

The Value of Speech, Debate and Theatre Activities: Making the Case for Forensics



THE VALUE OF SPEECH, DEBATE AND THEATRE ACTIVITIES: MAKING THE CASE FOR FORENSICS



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WHAT OTHERS SAY: SELECTED QUOTATIONS EXPLORING THE VALUE OF FORENSICS

Editor's Note: These quotations were drawn from the previous edition of *The Value of Forensics*, published by the NFHS in 1994, including the several historical figures cited. The exceptions are from Grant McKeehan and Donald Rumsfeld.

John F. Kennedy, August 22, 1960

“I think debating in high school and college is most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of Women Voters I wish we had a good deal more debating in our educational institutions than we do now.”

Malcolm X (Autobiography, 1965)

“But I will tell you that, right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been.”

Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*

“If it is a disgrace to a man when he cannot defend himself in a bodily way, it would be absurd not to think him disgraced when he cannot defend himself with reason in a speech.”

Frank G. Clement, Former Governor of Tennessee

“I cannot think of any one in the country who owes more to his participation in the National Forensic League events than I do.”

Grant McKeehan (2001), Attorney

“I am proud to say that I believe my experience in high school forensics and college debate has contributed more to my success than any other single factor in life. I learned a lot about winning and losing, and for the first time in my life realized how much fun it can be to give everything you have to an activity you love.”

Diana Carlin (1994), Dean of the Graduate School, University of Kansas

“I am a firm believer in the power of forensics to change a person's life. The ability to communicate is one of the most powerful there is in our society. By giving young people the opportunity to develop effective communication skills, forensics opens doors to endless opportunities. I know it did for me.”

John Fritch (1994), Chair, Department of Communication, University of Northern Iowa.

“As an undergraduate from a small rural community it was only through forensics that I was introduced to the social graces of dining in restaurants, meeting officials of universities and checking in at an airport. . . . it is also true that forensics provides the only opportunity which many students have to encounter these events.”

Clark Olson, Ph.D., (1994), Former Director of Forensics, Arizona State University

“Just this week I was visited by the father of one of my first year “walk on” students. He was eager to meet me because he wanted to know what it was about forensics that made it such a special activity that had transformed his son from a careless teenager into an adamant professional competitor. As his son performed his events at Christmas, his father detected that forensics had brought something very special to his son’s life. . . .”

Arthur Voisin (1994), Former Director of Forensics, Southfield (MI) Lathrup High School

“The intellectual challenge of forensic activities is instrumental in the personal growth and development of individual students. Schools unable to maintain or even initiate gifted and talented programs would be wise to maintain debate/forensic programs as the training obtained is highly comparable. Student success and achievement is the major reason that competitive forensic activity should be an educational opportunity for all young people.”

John Heineman (1994), Individual Events Coach, Lincoln (NE) High School

“Not every student will win a state championship or qualify for nationals, but students will inevitably discover that the persistence, dedication and sweat it takes to compose an oratory, perform an interpretation or prepare an extemporaneous speech is the same hard work it takes to survive that first semester of college, land that big job or create a strong family unit.”

Don Ritzenhein (1994), Vice Provost of Arts and Sciences, Macomb Community College

“How many debates, I wonder, did I participate in over a seven-year high school and college career? How many rounds of oratory and extemp? And those are just the tip of the iceberg. Double, triple that number of contest events went into practice; double, triple that number of hours went into research and preparation. It’s no wonder the skills I learned are automatic. It is that intensity, resulting in intuitive lifelong skills, that makes competitive speaking so unique and so valuable.”

Donald Rumsfeld (2004), Secretary of Defense

“I used to think one of the most powerful individuals in America was the person who could select the annual high school debate topic. Think of the power to set the agenda, and determine what millions of high school students will study, read about, think about, talk about with friends, discuss with their teachers and debate with their parents and siblings over dinner.”

**THE VALUE OF SPEECH, DEBATE
AND THEATRE ACTIVITIES:
MAKING THE CASE FOR FORENSICS
By Kevin Minch**

BACKGROUND

In early December 2000, I was on a late night flight from Kansas City to Detroit after learning of the death of my high school debate coach. It was a particularly poignant moment for me because I received the call about her passing while with a group of students at a college debate tournament. It was my second year as a director of my own program at a small liberal arts college in Missouri. Since I was, at that time, in my third year as the associate editor of the NFHS' *Forensic Educator*, I scribbled on the back of some school paperwork what would later be the opening essay for our forthcoming issue. I wrote:

I recently attempted to explain to a group of my students at Truman State University why I was willing to give up my weekends and evenings for no additional pay, why I was willing to sacrifice pursuits in the area of research that other colleagues consider "normal" for someone on a tenure track, and why I would want to carry the additional emotional baggage of being so intimately involved in the lives of 40 students. The answer, I explained, was simple. The gift I gave as a forensic educator is but a small down payment on a debt I owe to those who went before me . . . those who made the sacrifices that made my education possible. A forensic educator is a very special kind of teacher, I told them, and we do not consider these choices sacrifices. They are personal rewards.

