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Why Forensics Matters: The Development of Emotional Competence in Competitors

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Academic scholarship outlines several benefits to participating in competitive speech and debate activities. The most frequently cited perks, generally in this order, include improvements in critical thinking (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Bellon, 2000; Billman, 2008; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Minch, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2010;), communication competency (Billman, 2008; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Minch 2006), college and employment prospects (Billman, 2008; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Minch, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2010), and teamwork and relational skills (Billman, 2008; Fine, 2001; Minch, 2006). We do not dispute that forensics activities likely enhance students' development of these abilities. However, we find that these reports of the activity's benefits all too often frame them in traditional argumentative terms that privilege logical rationality and displace or ignore the activity's potential emotional and rhetorical reasoning benefits (Aden, 2002; Jarman, 2011). There are two reasons why scholars most likely overemphasize the benefits of logical rationality over emotional expression: (a) our activity's foundation in Aristotelian theory, which heavily privileges logos over pathos (Garrett, 1993; Sutton, 1986); and (b) the centrality of debate and oratory in our early justifications of the activities.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this problem is found in the discussion of critical-thinking benefits. For instance, frequently cited studies about critical thinking gains such as Colbert and Biggers (1985) and the 22 studies reviewed by Allen et al. (1999) in their meta-analysis of the link between forensics training and critical thinking skills, use the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (1952), a multiple-choice instrument that measures abilities to deduce, identify assumptions, evaluate arguments, and make inferences. While these are important reasoning skills, they do not encompass the entirety of critical thinking. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the importance of students' proficiency in understanding and using emotion as an important critical thinking and decision-making ability (Elder, 1996; Jarman, 2011; Ketrow & Arnold, 2002; Micheli, 2010; Miller & McKerrow, 2001).

To explicate our justification for the value of competitive speech activities, we contend that participation in forensics develops critical emotional competencies in students. Although the development of traditional logical skills remains an important benefit of these activities, we argue that coaches, participants, and scholars should acknowledge how forensics may enhance emotional competence, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity. These skills are noteworthy because several cognitive,

neurological, and psychological studies have demonstrated that overdependence on rationality and factual data can hamper effective decision-making (Jarman, 2011). Additionally, we cannot truly understand argumentative processes without fully appreciating emotion's role within our reasoning. As Ketrow and Arnold (2001) note:

Privileging only the rational ... simplifies theorizing about argument, but drops out crucial chunks that shape interpretation and meaning... . The significance of studying emotion, particularly what has been termed emotional competence and underlying abilities and skills, in relation to argumentation is that we cannot comprehend or describe argumentation fully without doing so. (p. 305)

To recognize the potential of competitive speech training in the development of emotional competence, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity, we begin this essay by defining and outlining several dimensions of emotional competence and its related skills. This discussion is followed by an examination of how certain competitive speech activities develop affective reasoning skills. These claims are supported by narratives from competitors and event-training materials, both found at the National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA) website.

The narratives used in this study were part of the NSDA's efforts to create materials that would introduce various individual events to beginning competitors. In 2016, through its Instagram account, the NSDA asked high school competitors to comment on a post about why they chose to compete in their individual events. The NSDA identified the best 12 responses and then interviewed those students. The interviews explored why the students wanted to compete in their events and what made the events unique and challenging. The organization purposely did not select national champion competitors for these interviews, as it wanted the information to be accessible to beginners (A. Reisener, personal communication, October 6, 2017).

Out of these 12 published interviews, we selected five that dealt with oral interpretation and oratory events. The other narratives were about three types of debate, two types of extemporaneous speaking, informative speaking, and student congress. We analyzed these narratives, but they discussed traditional critical thinking skills and are not included in this essay.

Although we use materials from the NSDA, a high-school organization, our primary audience is the college forensics community. We use these narratives because nothing comparable exists at college national forensics organizations' or teams' websites. While there are several competitive norm differences between secondary and post-secondary forensics activities, the skill sets we examine in this essay are common for both levels. Moreover, even if both high school and college speech competition develop similar skills, we argue that these emotional intelligence skills may matter more for college students as they are more independent and facing several life challenges for the first time that require advanced emotional competencies (Strauss, 2014). Thus, while we use a convenience sample of data from high school students, we believe that they illustrate the potential that further research beyond this exploratory essay can have in examining the connection between post-secondary forensics training and emotional competence.

We fully acknowledge that our sample size of five interviews limits the conclusions that this essay can make. The aim of our work here is to explore if a connection exists between the theoretical construct of emotional competency and forensics training. We are unaware of any previous scholarship making a similar connection. Our intent is not to provide conclusive evidence of the link. Rather, our work is tentative and we demonstrate how this heuristic can aid our future assessment work. In doing so, we outline some of the variables and skills sets that might be useful in future scholarship that explores this relationship. These efforts should utilize a more rigorous qualitative or quantitative research process and we would encourage the forensics community to strive to publish more first-person accounts of the processes involved in developing and performing pieces in individual events.

