the organizational structure, what Barley and Tolbert call the "institution" (1997), is a way of understanding the more formalized construction of human action. The ways in which the institution processes actions are through "sites" or centers of structure (McPhee, 1989). These sites are 1) conception, 2)implementation, and 3) reception. The first site includes all of the actions or decisions made by an institution that limit or redirect actions. The second site is the formalized consignment of those decisions through actions. Finally, the third site involves the organizational members' acting in accordance with the initial decision. These three sites expand Giddens' original notions of signification, legitimacy, and domination, and formalize understanding in relation to the organization or "institution." This formalization can be illustrated through the difference between speech and grammar (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). While speech "allows for an infinite variety of expressions," in order for those expressions to be understood and ascribed meaning requires "an underlying set of tacitly understood rules that specify relations between classes of lexemes" (p. 96-97). The formalization of structure through the institution offers a way of viewing the interconnectivity of micro social systems within a macro system.

Of course, since we know through structure that an institution is not usefully understood as rigid, another concept emerges that highlights the complex and dynamic nature of social organizations: the climate. This can be defined as "a collective attitude" that is perpetually created and reinforced through interactions within the organization (Bastien, McPhee & Bolton, 1995). The structured view of climate is particularly useful because it acknowledges the nature of climate in the construction of the 'structure.' Poole (1985) clarifies the structural approach to climate as "systematized and customary activities deemed important by the organization or its members" (p. 82). Therefore, climate is inextricably tied to the overall structure of an institution, and presents itself as an organic component that is both profoundly present, but also conceptually subtle. This postmodern approach to understanding the organization provides a subjective lens from which to view this complex and unique tension, and serves as a reminder of the paradoxical and dichotomous nature of our world.

Southern California High School Speech& Debate Team

As the focus of this paper is to explicate new insight into the dichotomy of competition and education, the analysis must come from a close exploration of that tension as it presents itself. Therefore, it is my intention to use a Southern California High School Speech and Debate team as the site of analysis. This site informs our understanding for a variety of reasons: First, the team serves as a model for a 'successful program.' Their competitive and educative success was, and still is, immediately apparent within the state and national forensics community(Leal, 2006; Navarro, 2009).Furthermore, the team is large enough to provide a diverse array of students. As of 2013, 120 students participate in the activity, of which about 35-50 compete regularly. That is, 35-50 students compete at least 2-3 times per semester. The other 70-85 students compete once or twice all year. Most notably, from this large contingency of competitors, most will attend college, and many will attain post graduate degrees. Many parents of these students from this school expressed that their students were applying to Ivy League institutions. There have been numerous instances of students indicating that forensics was the only thing motivating them to stay in school, without which they would likely have dropped out. Finally, the current director of forensics has been the recipient of numerous service awards in both the forensics community and the community outside of forensics. He currently serves as a city council member in a city in Southern California, and has coached multiple students to state and national titles.

While the team's competitive and educational successes appear substantial, the continued successes are what seem most salient to the discussion. Structure reminds us that organizations continually rebuild themselves in a constantly adaptive and reflexive manner, and that sustaining structures become equally as successful in addressing necessary structural changes as they are in addressing organizational tasks. In this particular case, the role of structure on a micro scale is best understood through the cycle of signification, legitimacy, and domination.

Initially, when a student is first introduced to the activity there are two questions that must be addressed in no particular order: 1) what particular events most interest you, and 2) in which events are you likely to be most competitively successful? Here we see an immediate representation of the competition/education tension. It is important that the student be motivated to participate and thus should possess some agency in the educational objectives being offered. But the student should also exhibit a modicum of potential competitive success in order to contribute to the team's "tradition of excellence" as indicated by the banner above the team room. A participant's first introduction to the team immediately addresses this tension, which then requires an interpretation of the potential outcomes this tension offers.