The passion of the forensic educator is great. It is so because most of those working in the field have experienced first-hand the profound benefits of an education that is supplemented by forensics. At the time I observed:

I would not be in the field of communication – let alone a speech and debate coach – were it not for [my high school coach]. I probably would not have gotten a Ph.D., or run for political office, or completed a number of the other major life accomplishments I have were it not for the sequence of events she set in motion. . . . I owe who I am to my parents, and friends, and a host of people around me. I owe what I do to [my coach].

This booklet is designed to help the prospective supporter of speech, debate and theatre activities – be they a parent, aspiring coach or speech teacher, administrator, school board member or program benefactor – appreciate how these activities fit into the overall educational experience of a student. It brings together, in one location, a significant amount of research and theory about the effectiveness of education in these activities, yet it also presents a notable amount of anecdotal evidence (in the form of testimonials and the observations of professionals) that demonstrates how these programs work in practice and how alumni of these activities have prospered in college and beyond.

I cannot write this volume without stating emphatically that no amount of quantitative research can demonstrate what I know in my heart to be true. Performance activities (and by this I mean the full range of debate competitions, individual speech events, mock trial, theatre, one-act play, etc.) are life-changing experiences for the students who participate in them. Speech, performance and critical thinking liberate the mind and the individual.

Nonetheless, the reader of this volume will find ample evidence of all kinds in support of that conclusion. My objective has been to pull together the best research available on the relationship between participation in these activities and the achievement of various educational outcomes – both the kind governments and school boards specifically describe, and the general life achievement objectives we all hope our students fulfill.

WHAT IS FORENSICS?

Before any useful discussion of the impact of speech, debate and theatre activities can take place, it is useful, first, to acquaint the unfamiliar reader with the range of options available to students. Different school systems, and different state activities associations, group these activities under different headings, yet many of the activities share characteristics, coaches/advisors and pedagogical objectives.

The traditional “territory” of forensics has been activities such as interscholastic individual or team debating and individual speaking events. Individual speaking events include a range of more specific activities including limited preparation events (impromptu and extemporaneous speaking competitions), platform speaking events (oratory, informative speaking, special occasion speaking, oratorical declamation of great speeches) and oral interpretation of literature (the performance of poetry, prose or dramatic literature). Additionally, theatre activities take multiple forms, including the traditional school play or musical, as well as competitive programs in one-act play, reader’s theatre, and so forth. These activities often complement those already described in what we might term a “broad-based” forensics and theatre

program. Programs such as Model United Nations, Student Congress and Mock Trial also fall under the general rubric of forensic activities in many schools.

These programs are usually cocurricular, meaning that they sometimes hold actual classes during the school day and continue their activities outside of the classroom. Others are extracurricular and function exclusively as teams or clubs after school. While theatre programs may be entirely contained within the school itself, performing plays “on campus,” all of these programs may be – and often are – competitive, either attending one-day, multi-day or overnight tournaments at other schools, or participating in festivals to showcase their work. Thus, there is both a pedagogical and a competitive or performative “team” component to most of these activities.

It is important to recognize, however, that “forensics” is not a label everyone necessarily attaches to the activities in which they are involved. When interscholastic programs (competitive activities) are considered, the labels we will use will vary from state to state. For the purposes of this booklet the term “forensics” will describe the broad range of activities we have discussed here and, where appropriate, the names of specific activities will be used to describe what we know about their individual impact on students. It will be a central contention of this booklet that a school does not need to do all of these programs to benefit but that teachers, parents, students and administrators can work together to develop the optimal mix of what is truly a wide variety of educational opportunities in the area of theatre, speech and debate. Generally speaking, the more opportunities that are provided, the better the students are served.

This booklet replaces *The Value of Forensics* booklet, which was authored by Jack Kay and published in 1994 by the NFHS.

THE BROAD CASE FOR FORENSIC ACTIVITIES

Faculty and administrators who have assessed extracurricular and cocurricular activities long ago reached the conclusion that participation in these activities has a positive impact on such important measures of a school’s performance as GPA and student retention. I remember when I first joined my high school debate team, expressing the concern to my coach that my grades might suffer from all of the time I was spending on the activity. She quickly assured me that, if anything, participation in speech and debate would improve my grades. She was certainly correct. I also learned new skills and how to organize. Yet, most importantly, I was driven to succeed because my involvement in these activities made me more competitive.

Much of the research done to establish a relationship between cocurricular involvement and academic performance has related to athletic activities.

However, some important generalizations have been made. Daniel R. VanderArk, a former principal at Michigan's Holland Christian High School, summarized an NFHS study on the subject in a 1992 article for the *Forensic Educator*, noting that 95 percent of principals surveyed believed that "participation in activities teaches valuable lessons to students that cannot be learned in a regular class routine" while 65 percent of students said that "activities helped to make school much more enjoyable" (VanderArk 26).

He further elaborated by pointing to a Minnesota study that showed significantly higher average GPAs among students involved in activities, with students involved in fine arts showing the highest gains. Similar data from studies in Iowa and Indiana confirmed activities participation as a source of improved student performance. VanderArk also noted the results of research in Kansas showing that "94 percent of high school dropouts in that state 'were not enrolled in activities programs'" (VanderArk 26).

