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Founding Practice: Examining Intercollegiate Competition as Assessment

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Abstract

Intercollegiate forensics is, at its core, a form of teaching. Like other pedagogical elements within higher education, the practice is now, and will increasingly be, subject to institutional assessment requirements in higher education. The conventional argument that the evaluation processes inherent in intercollegiate forensics competition will demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching and learning in forensics pedagogy is false. The assessment practices within the framework of competitions are part of the teaching processes. Forensics pedagogy, therefore, must align itself with institutional assessment components. This essay argues for the roots of that alignment to be tied to an academic learning compact that seeks to meet the requirements of institutional assessment and clarify the focus of the collection of scholars, educators and students that comprise the intercollegiate forensics community.

Introduction

A great number of scholars have worked to conceptualize forensics pedagogy and its place in higher education. Intercollegiate forensics competitions provide a unique opportunity for faculty and undergraduate students to travel together to attend competitive tournaments in which student work is assessed by communication scholars, faculty, and graduate students from multiple institutions. Additionally, the pool of adjudicators at each competition normally includes lay audience members that are drawn from outside of the collegiate forensics community. Therefore, students are challenged to devise intricate, and often intuitive, methods of audience analysis in order to meet the needs and expectations of a diverse audience.

The products of this unique pedagogical framework reflect a depth and substance that is difficult to replicate in the traditional classroom setting. Forensics is a creative learning space in higher education that consistently delivers on its promise to produce evidence of effective teaching via comparative analysis of student performance in contest settings. While this essay focuses on demonstrating the value of forensics in the language of data-driven assessment, the inherent value and efficacy of forensics is unquestioned. Yet, unquestioned efficacy and notions of value from the pen of a true believer does not preserve funding streams for collegiate forensics programs or bolster the role of said programs at the institutional level.

Forensics programming at the collegiate level needs to be reconceptualized in order to communicate the natural alignment between forensics pedagogy and institutional expectations of programmatic value. Intercollegiate forensics is primarily a highly effective, resource intensive, tutor-style teaching craft that will invariably be subjected to institutional assessment requirements. Each component of this

conceptualization of collegiate forensics can be easily identified for an unfamiliar audience, save one. In the following section I provide a brief description of each component to test its illustrative ease.

- A. Intercollegiate forensics is resource intensive: Illustrating this element of collegiate forensics is simple. The institutional resource commitment to forensics programming compared to traditional classroom teaching is very high. When calculating the full measure of programmatic resources we must consider FTE allocations of faculty and staff; travel funds; supplies; research; equipment; spatial resources, etc. While the returns on investment are extremely high, the fact the forensics programs reflect resource intensive forms of teaching remains.
- B. Intercollegiate forensics is a tutor-style teaching craft: Forensics provides a unique pedagogical platform. It is staged in an infrastructure that moves the professor-student transaction from tutor-style teaching to a multi-institutional assessment environment. In this instructional framework, the study of theory and practice are interwoven in ways that allow students to grow their knowledge and presentational skill sets more rapidly. It begins in the fall of each academic year. Coaches move students from the communication classroom into a daily, developmental regimen of one-on-one coaching and training in speech writing, delivery and analysis and oral interpretation of literature. The consistent focus on one-on-one coaching, qualifies collegiate forensics as a unique construct in higher education.
- C. Intercollegiate forensics is a highly effective form of teaching: The impact of forensics pedagogy is easy to identify because the products of teaching are student performances. The process of developing student performances aligns with the rhythm and progression of the intercollegiate season. An attendee at the national championship tournament would hold up final round participants as examples of undergraduate students of the highest order. Additionally, if that same attendee were to track to the progress of randomly selected students through the course of a season, collegiate forensics itself would be celebrated for teaching efficacy of the highest order. However, at this time, tracking practices and assessment mechanisms that are aligned with the expectations of colleges, universities and accrediting agencies do not exist. Outside of the perception of practitioners, the efficacy of the craft is not verifiable.

I propose that the inevitable subjection of the collegiate forensics programs to institutional assessment requirements is upon us. Programs throughout the United States will be challenged by their institutions to demonstrate their func-

tional effectiveness in teaching and learning in order to justify their funding and resource streams. On that basis, I advocate that the national intercollegiate forensics community, at the governance level, needs to embrace a common academic learning compact.