After examining how signs of emotional competence appear in the sample interviews, the remainder of the essay outlines some of the ways that this connection between emotional competency and forensics training could be used to justify forensics competition. We conclude with recommendations about how future scholarship can build on our exploratory work to benefit assessment and justification efforts. As part of our conclusion, we contend that we need more public data like the kind found at the secondary level to aid our future assessment work at the post-secondary level.

Emotional Competence Defined

Derived from concepts first outlined by psychologists John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey (1990) and later made famous by psychologist and *New York Times* science writer Dr. Daniel Goleman in his top-selling 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, emotional competence is defined as a “learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance” (Goleman, 1999, p. 19). Goleman (1999) outlines three personal and two social competencies. Personal aptitudes include (a) self-awareness (being cognizant of one’s emotions and the consequences of those feelings); (b) self-regulation (personal control over and responsibility for one’s emotions); and (c) motivation (understanding how emotions direct us to strive for excellence). The two social competencies are: (a) empathy (an understanding of other people’s emotions and needs) and (b) adeptness in managing relationships. While there are scholarly debates about the precise definition of emotional intelligence and our ability to measure it (Jones, 1997), we can use Goleman’s (1999) schema as a basic template to discuss how competitive forensics activities enhance students’ emotional skills in ways that foster better decision-making.

Forensics Training in Emotional Competence

To discover and become a different character requires a combination of several emotional competencies. For example, students must understand their own feelings (self-awareness), the affective state of the characters that they will depict (empathy), and how those feelings differ from their own emotions. By taking on the persona of a character, students must learn to recognize how to identify and portray several emotions in various situations, assisting students in understanding how they might react in similar moments (empathy and self-awareness). Further, the students must acknowledge their own feelings

towards the situation, subject, and various characters found in their performance (self-awareness). Understanding their own emotions then allows students to separate their emotions from the characters' emotions, which is an example of self-awareness and control.

Studies on the importance of roleplay on children's development have explored the effects of acting on emotional development. As Dr. Thalia Goldstein (2015), an assistant professor of Applied Developmental Psychology at George Mason University, suggests, student actors "decide what is appropriate given a certain set of circumstances, and then [they] mold which parts of [their] personality and emotions [they] express, which [they] hold back, etc." Overall, students' ability to identify and understand a range of possible emotional reactions to life situations that they have experienced only through a performance allows them to better "understand themselves, others, and the world around them" (Littlefield et al., 2001). Thus, performance as another character promotes a better understanding of self as students must recognize, explore, and separate their emotional reactions from those of the characters they portray.

Rachel Rothschild (2016), a Dramatic Interpretation competitor featured among the NSDA interviewees, explains this process: "The challenge of DI will always lie in the struggle to morph into a new persona. Speakers must separate themselves from their character, distinguish all the little details about the role they are going to take on, and finally, blend themselves into this new personality." Program Oral Interpretation (POI) magnifies this challenge. Because his event combines multiple types of literature into a singular performance, POI competitor Jeremiah Brown (2016) suggests that it is very challenging to take multiple characters from different backgrounds and texts and sort them out during the performance. To be successful in this event, competitors must clarify the motivations and emotions of several characters who do not exist in the same narrative universe prior to the performance.

Rothschild (2016) further notes how empathy is a challenging talent to master because "our characters have faced difficulties that most of us will never come close to in our lifetimes. As a result, we must experiment with different ways to approach our roles." Based on this account, interpretation requires higher-order critical thinking skills, like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. For instance, the ability to explore a character to understand its emotions and motivations requires critical analysis skills. Similarly, students' skills in differentiating the emotions of the characters from their own personal moods involves both analysis and evaluation skills. Further, students' abilities to decide how to portray various emotional responses to situations that they have not experienced before require important evaluation skills.

Even an event like humorous interpretation requires complex emotional self-awareness, self-control, and relational adeptness. For instance, competitor Jordan Singer (2016) explains the pleasure involved in understanding and emotionally connecting to his audience in stating, "[Humorous Interpretation] not only allows me to express myself, but allows me to fill a room with laughter and happiness." Like many other forensics events, humorous interpretation requires students to be highly adaptive to understand their own emotions, their characters' feelings and motivations, and the audience's perspective. As Singer (2016) further contends, "Interp pushes you to constantly grow and think outside the box. The ability to change, as well as open-mindedness, are definitely the most necessary skills to an interper." This creative and flexible problem-solving in response to

interpersonal situations utilizes both the personal and social skills Goleman (1999) describes as important decision-making abilities.

One area of emotional competency not specifically noted in Rothschild and Singer's narratives is the intellectual work necessary to understand the interaction of feelings and drives in situations involving more than one character. While this requires the use of self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, it also requires an aptitude in critically analyzing relationships and their dynamics. One event that heavily depends on this kind of adeptness in understanding these affective exchanges is Duo. For example, in its description of Duo, the NSDA (2016) explains this aspect of the event: "Using offstage focus, competitors convey emotions and environment through a variety of performance techniques focusing on the relationships and interactions between the characters." Additionally, Duo competitor Julie Thompson (2016) notes the collaborative nature of this analytic work:

A lot of that relies on the team dynamic and partners need to have trust. They must be able to discuss what looks good and what doesn't, and to build each other up. Partners need to be prepared to work together on all aspects of the piece.