More specifically, those who have had contact with speech, debate and theatre activities have observed specific desirable outcomes in a variety of areas. Students experience improved learning, both inside the classroom and in the context of what one might call "lifelong learning" – the practical application of classroom skills outside the classroom. Students with special needs – both the gifted and the learning disabled – gain unique benefits from their experiences in these programs. These experiences often satisfy needs that are not, or cannot be, addressed efficiently by current educational curriculum. Additionally, students experience positive outcomes in terms of preparedness for the workforce and occupational success. Socially, students develop in positive ways, learning group communication skills and exploring how to negotiate complex relationships. Finally, and quite importantly for schools in a period of fiscal uncertainty, participation in such programs promotes a sense of loyalty by school alumni that translates into a supportive community, good citizens and future parents.

What makes this difference? A number of scholars have advanced the "laboratory" metaphor to describe what forensics activities do (an idea that we will revisit several times in this booklet) that makes them different from other extracurricular or cocurricular experiences. Professor Kevin Dean has argued that these activities are a "developmental opportunity." Specifically Dean argued at a 1991 developmental conference on forensics education: "developmental programs provide students a context in which to both gain knowledge and apply that information in their interactions with others" (88). Unfortunately, Dean noted, "Such activities are frequently difficult to implement on the secondary and even more so college levels because educators typically are responsible for large numbers of students and have a limited time frame (one period or class per year or term) in which to observe and interact with the students under their tutelage" (88). Dean contended that the growth of cocurricular programs, such as forensics, is the natural outcome of a desire by teachers to provide these

developmental experiences. Other scholars have termed this type of learning “experiential” noting:

Experiential learning allows students to move beyond the classroom walls which tend to isolate and fragment learning to, instead, consider learning as it occurs throughout their daily lives. According to experiential education theory, learning does not come about only in the traditional classroom setting (if it does so at all in such a setting). Moreover, people learn about the world around them via encounters with numerous symbol systems. (Sellnow 5-6)

Scholars have further developed the laboratory metaphor, arguing that these developmental experiences – blending classroom and practical learning – boost the acquisition of knowledge in the broad field of communication studies (Swanson “Special” 49-50), enhance interpersonal communication skills (Friedley 51-56), strengthen the capacity of students to function in small group communication settings (Zeuschner 57-64) and provide valuable learning experiences in the realms of organizational communication (Swanson “Forensics” 65-76) and mass communication (Dreibelbis and Gullifor 77-82).

The crux of this effect is the coach. Imagine a teacher in a speech classroom of 25 to 30 students. Her particular school functions within a traditional 50 minute to one-hour class period. For a graded assignment, students have to compose a seven-minute speech and perform before the class. Optimistically, even with relatively short periods of feedback between each speaker, and a rapid turnaround between each performance, more than a class period would be exhausted just hearing the speeches. If instructor or audience feedback is added to the speeches, a single assignment on a single speech could take the better part of a week of classes. Now imagine if that instructor was teaching debate, and each debate composed of four students took an hour! While classroom instruction of speech is vitally important for teaching fundamental concepts of oral communication, such a schedule *cannot* provide the detailed feedback, rehearsal and polish that an after-school, cocurricular program in speech, debate or theatre can. The individual interaction with a coach, added to the feedback of peers and adjudicators from other schools, multiplies the input a student receives on their work. Moreover, it allows for a depth of analysis of the work that simply cannot be achieved in any other environment. Consequently, learning is substantially enhanced.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students and faculty who have participated in speech, debate and theatre activities have generated voluminous anecdotal evidence of the value of these programs in enhancing the academic experience. Many lawyers, doctors and professors were involved in speech and debate programs. However, they also recognize the vast number of students who improved as students because of their participation in forensics – even if they never went on to graduate school or acquired a six-figure salary.

A 1991 survey of college students involved in competitive individual speaking events (many of whom reported that they continued competing because of their high school experiences) cited among the advantages they perceived: improved oral communication skills, improved critical thinking skills, organization, research skills, improved writing skills, improved self confidence, the capacity to think quickly, development of a sense of ethics and a sense of personal accomplishment (McMillan and Todd-Mancillas 6-8). In each instance, more than 65 percent of students either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statements that these were advantageous outcomes.

Among the most cited advantages of forensics participation are greater oral communication competency, improved reading comprehension, more highly-developed listening skills and stronger quantitative measures of academic achievement. One of the most broadly recognized advantages, interconnecting all of these benefits, is improved critical thinking.

CRITICAL THINKING

Speaking broadly, research into the general advantages of arts education (within which forensic activities can be placed) has yielded very positive results related to student performance in measures we would commonly associate with critical thinking. A 2000 study by Buton, Horowitz and Abeles abstracted in the Arts Education Partnership’s 2002 *Critical Links* report indicated that children defined as “high arts” (those with significant arts involvement): “scored higher (from teacher ratings) on expression, risk-taking, creativity-imagination and cooperative learning” (Deasy 66), skills important to effective critical thinking. Tasks such as researching for a debate, organizing a speech, directing a play or analyzing the motivation behind a character in a story function to improve students’ problem-solving and questioning skills.

