

Your School Doesn't Have to Win Nationals: Pedagogical and Practical Benefits of Forensics to Educators and Administrators



As anyone who participates in forensics understands, our activity generates myriad positive effects for all who participate. In fact, the so abundant are the benefits of forensics that one article could not contain them all. This article is the first installment of a 3-part series which explains the benefits of forensics to students, educators/administrators, and communities.

By Jennifer Billman

If only students benefited from competitive forensics, the activity would still be worth our effort and support; however, educators and school systems gain benefits tantamount to those of students. Forensics improves GPAs, standardized test scores, and student retention, frequent litmus tests of school efficacy. It also encourages sound pedagogical aims and rewards different ways of knowing, two keys to effective instruction. Forensics uniquely benefits both gifted and at-risk populations, providing a rigorous and relevant education to everyone involved. Finally, it serves very pragmatic aims of reducing disciplinary problems and increasing community support from school stakeholders.

While institutionalized speech and debate classrooms are critically important to students (see Tucker and Phipps, 2002), the benefits outlined below are most evident when classroom instruction accompanies competitive forensic opportunities. As Minch explains, "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, co-curricular program in speech, debate or theater can" (2006, p. 10). Because research overwhelmingly indicates that competitive forensics advances education to

a degree that no other activity can replicate, this essay seeks to justify a co-curricular competitive forensics program in addition to speech and debate classes as part of each high school's standard curriculum.

Forensics improves standardized test scores, graduation rates, and proportion of college-bound students.

Initially, the academic benefits from a forensic team improve a school's performance at large. Owing in no small part to well-documented gains in critical thinking skills, (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt & Louden, 1999; Bellon, 2000; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Luong, 2000; Minch, 2006), forensics promotes proficient work that reflects high-level understanding of standards of content and performance. Forensics provides a tool for learning, a way for practitioners to synthesize a wide body of information (Bellon, 2000); because of this, myriad concepts, including core concepts assessed at state and local levels, become more relevant and accessible to students. Not surprisingly, members of forensic teams tend to excel in the classroom. Minch (2006) wrote that his team members typically had high school GPAs between 3.5 and 3.8. NFL's own alumni survey (Billman & Christensen, 2008) indicated that alumni respondents had a median GPA of 3.75 on a 4.0 scale (n=126, M=3.6). While forensics tends to

attract top students, research indicates that speech and debate education translates into higher academic achievement for nearly every student who participates, regardless of skill level. Collier's year-long study in urban public schools indicated that students who debated improved their reading scores 25 percent more than their counterparts (Open Society Institute, 2004). Anecdotal examples also affirm academic growth as a direct result of forensic involvement (Billman & Christensen, 2008; Carr, 2002).

Not only do forensic students excel in the classroom, placing on average in the top ten percent of their high school class, they tend to outscore their counterparts on national testing measures such as the ACT and SAT (Fine, 2001). Such predictable increases in standardized test scores stem from gains in literacy, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills (McCrary, 41). Higher test scores are critically important to educators because their institutions are frequently judged by the test scores they produce. As McCrary explains, "Not only do forensics and debate foster creative and intelligent citizens for the 21st century, they may even help your local school system win the numbers game" (2004, p. 44).

Forensics also increases student retention among participants. As Hinck explains, "Forensics activities can provide an interesting enough challenge to keep

students in school, keep them on track to graduate, or contribute to personal development” (2003, p. 65). Minch (2006) reported on a Kansas study which determined that 94 percent of high school dropouts were not involved in fine arts activities, including forensics. A number of former competitors have reported that forensics kept them in school when they otherwise would have dropped out (Billman & Christensen, 2008). Forensic students also tend pursue college at an exponentially higher rate than their peers: Fine’s survey of high school debaters indicated that 99 percent of them planned to go on to college after high school (2001). Data from the NFL survey indicates that 98.58 percent of respondents attended college after their high school graduation (n=141). One alumnus reported, “I whole-heartedly believe that I would not have attended a four year university if it were not for forensics. My family did not have a history of attending college and while encouraging of me did not have the resources to enable me to attend...Forensics opened up my eyes to colleges and universities, and without it, I do not know where I would be” (Billman & Christensen, 2008).

Forensics serves sound pedagogical aims.

The report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce points out that American students are in a unique situation, faced with competition from high-skilled workers from other countries who are willing to perform skilled labor at a fraction of American salaries. The commission postulates that students will need to master innovative thinking and problem-solving skills to maintain a marketable position in the workforce and their present standard of living. Unfortunately, current systems of education are insufficient to accomplish this. Students have been groomed to achieve low baselines of competence, conditioned to memorize information ad nauseum and passively receive education. This system, the commission argues, will never generate the type of graduates that can survive at present income levels in the developing world economy (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

While the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex and challenging, forensics helps provides the functional, thorough education that educators currently seek. Sellnow explains that “forensics is an activity which promotes experiential

learning and has been doing so long before experiential education became an educational buzzword” (1994, p. 11-12). Competitive speech and debate students learn to examine the relationships between subject areas, as Bellon explains: “Constructivist research shows how students arrive at new understandings and new meaning only once the opportunity to use new words and concepts in a realistic context exists. Incorporating oral language skills into instruction offers students this opportunity, allowing them to build links between words and ideas that would otherwise be perceived as separate and as having less meaning” (2000, p. 163). By promoting learning that integrates theoretical instruction with structured training, forensics enables students to achieve a richer understanding of content instruction.