Thus, interpretative events train students to utilize several emotional competencies, including empathy, motivation, relational adeptness, self-awareness, and self-control.

Yet, interpretative events are not the only ones that require expertise in these competencies. Oratory and public-address events require affective critical thinking skills as well. For example, contestant Lia Thayer (2016) explains that she chose to compete in oratory because it "seemed like the event through which I could express myself the most.... I get to speak directly from my heart. The topic I chose for my oration is something I'm very passionate about ..." Thayer's comments demonstrate that oratory requires students to understand their own emotions and motivations to channel them into their topic and inspirational and pathetic appeals. Due to its purpose to encourage or persuade, oratory may be the event that best trains students in the emotional competency of motivation. Thayer (2016) suggests this in saying, "Every Orator I've met is encouraging, excited about their topic and their speech, and wants to change the world someday." In its description of the event, the NSDA (2016) further notes that oratory, more so than other events, emphasizes the use of both logical and emotional appeals, reflecting the kind of balance that we contend is important in producing strong critical thinkers and decision makers.

Importance of Emotional Competencies Beyond Forensics Activities

Students have a great deal to gain from improved emotional reasoning competencies. First, as Goleman (1999) maintains, occupational and personal performance, especially in decision-making, improves through enhanced affective talents. Second, in our current political context, an education in both emotional and logical critical thinking skills may allow students to best navigate the current political terrain. For example, public confidence in traditional sources of public argument of fact such as the government, news media, and science are at all-time lows, making it difficult to rely on common knowledge as a basis for logical appeals (Klumpp, 2006). Further, people

tend to stay within “echo chambers of information” that expose them to information that only confirms their existing beliefs (Manjoo, 2016). This causes partisan people to deflect appeals to fact-checked information, which undermines the power of logical and fact-based appeals. Worse, attempts to correct factually incorrect arguments can cause a “backfire effect” that reinforces those opinions (Ignatius, 2016).

Rather than use these findings as a reason to abandon all hope for logical argument by claiming we are in a post-argument world or rigidly insisting on more fact-checking, we argue that we likely exist in a time where persuasion, rather than argumentation, dominates our culture. Obviously, persuasion involves the use of logic and reasoning. However, neglecting the development of strong pathological appeals within argumentation also undermines effective reasoning, according to Ketrow and Arnold (2001). Very few activities in academia reward students for deploying both logos and pathos in constructing an argument; forensics is one of those pursuits. A student with strong skills in empathy, motivation awareness, and self-control likely is better equipped to avoid a backfire effect that is triggered when people feel attacked within an argument. This is possible because these students better understand which appeals can trigger certain emotional reactions and what best motivates others to act. Thus, we maintain that the under-appreciated impact that competitive forensics activities have on developing students’ emotional competencies should be foregrounded as a justification for the activity within our current political climate.

Recommendation

Based on our tentative exploration of the utility of understanding competitive speech activities as training in emotional competence, we finish this essay with one key recommendation for both forensic organizations and individual collegiate teams. As we note in the beginning of this essay, there are no easily attainable narratives written by collegiate competitors that compare to the ones present at the NSDA website. We contend that these “what-to-expect-in-x event” or personal accounts of the craft of self-exploration and portrayal of characters at the collegiate level would be very valuable. These documents could serve as useful recruiting tools that illustrate what skill sets are involved in competing in intercollegiate individual events.

Perhaps more importantly, these accounts can aid in our assessment efforts to demonstrate the value of our activities. Increasingly, higher education institutions expect collegiate forensics programs to conduct assessment of program outcomes to “justify [programs’] funding and resource streams” (Kelly, 2010, p. 131). As both national collegiate forensics organizations and individual programs confront growing assessment demands, it would be highly useful if the community had access to publicly-available interviews or narratives from competitors that provide us with qualitative data about the logical and emotional critical-thinking skills promoted by individual events. Having evidence of the many critical-thinking outcomes of intercollegiate forensics training, programs can justify their existence and resources by pointing to a broad range of logical and emotional critical-thinking results. As we argue, emotional competency skills are important life skills that are increasingly needed by today’s college students (Strauss, 2014). We should promote ourselves as equipping students with these critical thinking skills as we justify the need for collegiate forensics programs.

Conclusion

Based on our limited exploration, we contend that forensics competition has the potential to train students in important emotional competencies. Participation in interpretative and public-address events may teach students to be proficient in affective skills such as self-awareness, self-control, empathy, motivation awareness, and relational adeptness. We argue that these cognitive benefits of forensics may be just as important as the logical critical-thinking skills that we most often promote, especially in a time when factual argument and rational appeal perhaps may be less effective than in the past. The findings of our work here justify further scholarship that seeks to measure the relationship between forensics training and affective competence.

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