In no area has the critical thinking relationship been more directly studied than in debate activities. While this should not be viewed as excluding other forensic experiences, this emphasis is not surprising, given the traditional association educators make between argument and logical thought. Still, there is much debate – specific research can teach us.

Professors Kent Colbert and Thompson Biggers observed in 1985: “Keefe, Harte and Norton concluded, ‘Many researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience’” (238). Studies as far back as the 1940s – both on the high school and college level – have established a fairly consistent correlation between participation in debate and higher test scores in critical thinking (Bradley 135). More recently Laurence E. Norton, one of the most respected collegiate speech and debate coaches of the 20th Century, observed:

A pioneer study was conducted by Brembeck on the influence of a course in argumentation on college students. A major conclusion of the study affirms, “The argumentation students, as a whole, significantly outgained the control students in critical thinking scores.” More recently Gruner, Huseman and Luck investigated the relationship between high school debaters’ proficiency and their scores on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Tests. They found that the relationship between debate ability and critical thinking ability extended to all five subtests of the Watson-Glaser test. (Norton 33-4)

Robert Greenstreet, in a 1993 summary of the available data on the relationship of debate participation and critical thinking, correctly noted that the correlation is somewhat of a “chicken-egg question” (18). That is, researchers cannot know conclusively whether the improved critical thinking performance is the result of (a) really good students entering debate first, (b) debate taking students and making them better critical thinkers, or (c) students being impacted by the broader design of the educational system, of which debate is only a part. Nonetheless, in any of these instances, the correlation serves as an affirmation of debate’s positive role. It either serves the enrichment needs of gifted students, it uniquely improves the performance of students or it enhances a system already striving to improve student performance. This is where students’ own experiences and perceptions can be instructive. Surveys of students affirm the perception of improved performance. Greenstreet reported:

A tremendous variety of former high school debaters attest to the value of debate training on their critical thinking as well as their communication abilities. Even Lee Iacocca (1984) jumped on the bandwagon in his autobiography. Testimonial and survey support appear consistent that debate experience equates with positive changes in participant thinking behavior. (21)

Researchers have hypothesized a number of reasons for this improved (or perceived improvement) of critical thinking performance. An obvious source is the significant amount of research a student involved in debate will perform during a typical competitive season. Russell Windes, a former director of debate at Northwestern University, quoted a former debater and Northwestern political science professor while writing in *The Speech Teacher* in 1960: “Professor Robinson expressed his belief that a year’s research on a debate proposition by a good debater may equal the amount of time a graduate student invests in research on a master’s thesis” (107). Robinson and Windes’ observations from 1960 could not have foreseen the depth of research performed by 21st century debaters armed with the Internet and Lexis-Nexis, often more adept today at finding support for their next argument than the graduate students these writers then alluded to.

The competitive drive of interscholastic debate competition provides incentives for performance unimaginable in most classroom settings. Norton observed, “In debate a student has the motivation for thorough research on one subject for one academic year; usually this is not possible for an English theme or a term paper (30). Bradley further noted, “debate promotes an independent pursuit of the problem on the part of each student” and “Since the debate propositions are chosen annually in a currently controversial area in which much information is available, it is generally next to impossible to exhaust all sources” (135).

More recently Stefan Bauschard has argued that debate exhibits characteristics of cooperative learning, or various types of structured group investigation. He observed in 2001 that: “more than 575 experimental studies and 100 correlational studies have been conducted” in the area of cooperative learning. Among these, researchers have determined that “Cooperative learning is an excellent way to promote critical thinking because it is a method that involves structured discussion, emphasizes problem solving, and encourages verbal learning methods that enhance the development of metacognition” (9).

While the bulk of research on these relationships has been conducted in relation to debate activities, many of the same skills translate into speech and theatre contexts. Most individual speaking events require intensive research in preparation for performance. Specifically, events like extemporaneous speaking, student congress or Model United Nations require perpetual investigation of current events. Theatre students must work collectively to facilitate successful performances and often exhibit the same kinds of cooperative learning skills identified by Bauschard. Ideally, access to a variety of different forensics events, such as experiences in both debate and individual events, or debate and theatre, access different skills needed to make a more effective overall critical thinker.

ORAL COMPETENCY

Naturally, a logical outgrowth of all such activities is increased speech competence. As has already been observed, scholars attribute to forensic activities the capacity to enhance understanding in a variety of communication contexts – interpersonal, organizational, small group and mass.

The importance of developing these skills cannot be overstated. One need only read a copy of a newspaper's classified section to see how many potential employers demand good communication skills from their new hires. Moreover, a recent issue of the National Communication Association's *Spectra*, reported that "the largest gap [between high school preparation and college expectations] exists in oral communication skills." The study, conducted by the firm of Peter D. Hart and Associates in December, 2004, asked 900 high school graduates to compare what they learned in high school to what they were expected to have learned when they reached college or the workforce. The gaps in expectations exceeded those for science, mathematics, research abilities and writing ("Oral" 15).

