

Diverse Approaches to Forensics: Curricular vs. Extra-Curricular

by Adam Jacobi

*This column is a must-read for both new coaches
and coaches who mentor them!*

While it may be easy to agree that forensics is an interscholastic sport, the educational path young people take toward growth in the activity often follows different forms. At some schools, forensic classes (inclusive of speech and/or debate) are offered as part of curriculum, with benchmark assessments that may or may not be tied to interscholastic participation. Some state education agencies have codified standards. At other schools, forensics is strictly co-curricular or extracurricular as an after school activity. Some schools even have a hybrid model, where participation in forensics can count as an independent study credit.

Whatever the educational form it follows, it is important to embrace the notion that all forensic learning should include a scope of knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of students, as well as a sequence of teaching and learning.

Toward an Educational Coaching Philosophy

Friend and mentor Dr. Kay Neal, Communication Department chair at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, once called forensics “the purest form of teaching,” because a coach has the ability to work with a student over several years, witnessing his/her growth. Like a gardener who cultivates and nurtures a plant over several seasons, a coach becomes vested in the student’s maturity and drive toward success.

This should not be confused with living vicariously through students, a pitfall of which coaches who are former competitors are sometimes guilty. Athletic coaches call

all the shots, giving their team members play-by-play instructions on what to do and when to do it. In debate, this takes the form of coach-generated research and even coach-written cases. In speech, this takes the form of coach-written manuscripts, and in interpretive events, it takes the form of coach-cut pieces and moment-by-moment blocking. This begets students who do not think for themselves or even understand the content of what they’re presenting. They become marionette puppets whose coach manages all the strings. Sure, it’s

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easier to model a performance technique for students, but their acting becomes more meaningful when it comes from within them through their emotive understanding of the characterization and circumstances.

I detest the notion of teaching to trophies as much as I detest teaching to tests. Both test scores and trophies can be a great motivator, but they are not ends unto themselves. Some of my most successful students did not win tournaments, but they grew immensely in the quest. They were self-sufficient at the end of that journey, and all the better for it. When I left Rufus King High School, one of the most meaningful gifts my students gave me was a business card holder inscribed with “Imagine the possibilities...” When they presented it, I learned that unbeknownst to me, all

of my little paperweights and posters with inspirational quotations had an impact on my students. The most meaningful of all: “The journey is the reward.”

The old adage, “we teach for when we’re not there” is an important maxim for coaches to live by, because it reminds us that young people should take what they’ve learned in forensics into their future lives. The most rewarding students to work with are the ones who surpass the ability of their coaches to teach them further. That can be a tough lesson for a coach’s ego, but an important one, nonetheless. After all, I really do cherish all I have learned from students over the years.



Coach Background

I have realized over the years just how diverse the backgrounds of forensic coaches are. They hail from science, foreign language, mathematics, special education, elementary education, and non-teaching careers, just to name a few. Oh yes, and there are some licensed teachers of communication within the ranks... but I would wager not even a majority of coaches. Despite their

varied disciplines, coaches almost universally bring a zealous passion to making forensics accessible to as many young people as possible, with an earnest desire to see those kids succeed.

Teachers with training in the communication discipline can create curriculum for any speech course. So, how do coaches without training in communication studies proceed? Well, if they were fortunate

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enough to have competed themselves, they have that on which to fall back. However, they will not have as firm a foundation for pedagogy as someone who has studied the discipline. Those without any background often find a mentor, and they take advantage of myriad coach resources and professional development opportunities the NFL has available. What both former competitors and novice coaches have in common is much of what they do is instinctive and done on an *ad hoc*, or as needed basis, especially early in coaching tenures.

Constantly reacting to needs can be an exhausting proposition, though, especially for a coach who inherits a large, active program of zealously motivated students with type-A personalities! At least a new coach who is building a program from scratch can start small. Like in teaching any subject, proactive planning of what to cover and when really is worth its investment in time and energy. For a coach who has no frame of reference by which to plan, it is helpful to find a mentor and be persistent (but polite) in finding necessary answers. Many veteran coaches are willing to offer assistance, but they are

often up to their ears in responsibilities and commitments. So, if they do not answer in a reasonable time frame, seek out a different mentor or leader.

When I reflect on programs I’ve seen wither away, it’s most often because a new coach could not be found. We need to do a better job of educating our colleagues on how rewarding the activity is, and offer our support when needed to ensure coach retention. If a coach cannot dedicate all his/her time to coaching and traveling, then a partner associate with whom to split duties helps.

When all else fails, follow the advice I once heard in a professional development workshop: “fake it until you make it.” In fact, one of the best anecdotes I have ever heard about learning the activity comes from NFL Hall of Fame coach, author, and speaker, Randy McCutcheon. McCutcheon recounts learning how to debate in high school by going to a tournament, losing the first debate, yet noting all the arguments used, and then using those arguments to win against the opposing team the following round. Of course, he later talked to other teams and learned techniques that made them successful. The point of his story (which is much more engaging to listen to in person) is that persistence pays off.

Approaching Curriculum

While it may be a simple concept, it really does help to take one step at a time. Whether drawing on the sage advice of a mentor, or combing through instructional guides, a coach should focus his/her efforts on a specific forensic category/event. It does help

Visit our coach resource portal at www.nflonline.org/Coaching

to look at model presentations and get a sense of how an event feels, so NFL final round videos are a great place to start. Current and past years of speech and debate events are available for purchase; interpretive events are available free with a licensing agreement (past years do require a handling fee). The new Web site, *NFLtv.org*, also has myriad archived (though older) videos, and new instructional videos.

Using the concept of backward design, investigate the theories, principles, and techniques necessary to effectively guide students in learning forensics. There are various instructional materials available; visit www.nflonline.org/Coaching. Don’t attempt everything immediately. First, focus on concrete concepts before moving to more abstract ideas.

Volunteer to help at tournaments you attend. When I host tournaments, I always invite new coaches to help tabulate, because they are able to pick the brains of veteran coaches in a captive environment, and it also engenders a sense of belonging in the community. That’s how I learned a great amount.

Advancing to the Next Level

Professional development really can be enriching. I attended a coaching institute one summer, with the assistance of some extra funds that my principal needed to spend or lose by the end of the school year, along with permission I was given to use funds raised by parent boosters. It was well worth the time and expense in what I learned, the materials I gained, and the network of coaches I met. Now, the NFL has partnered with several institutes to waive coach tuition expenses, so the participating coach need only pay transportation, room and board (and some institutes may even have financial assistance for room and board available).

The NFL also offers online professional development in concert with Minnesota State University, Mankato. Additionally, whether or not a coach qualifies students to the national tournament, s/he can enroll in coach clinics held in conjunction with the tournament, earning practicum hours for judging and observing rounds (an additional night’s stay may be required). ■

About the Author

Adam Jacobi is the NFL’s Coordinator of Programs and Coach Education. A former two-diamond coach of three NFL champions and an NCFL champion, he has taught courses in speech communication and International Baccalaureate theatre.