

## MENTORSHIP AS AN EVOLVING PRACTICE: EMMA AND JUSTIN'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

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# Mentorship as an Evolving Practice: Emma and Justin's Excellent Adventure

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## Abstract

*This paper provides a semi-autoethnographic exploration of the evolving practice of mentorship within forensic debate. Ultimately, this paper is situated within previous literature, such as Buell's (2004) understanding of mentorship models, but expands on the need for an evolving mentorship model within student-professor mentorship, especially as the student role changes from undergraduate student to graduate student. The researchers' arguments in this paper are around how mentorship in student-professor relationships needs to adapt as the student's role changes from novice to experienced competitor and eventually from student to coach. The goal of the mentor-mentee relationship is long-term success for both parties that can provide a more profound connection both professionally and personally. Thus, by exploring each researcher's experience within forensics, there can be a greater understanding of the practical benefits of a lasting and growing mentorship in the forensic community.*

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*KEY TERMS: Mentorship, Mentor, Mentee, Evolving, Forensics*

The relationships, experiences, and knowledge students gain during college can fundamentally shape their lifetime personal and career outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), especially in the unique subset of forensics. The supportive relationship within the forensics culture between student-student relationships as well as student-professor mentorship can provide a wide range of benefits. In general, student-professor mentorship has been shown to help students develop their interests, maintain retention, and help students find their career paths (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018; Trolan et al., 2016). Forensics is a place of opportunities to grow mentorship and foster students to succeed in graduate studies. Thus, this semi-autoethnographic exploration is a further extension of the argument for a hybrid model of mentoring first proffered by Holm and Foote (2011).

Buell (2004) notes that mentoring within academia remains much more fluid than mentoring within the business realm. A predominant argument for mentoring being of utmost importance in academia comes from Kelly and Schweitzer (1999), who argue that mentorship is the heart of the graduate school experience. Although there are similarities between mentorship in business and academia, academia is fundamentally built on good mentors fostering a strong academic tradition. As a result, this paper hopes to expand on the understanding of how mentorship evolves and functions through an exploration of Emma and Justin's experiences.

Forensics provides a unique venue in which the importance of academic mentoring becomes pivotal. Any quick discussion with a current forensics coach will reveal current coaches have had strong mentors. In fact, the vast majority of forensics coaches moved from competitor to coach with the guidance of their undergraduate coaches. Forensics thrives because of the successful mentoring the activity fosters. However, because of the strong focus on mentoring and the reliance on undergraduate competitors to shift into coaching roles, Buell's (2004) mentoring models need some modification.

In her article, Buell (2004) identifies four models of mentoring that emerge from her research on mentor-mentee relationships: the cloning model, the nurturing model, the friendship model, and the apprentice model. Holm and Foote (2011) previously articulated an argument for a hybrid nurturing-friendship model encompassing the shift from graduate teaching assistant to coach. This work expands that argument by focusing on the shifting nature of mentorship as a student-coach mentorship experience shifted to a coach-coach mentorship experience through sharing an ethnographic narrative further solidifying the nature of a nurturing-friendship hybrid model of mentorship. There is value in shared experience and this article highlights the continued experience of coaches and students as they adapt to different roles while still maintaining various mentor-mentee roles.

### **Emma: The Adventure from Competitor to Coach**

I have grown in both my undergraduate and graduate programs as a result of the mentoring I received from my former debate coach. My experience in debate as a competitor has provided me with many opportunities in graduate school, including the ability to be an assistant debate coach while in my graduate program, which is paying for my schooling. One of the hardest things during my transition from student to coach was having to navigate what it looks like, and means to be, a debate coach. Since the head coach was another graduate student, there was a lack of in-depth mentorship I could gain from the head coach because we both had questions and struggled similarly. I leaned heavily on my former debate coach and we often discussed problems that occurred during the transition.

As a young graduate student, I was close in age to most of my debate students. I had to learn how to be encouraging and friendly but maintain that clear distinction of coach. Frequently, we learn roles and information based on what has been previously observed (Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Yiend et al., 2014). To negotiate that tenuous relationship, I reflected on how my debate coach interacted with me, and I strove to model that behavior. The benefit of having a deep mentorship with my debate coach, that has transcended my undergraduate experience, has made an easier transition to being a full-time coach. In addition to reflecting on past experiences with my coach I asked him questions and got his advice on how he would do things. His mentorship helped me grow into my role as coach and has ultimately helped me grow my debate knowledge regarding different debate styles.

As with any sport, forensics teams create a culture primarily based on participation. That culture produces close ties that provide great ways to connect and constantly learn new ideas

(Goodnight & Mitchell, 2008). When I became a coach, I transitioned from the National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) to the International Public Debate Association (IPDA), a transition which was shocking and stressful. I leaned on my forensics connections and former coach to help find IPDA information. I never really enjoyed metaphor rounds during my NPDA career, nor did I overly enjoy the pop culture rounds. Yet somehow, I found myself in the form of forensics that primarily focused on those prompts: There was a learning curve.