Fortunately, students involved in speech, debate and theatre activities enjoy marked improvement in oral communication through active practice and refinement of their communication skills. Not only are they better performers, but they also tend to be more confident performers. Colbert and Biggers identified research by Selmak and Shields (1977) that revealed "students with debate experience were significantly better at employing the three communication skills (analysis, delivery and organization) utilized in this study than students without the experience" (Colbert and Biggers 237). Ohio University's Roger Aden, himself a former director of forensics and professor of speech, added in 1991 the conclusion of research asserting that the forensics "laboratory" improved students' analysis of argumentative communication and their capacity to communicate with other people. 1995 research in theatre by Rey E. de la Cruz extended this thinking to dramatic activities, noting that young students who participated in certain creative drama exercises "significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills" (Deasy 20). What is more impressive about the de la Cruz study was its focus on students with learning disabilities. Windes further observed that speech and debate programs "contribute heavily to the building of an extensive speech curriculum" (106).

Speech, debate and theatre teachers know from experience what their students learn "in the arena." A teacher's capacity to assist the preparation, critique and restructuring of a speech, a debate or an interpretative performance is limited by the space and time of the normal classroom day. Cocurricular forensic activities enable students to develop their work over time, under the experienced guidance of a coach. Moreover, through competition, students receive feedback from adjudicators and responses from audiences that first, teach them how to respond to criticism, and second, encourage them to reframe and

adapt their work. These experiences foster interpersonal sensitivity, improved appreciation for the needs of a group or a team, and heightened awareness of the importance of audience adaptation – so critical to an effective performance and everyday communication interactions.

READING COMPREHENSION

Reading is a natural outgrowth of research and performance. It would be natural to assert that a debater would need to read their evidence and a performer would need to read a script. Does such access to written material, however, translate into improved skills as readers? Substantial research has offered an unqualified “yes” in response to this question – particularly in the area of theatre and arts education.

James S. Catterall, Richard Chapleau and John Iwanga, in a 1999 study, reported that “sustained involvement in theatre” resulted in students performing better in standardized reading testing. In fact, “about 48 percent of drama students scored high in reading, compared to 30 percent of students not involved in drama” (Deasy 70). Catterall summarized many of the best impacts of theatre on reading when he wrote: “Research shows consistent positive associations between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension, oral story understanding, and written story understanding. . . . Studies of older children show impacts of drama on reading skills, persuasive writing ability, narrative writing skills, and children’s self-conceptions as learners and readers” (Catterall 60).

Several studies have focused specifically on reading comprehension. Researchers have noted improvements in the capacity to understand and describe stories by acting-out. A 1992 study by Peter Williamson and Steven Silvern noted both improved reading comprehension and improved meta-behaviors such as questioning and directing others among students engaged in dramatic enactment of stories (Deasy 54). Anthony Pellegrini observed in 1984:

. . . students using dramatic play to think about, review and otherwise process the story they had just heard were more likely to use explicit language when retelling their stories. . . . That is, they were better at producing a retelling that would be coherent, and make sense to a listener who did not already know the story. Pellegrini makes a critical point, that conveying meaning explicitly is an important skill and one that is traditionally valued and rewarded, both in school and in later life instances of communication. (Deasy 44)

In total, the larger body of research compiled by Deasy and colleagues in the volume *Critical Links*, describes an increased capacity of students who analyze

literature by means of acting-out to retain information, negotiate meanings with others, and in turn, be able to retell stories to others. This translates, more concretely, into improved standardized measures of reading comprehension.

One study, conducted by Michaela Parks and Dale Rose in 1997, found that students involved in dramatic reading and presentation exercises experienced an improvement in reading comprehension scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and also showed a three-fold improvement over a control group in their “nonverbal ability to express factual material” (Deasy 36). Similarly, Sherry DuPont’s 1992 study of remedial reading students engaged in drama found that “when children have been involved in the process of integrating creative drama with reading they are not only able to better comprehend what they’ve read and acted out, but they are also better able to comprehend what they have read but do not act out, such as the written scenarios they encounter on standardized tests” (DuPont quoted in Deasy 22).

While much of the research into the relationship between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension has been conducted with younger students, intuitive connections can be drawn to secondary school drama programs or interscholastic forensics competitions. Once again, the laboratory metaphor previously described becomes useful. A student reading a text in solitude potentially lacks motivation to “go deeper” in an examination of a text. Theatrical re-enactment of stories or plays, and the successful oral interpretation of literature in a competitive environment demands careful inspection of a text and understanding of the author and the characters, their motives and emotions. A similar critical capacity develops among debaters who have to frame a larger “story” to describe the advocacy in a debate. Students learn collectively, under the guidance of an effective teacher/coach, the importance of comprehending the meanings of ideas, negotiating those meanings with peers and conveying those meanings to an audience.