In 2008, the National Forensic Association commissioned a *Committee on Pedagogy* to address concerns among the membership related to the future of collegiate forensics. The fundamental issue that the committee was charged with exploring was one that has long frustrated forensic educators at the collegiate level. "For decades the assessment of what constitutes "quality performance" in collegiate forensics has been rooted in a mysterious and unsupported collective conception of unwritten rules and performance practices related to a very narrow and instinctive set of standards" (Kelly, Paine, Richardson, White, 2009). The central product from that committee was a published report that argued for a formalized embrace of assessment in intercollegiate forensics, in order to strengthen the position of forensics pedagogy in higher education. The report provided insight into a variety of important questions related to forensics pedagogy, the insufficient answers to which have helped to shape collegiate forensics over the last 30 years. More importantly, the report exemplifies the fact that higher education is being reshaped by standardized assessment practices, and collegiate forensics must reshape practice accordingly.

This essay is designed to challenge a single conventional argument related to pedagogical practice in collegiate forensics and its connection to the assessment of student learning. The argument has two primary components. The first contention asserts that intercollegiate forensics competition serves as a mechanism for institutional assessment of student learning. The notion will be repudiated on the basis that competition is a component of the teaching context. Second, I will assert a foundation for assessment practice in collegiate forensics that could unify and strengthen the place of the discipline in higher education.

Competition as Assessment

It is not uncommon for forensics practitioners to assert the argument that intercollegiate competition serves as a form of assessment. Structurally this is true. Intercollegiate forensics competitions serve as multi-institutional classrooms in which adjudicators from a variety of institutions provide a cross-section of student performance feedback. There is great value for students in this form of assessment: community, continuous improvement, skill building performance experiences, mixed audience of lay and expert perspective that simulates conventional professional contexts, etc. In the same moment, the foundations for performance evaluation among this pool of adjudicators are not explicitly linked to common learning outcomes. Therefore, the only unifying factors in this evaluative context are the structural variables (limitations on oral critique, common scoring system, multiple rounds, etc.) and general event criteria. These factors do not allow us to draw distinct lines between shared pedagogical goals that are linked to the roots of the communica-

tion discipline and the performance products that students are presenting during competitions. Therefore, multi-institutional competitions do not meet the standards for institutional assessment.

The conventional argument, also, contends that because competitions feature experts in the field as adjudicators, then surely that level of expertise informs the value system that founds standards for evaluation in competitions vary by region in the same way that the formulation of the competition is culturally based. Miller (2005) provides insight in the cultural space that exists between different regions of the country. Miller (2005) observed that forensics competitions are reflective of micro cultures within the forensics community based on the region in which a competition occurs. "My exposure to students and colleagues in other regions was limited to national tournaments, to a few out-of-region tournaments I had attended, and to national conferences like NCA. After having the experience of adapting to a new region, and thus gaining a clearer perspective on exactly how many differences actually exist in terms of regional beliefs, values, and practices, I believe that the label "micro culture" is indeed warranted for each region" (Miller, 2005, p. 4). If we are to accept Miller's observations as valid, then surely these cultural distinctions are also reflected in the performance assessments and pedagogical goals. At this time, an extensive, national platform for forensics pedagogy is not in place. This allows for disparate goals and values to inform teaching. Additionally, the age-old question of whether the fundamental foundation of forensics is competition or education persists. "This tension, expressed in speech journals as early as 1915, continues between the educational goals of debate and its competitive nature" (Wood & Rowland-Morin, 1989, p. 81).

Forensics competitions, in and of themselves, are not yet acceptable mechanisms for institutional assessment. The primary reason for this exists in the fact that they were never intended to assess learning from that vantage point. Competitions are a key component in the teaching and learning process in forensics pedagogy. Multi-institutional environments provide students an incentive to develop speeches and performances. The act of sharing performance in a competitive, comparative environment allowing students to mark their progress as a developing speaker in relationship to a wider scheme of peers than the institution they attend is able to provide. Additionally, the sense of community and collective mission that is derived from these experiences is invaluable in their time of "becoming" as a college student.

The vast array of substantive and valuable outcomes that are derived from the experience of intercollegiate competition are clear. Yet, the fact that no framework for articulating the high degree of learning that comes from these experiences in terms that are valued by institutional assessment practices puts forensics pedagogy in peril.

The next section of this essay identifies a starting point for the forensics community to address this limitation.