Forensics also delivers education superior to that legislated by various state and federal actors by encouraging students to take an active role in the process. Bellon explains that “students, not teachers or texts, are necessarily at the center of the learning process. Because knowledge is constructed by students, schools cannot legislate the achievement of meaningful goals by altering the content teachers deliver” (2000, p. 162). For this reason, forensics is especially meaningful in that it motivates students to direct their own learning experiences (Carroll, 2007). Sellnow (1994) advances this idea, arguing forensics requires students to develop cases, speeches, or selections that they consider to be personally relevant, teaching them to pursue areas of interest for their own edification. This situation is compounded by the fact that students gain access to vast new bodies of information, such as college-level philosophy and a litany of historic events (Carr, 2002). Students learn to comfortably negotiate this new, often highly technical information through countless instances of use in competitive rounds, which enables them to take an active role in decision-making in society at-large (Tucker & Phipps 2002). As one NFL alumnus reported, “I can talk with doctors, lawyers, scientists, and journalists (far better than myself!) and make logical, reasoned statements that lead me to greater understanding” (Billman and Christensen, 2008).

Forensics may also help resolve some of the complaints surrounding the mechanization of American education. As the New Commission explains, “too

often, our testing system rewards students who will be good at routine work, while not providing opportunities for students to display creative and innovative thinking and analysis” (2007, p. XX). In stark contrast, forensics teaches students to exercise creativity and implement different ways of knowing (Sellnow, 1994). In this vein, forensics may be an especially helpful outlet to self-expressive learners, highly creative and motivated students who are underserved by current assessments. In fact, forensics may provide gifted students who have not tested to their potential with a vehicle to demonstrate, even quantify their talents, equalizing the playing field when they go to apply for college (Carroll, 2007).

Forensics provides unique benefits for gifted and at-risk populations.

While the benefits of forensics are available to every student who participates, forensics provides unique benefits for gifted and talented students. Minch explains that “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” (2006, p. 18). Carroll (2007) expands this notion, arguing that forensics enables the core tenets of gifted education, acceleration and enrichment. By allowing gifted students to learn at their own pace, as well as moving beyond the traditional curriculum to allow students to choose their course of study, forensics provides educational opportunities to gifted students that far exceed regular classroom experiences. Without proper outlets, gifted students may be disruptive to their peers; engagement in forensics provides students with a vehicle to channel their energy, reducing their need to act out. Carroll also explains that mentorship might be the most significant aspect of gifted and talented education. Forensic coaches are ideal to serve as mentors, given that they spend time with the students, share interests, and harbor mutual respect. By mentoring gifted and talented students, forensic coaches can teach them to actualize their own potential, as well as valuable lessons about relating to peers and collaborating with others.

At risk students have also found new possibilities in forensics. Minch (2006) reported studies which indicated growth in leadership ability, increases in school attendance, and improvement in behavior among at-risk populations. Another study found that debate education decreased

disciplinary problems among participants by 50 percent (Glanton, 2005). Educators involved with forensics indicate that the activity can “steer high-risk students away from the temptations of drugs and gangs” (Hoover, 2003, p. A29). Forensics may also help at-risk students deal with new factions of society; as one NFL alumnus explained, “Coming from a primarily minority school and from a lower income neighborhood, forensics taught me how to adapt and also how to deal with “white America” (Billman & Christensen, 2008).

Some of the most consequential gains for at-risk populations come in the form of reductions in violence. Infante and Wigley (1986) proposed the idea that verbal precociousness could mitigate violent tendencies by affording the aggressor a means of release. Forensics puts this concept into practice, offering an outlet to students who, prior to their involvement,

would have no recourse to conflict outside of physical confrontation. As one debate instructor explained, “I was angry at the world, and nobody would listen – debate was the first place where I could yell and scream and people would listen” (Hoover, 2003, p. A29). In fact, research so strongly supports the idea that forensics can offer at-risk students an alternative to violence that some institutions are adopting forensics as a tool for intervention (Glanton, 2005).

Final Focus

Regardless of the competition side of forensics, every school benefits from housing its own speech and debate team. The sheer impact of forensics on students justifies its continued support from the administrative level, but forensics also poses unique benefits to teachers and administrators which additionally warrant its sustenance. Because students

receive a more comprehensive education, teachers gain a more orderly and engaging classroom, and administrators are rewarded with higher test scores and graduation rates, every high school that maintains a competitive speech and debate program, wins.

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