LISTENING

Forensic activities also serve to improve the listening skills of students. Research has demonstrated that students tested on immediate and delayed recall of information perform rather poorly due to a lack of active listening skills. The active listening process requires an active attempt to absorb facts and perceive feelings rather than passively engaging in the situation we are in (Hunsaker 27). These are skills that interscholastic speech and debate competition nurture by the activity’s very nature.

Students in debate must listen to their opponents to recognize arguments and respond to them. Moreover, students must also appreciate the verbal and non-verbal feedback they receive from adjudicators in order to continue to be

successful. Similar feedback is provided in the context of individual events competition and drama competitions involving adjudication.

TEST-TAKING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Even while we find concrete advantages in a range of academic skills, it is always nice to know that participation in an activity leads to academic success. As we have already observed, data clearly indicates involvement in cocurricular and extracurricular activities – particularly arts-based activities – correlates with higher grades. My own personal experience as a forensic educator has proven this true. While the institution I work for has a reputation for recruiting successful students, the students who choose to compete in speech and debate activities consistently have higher high school GPAs (generally between 3.5 and 3.8) and higher ACT scores (normally around 28 or higher) than their counterparts outside of the activity. They tend to receive more scholarships, take more challenging courses and are highly motivated. This is a consistent theme found among college coaches who describe their experiences receiving experienced high school competitors.

Bauschard asserted in his 2001 article that the kind of cooperative learning that takes place in the competitive environment naturally increases academic achievement (9). James Catterall reported in a 1998 study of students actively involved in arts activities, such as theatre, that: “High arts students earned better grades and performed better on standardized tests. High arts students also performed more community service, watched fewer hours of television, and reported less boredom in school” (Deasy 68). Similarly, a 1999 study by Catterall and colleagues determined that:

. . . students with high arts involvement scored higher on standardized tests scores than those with low arts involvement. More specifically, 57.4 percent of high arts-involved students scored in the top two quartiles of standardized tests, compared to only 39.3 percent of low-arts involved students; 56.5 percent of high arts students scored in the top two quartiles in reading, compared to 37.7 percent of low-arts students; and 54.6 percent of the high arts students scored in the top two quartiles of history/geography/citizenship tests, compared to 39.7 percent of low arts students. (Deasy 70)

As we have seen, involvement in speech, debate and theatre activities stimulates a variety of different skills. The fact that test scores and grades improve along side these skills should not be surprising. These programs successfully promote critical thinking, speaking, reading and listening skills. These skills are so fundamental to academic performance that the relationship with overall academic performance is intuitive.

We should not, however, allow ourselves to think exclusively about high-performing students. Our schools are filled with students with special needs who struggle to achieve, or are starved for challenges. Here, too, forensic activities make an important difference.

OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Retention of students in school is often tied to the interest they hold in education. While a variety of socio-economic, family and personal factors may come into play, a student who is engaged in meaningful experiences while in school is probably far more likely to choose to remain there. Indeed, a study appearing in the journal *Developmental Psychology* in 1997 reported that: “Students who dropped out of school had participated in significantly fewer extracurricular activities at all grades, including several years prior to dropout” (Deasy 80). More specifically, a 1990 study by the Center for Music Research at Florida State University reported survey data indicating that participation in the arts kept students in school and, more specifically, that 83 percent of those surveyed said their decision to remain in school was tied to participation in the arts (Deasy 74).

GIFTED STUDENTS

Gifted students, in particular, need careful attention. Many students involved in forensics cite their experience in the activity with giving them a sense of direction and the intellectual stimulation that they felt they lacked in their normal curriculum. As has been stated elsewhere in this essay, some scholars have argued that the work generated by a year’s involvement in debate, for example, can rival the work put into a Master’s thesis or a doctoral dissertation. Any parent who has ever watched their son or daughter spend hours after school working on a set design or practicing their lines has marveled at the capacity of that child to move mountains when their mind is set to a task. Creative thinkers are similarly challenged to stretch their imaginations as they interpret a program of poetry or assemble an extemporaneous speech arguing for the government to take a different approach to free trade.

One model for successfully addressing the needs of gifted students has been offered by Kevin Dean and David Levasseur who argued in a 1989 issue of the *National Forensic Journal* that high-achieving students can benefit from more challenging “capstone” experiences in speech. In their experiment with a collegiate basic public speaking course, these University of Maryland instructors discovered that students who attended forensics competitions, in addition to normal speech classroom activities, achieved a greater level of satisfaction from their experience (137). Even novice-level experience in a competitive environment puts the communication learning experience in context and stimulates the mind.

LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

The learning-disabled student faces an entirely different challenge. Depending on the disability, tasks like writing, retaining information for prolonged periods of time or focusing on an argument can prove difficult and frustrating. Teachers can become impatient and classmates can be cruel. Yet the sense of purpose generated by involvement in team activities, such as speech, debate and theatre, can be highly valuable. Moreover, the teaching methods employed work differently than those a student might normally encounter in the classroom.