TABLE 1

The National Forensic Association Academic Learning Compact incorporates student learning outcome activity across five domains that should characterize the skills and abilities of a successfully trained student/competitor in collegiate forensics, regardless of the program, which they represent. The Academic Learning Compact¹ should align with the following five domains.

- **DISCIPLINE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS (ALC 1)**
 - (ALC 1.1) Use communication technology effectively.
 - (ALC 1.2) Describe and apply communication concepts and principles from the following areas:
 - Rhetorical theory
 - Fundamentals of speech
 - Audience analysis
 - Fundamentals of oral interpretation of literature
 - Argumentation
- **COMMUNICATION (ALC 2)**
 - (ALC 2.1) Adapt style and delivery to communication clearly and memorably.
 - (ALC 2.2) Deliver effective presentations with well-defined introductions, main points, supporting information, and conclusions.
 - (ALC 2.3) Establish credibility with audience.
 - (ALC 2.4) Use information technology effectively to conduct research.
- **CRITICAL THINKING (ALC 3)**
 - (ALC 3.1) Apply rhetorical, relational and critical theories to understand communication events.
 - (ALC 3.2) Evaluate effective and ineffective communication.
 - (ALC 3.3) Suggest audience-centered strategies for improvement in public speaking and performance that are considerate of the speaker
 - (ALC 3.4) Identify trustworthy evidence and information.
- **INTEGRITY/VALUES (ALC 4)**
 - (ALC 4.1) Distinguish between ethical and unethical behavior in human communication.
 - (ALC 4.2) Describe and adhere to the principles of ethical practice in public speaking, performance, scholarly activity and citizenship.

Academic Learning Compact: The Point of Unification in Teaching and Learning

Stanney and Halonen (in press) wrote:

Higher education has demonstrated a growing commitment to the principle of continuous improvement; the current accreditation environment demands that departments and institutions engage in assessment to maintain their competitive position as high-quality academic programs. (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Suskie, 2004)

Seemingly, there would be great economy in devising assessment alignments, at the national organization level, that inform programmatic goals at lower divisions and allow individual programs to demonstrate teaching efficacy to meet institutional requirements. Articulation of programmatic value would be rooted in the language common to resource decision makers. Additionally, foundations for performance evaluation would be clarified for adjudicators based on pronounced pedagogical prerogatives.

The fact that intercollegiate competition is not currently founded (in an official manner) in shared learning outcomes substantially problematizes the venture moving forward. In order to meet institutional and accreditation agency standards, forensics organizations must publish ALC compacts, student learning outcomes for each event, and teaching priorities for each genre. This process begins with an academic learning compact, which clarifies the foundational goals of the discipline in the broadest fashion. All elements of teaching practice would be linked back to this common, general outline. The National Forensic Association *Committee on Pedagogy* published a report in 2009 in which an academic learning compact, aligned with the goals and philosophy of that organization, was featured (refer to Table 1). While this formal articulation of pedagogical outcomes is out of character for forensics organizations historically, the landscape of higher education has changed along with the inter and intra-institutional intensification in the battle for resources.

Implementation of an academic learning compact, such as the NFA model featured in Table 1, would begin to align the practice of national organizations with the standards of accreditation agencies nationwide. Standard 3: Teaching and Learning in the *Accreditation Standards for Quality Schools for Schools seeking NCA CASI or SACA CASI Accreditation* highlights, “gathers, analyzes, and uses data and research in making curricular and instructional choices” as standard 3.3. (2009). Data driven assessment of teaching and learning is the standard that informs accreditation. In order to demonstrate and articulate program quality and effectiveness, collegiate forensics must make a concerted effort to formally embrace these standards.

Accreditation, however, is not the central concern for most forensics programs in terms of institutional placement. The primary interest at this level is demonstrating teaching effectiveness and programmatic value at an institutional level. This is the area in which the articulation of pedagogical prerogatives brings the greatest value. Currently, a forensics program seeks institutional support and value perceptions based on a variety of approaches. Some rely on competitive result profiles, others on institutional tradition, and so on. Each argument can prove effective to varying degrees depending on the advocate and institution. Yet, the only commonly held criterion that is celebrated by all institutions is verifiable, teaching effectiveness. The integration of assessment standards in collegiate forensics would unify all programs to that end, without excluding the functional argument, which preceded them.

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