The learning curve urged me out of my comfort zone and brought me great rewards. Because many of my students were also new to forensics, we learned together. As my students and I learned about IPDA, I often reached out to my former debate coach, sharing resolutions for his students to use and asking questions when uncertainties arose. The constant evolution that we undergo as students in forensics is a fantastic feat, and it does not just stop at being a student participating in forensics. It continues into coaching.

### **Justin: Evolution of a Coach-Mentor to Friend-Mentor**

Much of how our mentor-mentee relationship has evolved has followed a path similar to how I had been mentored during my time in forensics, although there are some key differences. Having never participated in speech and debate as an undergrad, I lacked the competitive experience of many coaches, including Emma; however, our experiences in the roles we have undertaken are still much the same despite this difference. When Emma was a competitor on my team I prepped with the mindset that I can't tell them everything; they need to go into the round having created material they know and understand, so rather than give them the material to use, I taught them how to think so they could create their own arguments. However, I was the head coach, so if I needed the students to address certain arguments in the round I made sure they got them into their notes—not particular arguments per se, but rather potential argumentative areas to consider.

Although I had other students on the team who graduated and went to graduate school, Emma was the first who also started coaching speech and debate as a graduate assistant. Both of us began that particular position with a little hesitancy—I had no idea what forensics was when I was asked to become a coach and Emma was not looking for coaching positions. Both opportunities just fell into our respective laps and those surprise opportunities have become some of our most rewarding experiences. Emma undertaking this new role in graduate school allowed me to realize how my own mentoring style would adapt as my mentee's situation changed. Much like my own experience being mentored when moving from a graduate assistant into a head coaching role, I noticed a greater reliance on the friendship model of mentoring than the nurturing model (Buell, 2004). Holm and Foote's (2011) National Communication Association presentation argued for a hybrid of Buell's mentorship models, pointing out that a nurturing-friendship model best described the nature of the forensics director-graduate assistant relationship.

Emma continued to approach to me with questions and concerns about coaching and graduate school as she began coaching her own team. Rather than make sure she did things a

certain way, as I may have done when she was a competitor, I offered her ideas and insights on various responses one could use in whatever situation she was facing. I also gave advice on how to acclimate to a new team. Understanding her comfort level with the norms of my team and discussing how she must be attuned to the traditions of her current institution helped Emma merge her experience as a competitor with the expectations of her role as a new coach. The mentor-mentee relationship had definitely changed from nurturing toward one of friendship—a model built on mutual learning.

Additionally, I made a conscious effort to continue what I found to be one of the single most important aspects of being a good mentor that I was shown by mentoring with Dr. Todd Holm, fostering a start to academic performance at the graduate level. Just as Dr. Holm had taken the time to make sure I had something ready to submit to conferences, and encouraged me to start publishing my scholarship, I reached out to Emma to make sure she had material ready to present and have encouraged her to publish. Oddly enough, with my program's reframing from NPDA more toward IPDA Emma has the unique ability to adapt the mentor-mentee role and help her former coach ease into a new style of debate. Like much in life, the mentor-mentee relationship rarely remains static.

This semi-autoethnographic work adds auxiliary evidence supporting the creation of a hybrid nurturing-friendship model of mentoring. The role of coach-student relationship, often found in the nurturing model, never truly disappears, at least in venues where competition has been the primary genesis for the coach-student relationship. At the same time, the mutually beneficial learning aspect of the friendship model is prominent in coach-coach relationships, at least in those instances where one of the coaches initially assumed the role of student. Despite their similarities, the differences between business and academia may warrant a re-examination of how mentorship models are enacted. At the very least, the evolution of students, from undergraduate competitor to graduate assistant to coach, offers a unique setting in which the suggested models of mentorship insufficiently encompass the rich relationship of forensic coaches and students.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of mentorship in forensics is for students to evolve and to be active learners, a skill instilled in many speech and debate students. The mentorship also needs to adapt as the student's role changes from novice to experienced competitor and eventually from student to coach. Forensics is a changing environment with plenty of nuanced events and debate types to learn, therefore adaptability is essential in fostering mentorship. Buell (2004) states that mentorship has different models but lacks accounting for the possible evolution of a mentoring relationship. As we develop into new roles and our responsibilities shift, learning experiences also change, and thus the mentor-mentee role must also adapt.

There are missed learning opportunities if the mentorship does not evolve. If Justin could not adapt to Emma's IPDA questions, he would have missed the learning opportunities that different disciplines of forensics offer; just as Emma would have been unable to expand her

coaching knowledge without relying on Justin's past experience. The goal of the mentor-mentee relationship is long-term success for both parties that can provide a deeper connection both professionally and personally. If one does not foster the mentor-mentee relationship for the long term, there is a loss of these important milestones that help grow each coach for the better.

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