Rey E. de la Cruz, in a 1995 doctoral dissertation, researched the impact of drama education on students with learning disabilities. The editors of *Critical Links* noted:

Existing research pointed to two developments important to the success of children with learning disabilities. One was the centrality of linguistic skills, variations in which account for most placements of children into special-needs status. The second was consensus in research that children with learning disabilities typically lack social skills necessary for effective peer-to-peer and student-teacher interactions – relations that contribute generally to success in school. (Deasy 20)

de la Cruz's research concluded that children involved in a creative drama experience benefited from improved social skills when compared with a control group. "They also significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills. . . (Deasy 20). This research suggests programs like forensics can function as a valuable supplement for learning disabled students yearning to experience success.

One of the fortunate experiences I have had as a coach has been the opportunity to work with several students with learning disabilities. While these students present unique challenges, they are far too often dismissed as "uncoachable." Far from true, these students challenge teachers in unique ways, but the rewards they receive from staying in competition expand their academic achievement. My personal experience has confirmed de la Cruz's research in a non-theatrical context. Debaters and public speakers with learning disabilities succeed because they are focused on a special goal. That focus transfers into day-to-day classroom activities as better study skills, increased confidence and, in most cases, higher grades.

AT-RISK STUDENTS

An area of notable success in the forensics community has been programming to address the needs of at-risk students – particularly those in urban communities. Debate programs such as the Soros Foundation’s Urban Debate Leagues and the Kaiser Family Foundation’s Barbara Jordan Youth Debates have demonstrated that allocation of resources to under-served communities helps keep students in school, stimulates community investment and private funding and moves gifted students toward a college education. Students who might not otherwise be exposed to the topics and competitive experiences of debate become enthralled by it, often entering collegiate debate programs upon graduation. The potential for such programs across all forensics and theatre events is vast.

In a theatre context, measurable success has already been observed. Jeanette Horn published a study in 1992 for the National Arts Education Research Center exploring how a theatrical script-writing institute experience influenced the personal successes of inner-city students. Among her findings were improved attendance, increased use of school and public libraries, more prolific writing and a growth in self-perception and behavior. “Students increasingly saw themselves as leaders” (Deasy 28).

A discussion of the growth in student leadership potential lends an appropriate transition to the question of outcomes *after* one’s time in school has ended.

OCCUPATIONAL OUTCOMES

An important goal of the educational system is preparation of students for future occupations. Students in forensics activities are well known for achieving future professional success, whether it be in politics, law, medicine, academia or the performing arts.

Colbert and Biggers reported the data of a 1984 study by Keele and Matlon that concluded:

90 percent of debaters have attained at least one graduate degree. 30 percent of their sample are university educators while another 15 percent are top ranking corporate executives. Ten percent are now working in the executive or legislative branches of government. They suggest that these ratios do not vary between those who graduated 25 years ago and those who finished within the last five years. It is doubtful that many other activities can boast of so many successful alumni. (Colbert and Biggers 239)

Similarly, a 1960 survey of 160 senators, congressmen, governors, Supreme Court justices, members of the Cabinet and other political leaders identified one hundred who felt high school or college debate experiences had helped their careers. Ninety described the experience as “greatly helpful” or “invaluable.” Twenty-six of the 60 surveyed who lacked debate experience indicated that they wished they had had it (Colbert and Biggers 239). Given that this survey was taken in 1960, one must wonder how many more leaders have followed this same path.

Still, one need not dwell on high-powered jobs to measure occupational success. If we recognize that today’s marketplace values a well-rounded education, critical thinking skills, communication skills and the ability to interact with people effectively, then few activities can prepare students for the marketplace as well as speech, debate and theatre. Students with these experiences not only have strong intellectual and workplace skills, but they have the unique advantage of knowing how to function in the context of a team, imbuing them with a sense of collegiality that will help keep their jobs.

SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Involvement in forensics also has significant social impacts. These tend to manifest themselves in better self-esteem and interpersonal skills, but they also appear in the form of better citizenship behaviors.

Windes and Bradley both argued that participation in debate promotes an attitude of tolerance on the part of students (Windes 100; Bradley 136). Bradley elaborated in his article for *The Speech Teacher*: “taking part in educational debate programs helps to create tolerance for other points of view. Not tolerance for the sake of tolerance, but tolerance for the other point of view because of respect for the logical, substantiated arguments upholding that viewpoint” (136). In essence, debate helps students to view situations from multiple vantage points and to respect the fact that one person’s sense of reality, truth or tradition may not be the same as the person next to them.

Tournament competition is a socially significant experience, affording “students the opportunity to meet some of the best thinkers and speakers from a large number of other schools throughout the country” (Windes 103). Travel, in and of itself, is a significant growth experience. Windes observed: “The enjoyment of the trips and their educational value, the social contacts with other students, and the excitement of the contest, including the trophies and recognition, all of these things are as much a part of a young citizen’s education as his academic work” (103).

A strong case can also be made for the impact these experiences have on citizenship. Windes continued:

Previously mentioned is the fact that debate is a necessary adjunct to a free society – that it illuminates positions, educates the public to the issues, and allows final decisions to be made democratically after the presentation of at least two opposing points of view. This in itself is perhaps the most forceful argument that can be made in behalf of training young people in advocacy. (107)

Bradley supported this claim when he argued that debate “prepared the student for the democratic society in which we live” (137).