There are a number of steps any student/competitor can take after determining the most conducive events; of course the ones that maintain the student's role in the system are the most useful for exploration. However, as it would be problematic to exhaust possible options, three key possibilities seem most pervasive: 1) the student will maintain and compete on a limited basis in one event for the duration of the year, experiencing

minimal competitive success; 2) the student will adopt a second event and compete on a more consistent basis for the duration of the year, experiencing minimal competitive success; 3) the student will adopt a second event and compete on a more consistent basis for the duration of the year, experiencing much success both locally and nationally. Each of these scenarios affords the students certain motivational outlooks on the activity that impact the tension in unique frames.

In the first scenario, the student may indicate that they are here "for the experience" rather than competition. However, neither education nor competition is being favored or advanced as the student is not broadening their "experience" with a variety of events which could expand their educational horizons, nor are they attempting to further their competitive successes. In the third scenario, we see both areas being accentuated; the student is allowing themselves to indulge in a couple of events, affording a more holistic educational experience, as well as achieving competitive success. It would appear, then, that the student most likely to experience this tension is caught somewhere between maintaining their motivated interest in the activity while also attempting to validate the extrinsic rewards. In each case, the student must deal with different legitimate concerns; however, the second scenario bodes ill when entering the stage of domination.

The first and last student seem to be content in their respective areas, one favoring neither education nor competition, the other favoring neither but reaping the benefits of both. The second student's decision concerning which action to take seems to be most problematic, and as with any problem concerning an organized system, the one with the power to make decisions is afforded the opportunity to exhibit power over the situation, in this case the coach.

In a classroom/educational system, the continued domination of one ideation could be considered the pedagogy of the teacher, or in this case the "coach." This particular decision as framed as a tension is located at the apex of this pedagogy: does s/he indicate to this student that the experience is more crucial than the extrinsic reward of a trophy, or does s/he focus efforts into competition, potentially sacrificing the authenticity of the events in favor of the "tradition of excellence?" This cycle of signification, legitimacy, and domination continue, eventually leading to an over pedagogical framework for the team.

Of course, once a team achieves recognizable success, the team seeks to perpetuate the characteristics that led to success, while other teams seek to emulate those characteristics. On a macro level, we can see the singular instances translate into a larger sense of conception, implementation, and reception through a specific decision by the team to no longer attend the state tournament.

This particular tournament historically offered multiple divisions for the overall team awards, meaning that even though smaller schools could mathematically never achieve the number of points needed to win the tournament, they could still win their "division" and indicate to administration that they had "won" the state tournament, albeit

in a smaller division. However, recently the state tournament got rid of the divisions, pitting large schools against small for an all-encompassing state title. While this change did nothing to hurt the educational factors of the tournament (the same number of students received awards in the same number of events), it did make the smaller schools appear less competitively successful, as what would have been their state championship trophy changed into a 14th or 15th place award.

The conception of this decision was never clearly articulated; however, it limited potential "competitive success" for smaller schools, while also reframing perceptions of this tension. Once implemented, this action forced many coaches, including the site of analysis, to revisit their strategy for addressing the tension. Do we as coaches strive for the intrinsic rewards of educating students and ourselves through continued competition? Or do we forgo attending the tournament due to an understanding that our competitive successes would take a significant hit?

Conclusion

It is evident that the tension persists in this activity, and perhaps not until competition is completely removed from the environment can the tension ever fully be addressed. However, would an activity be able to survive without the qualities that competition brings to its students? Are there options for structural improvement that can be prescribed in order to better facilitate learning while also building on student motivation? Or perhaps, is this tension an organic and fundamental principle of learning that should run parallel to our worldviews? Future research may address such concerns; however I have a feeling it is unlikely that in our current society we could strip away the competitive nature of our beings in favor of a more cooperative approach to learning. It is in no light impossible; in fact, as an activity that lauds itself as "spark[ing]transformation in the lives of students, to help them become effective communicators, critical thinkers and engaged, ethical members of a democratic society," this structural tension should serve as a constant reminder that even this noble endeavor deserves a consistent revisit to the structural model.

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Bio:
Sean P. Connor, MA is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Los Angeles and a Forensics Coach. He holds a B.A., from California State University, Long Beach and an M.A., California State University, Los Angeles.

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