Windes further elaborated on the civic function of debate when summarizing the work of James Coleman, who advanced an early argument (in 1959) for the role of debate in what we would now call “civic engagement.” He wrote:

Professor Coleman suggests that competitive debating achieves similar results in high schools, and at the same time achieves beneficial academic results for both the individual who engages and the society in which he functions. Debating has its individual rewards; at the same time it induces constraints and group-reinforced rules of conduct, a completely new experience for many of its participants. The debate team represents the school, and this is not so distant from being a civic responsibility and a civic representative. (Windes 108)

He concludes:

Competition for grades bring about a kind of group defense mechanism which ridicules the bright student. No such epithets exist for the debater, for his achievement has benefited his squad, his school, and the community. In helping to win a debate for his school, the young adult is performing a civic function, one for which he has had to deny himself pleasures and accept a social responsibility. (Windes 108)

While Windes may be overly optimistic about the praise a debater will receive for his or her competitive successes in the 21st century, these observations about civic engagement and improved social functioning are consistent with Bauschard’s research into cooperative learning and forensics. He observed that such a learning environment has been demonstrated to promote pro-social behavior, reduced absenteeism and increase work achievement (9).

EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT OUTCOMES

Kenneth Anderson, a professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, noted in a summary of developmental research in forensics: “Debate tends to attract students above average in intelligence and higher intelligence correlates somewhat with winning” (151). For many schools, attracting intelligent students to extracurricular activities is an exciting end in itself. However, making students in speech, debate and theatre happy about their experiences is an investment in the future of the school.

One of the things that most impressed me about my high school’s speech, debate and theatre programs was the consistent support those programs, and by extension, the school, received from those who had once participated, graduated and gone on to greater things. A sense of tradition permeated those programs that brought alumni back to assist in coaching, or to attend a play, or to contribute funds to support travel to an out-of-state competition. When I went on to briefly coach at another high school while working on my Master’s degree, I again experienced that same sense of loyalty. To be loyal to the program was to be loyal to the school. The parents of these students were among the first to step forward to campaign for school tax ballots and bond issues and their students often became vocal boosters of education as adults. Thus, the process of making more civically-aware, articulate critical thinkers comes full circle. Those who were taught so well by a system that valued them as diverse and valuable individuals came back to help ensure that the next generation of students would benefit from the same experiences.

HOW DOES THIS TRANSLATE INTO A PROGRAM AT MY SCHOOL?

So perhaps your school is a school that does not have an active speech, debate or theatre program, but wants one. Or maybe you have such programs but are facing questions about how to best configure them. The first, and most important, fact to know is that organizations and experienced professionals in the field are available to help you make a new program a reality or shape an existing one to be better, stronger or more cost efficient. The NFHS has plentiful resources available through its Web site <http://www.nfhs.org/>. Simply select the link for Professional Associations and find the icon for the Speech, Debate and Theatre Association. Naturally, your local state association, or affiliated association for forensics or theatre, can assist you as well. Many states have materials specifically designed for the novice coach or the new school. Local colleges and Universities are often very eager to assist programs in their area, sometimes helping teachers with volunteer assistance. Whitman University in Washington sponsors a special site designed to help high schools and their students locate collegiate programs and also offers a list of national forensics organizations on both the high school and state level. They can be found at <http://www.wcdebate.com/7others/colleges.htm>.

Whether your school begins with a local debate league and an annual play, or develops a full-service program that fields students in national competition, an investment in forensics education is a sound investment in the future of your school and community.

AFTERWARD

My hope is that you have found something useful in reading this booklet. Whether you are looking to create a new program, shape the course of an existing one, or simply want to learn more about the activity. As a student and coach I have spent every year since age fourteen involved in some form of speech, debate or theatre activity. For me these experiences truly have been profound.

The research assembled here is only a partial view of what these activities are capable of. Sadly, much of the research that has been done on the impact of these programs is old. The reader will note that many of the pioneering studies on the impact of debate and individual events competition were conducted as far back as the 1950s. Why is this? Put simply, for so long the speech education community took at face value what anyone who has worked as a speech and debate coach knows from experience: these activities work. Fortunately, as exemplified by several of the newer pieces cited here, a younger generation of coaches is now actively revisiting this research and re-confirming much of what we already know, yet re-contextualizing it in the methods and measures more commonly employed today. In theatre, the reader will note that much of the pioneering work-particularly in the area of reading comprehension – has been done with children before the secondary school level. This is fitting, as those years are formative in a child's acquisition of the desire to read. Yet, much of what these studies tell us is equally applicable to secondary and collegiate contexts.

As we are committed to the value of forensics, so too must we be committed to innovation in that very field. As our students learn by doing, so too do we, as educators, continue to learn by refining and investigating our techniques. This volume is merely a part of that process, one which I hope will be a continued one. In the meantime, it is my sincere hope that schools around America (and indeed, as is increasingly the case, around the world) will continue in the great tradition of our earliest schools, emphasizing training in rhetoric and performance for the sake of intellectual growth and improved citizenship.

Kevin M. Minch, Ph.D.
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