

The Eight Myths of Coaching (and Teaching)

by William H. Bennett

There are urban myths, Greek myths, creation myths, and teaching myths. Most teaching myths are self-perpetuating. As you work to become a better coach, it is smart if you challenge some of the common speech and debate myths of our time. To do so will improve your skills and effectiveness.

Myth #1: A good coach will offer all the major events. If you want to win sweepstakes and offer your students every opportunity, the reasoning goes, you should offer them the chance to succeed in any and every common tournament event. Not so.

First of all, there are at least 10 major tournament events in most areas of the country, and up to 18 in a few areas. Dividing your coaching time into so many arenas guarantees that that your students will rarely excel at anything.

You can, of course, coach only a small number of events but let your students enter anything they want. That dilutes the focus they put on their major event and or the events you want to focus on. It dilutes the amount of learning that occurs in each event. But some successful sweepstakes coaches do use this approach.

You should, instead, do what you do best. Malcolm Gladwell makes the point well in his insightful and delightful best seller *Outliers: The Story of Success*¹—successful people focus on very few things, and those are the things that they know best. Educational research by Prof. Karen Rogers argues the same point;² the most effective teachers of gifted students are those who develop expertise in a specific talent area. I would argue that the best coaches know what they are strongest at and focus their teaching and coaching in that (or those) arenas.

Myth #2: A good coach is a generous or easy grader. Research says exactly the opposite. Teachers who scored highest in student respect and polls of “my best teacher” did NOT give grades when they were not

deserved. Several studies show that some of the hardest grading teachers scored at the top of student polls. The crucial elements students report are clarity of expectations, immediacy of feedback, and transparent understood grading requirements—not the ease of obtaining an “A.”

Myth #3: We should let our experienced students set their own pace. But experience is not a substitute for depth of knowledge.

It is easy to think that a student who has two or three years of solid competition behind her is ready to make her own decisions, or even assist by coaching novices without your assistance and supervision. Yet time spent coaching others is time away from developing his or her craft. And experience is not a creator of good or automatic work ethic. Even the most experienced of students still needs a coach who sets goals, parameters, objectives, time lines, and provides detailed methods to achieve them. Truly admirable research³ argues that 10,000 hours of practice is necessary to truly master a skill. “Experienced” speech and debate students need more practice and coaching, not the freedom of a reduced or relaxed work schedule.

Myth #4: Most of my speech or debate time is spent coaching. Very probably this is not the case. In fact, many coaches spend most of their time doing other things.

What do coaches do? They fill out forms, make travel plans, work in the tab room, judge tournament rounds, catch a snack or socialize in the coaches’ lounge, play chaperone on the bus and at the motel. But all of those activities are times that could have been spent listening to or working with students.

Bus trips are a great time to hear speeches. Tournaments are the best time to sit in and see what students do in competition (practice is one thing,; a young person’s reaction to tournament stress is another). When you can buy out of judging or use a parent to replace you, that can be great coaching

time. Tab room work teaches your students nothing; this writer’s advice is do it only when there are absolutely no other reasonable alternatives. And do your entry forms and essential minutia only when students are not available to be coached.

Myth #5: My continuing college work should be in education. School systems increase your pay as you move towards a Master’s Degree or a PhD. But your students will do best if you earn that degree in a subject more likely to deepen your subject knowledge, not the shallow world of education courses⁴.

The coach’s knowledge needs to stay ahead of the students’ knowledge. On each debate topic, Extemp topic, or oration, the teacher needs the knowledge or knowledge acquisition skills to best help his or her students. That knowledge is much more likely to come from history or government or political science or economics courses than it is from education classes. For interpretation, certainly a knowledge of literature, drama, acting, and the contemporary stage would be of the utmost importance.

Very often I see coaches receive their LD, Public Forum, or Policy case sets and just hand them to their students without reading the material themselves. And coaches who admirably try to research with the students often lack the research skills and/or content knowledge to make those efforts sufficiently beneficial. Content classes rather than educational method courses are the best solution for these ills. The best teachers are especially strong in the content areas.⁵ As Alexander Pope advised us, “Let such teach others who themselves excel.”⁶

Myth #6: The best coaches are friends to their students, and often treat them as equals. Not true. The best coaches walk the fine and important line between support and friendship. A coach’s job is not to be their “pal” but rather to be enthusiastic and warm. Wells, *et al* write that immediacy (which they define as closeness, warmth, and

enthusiasm) is closely related to perceptions of teaching effectiveness. But don't confuse closeness with equality or a reason to act in a less-than-professional manner.

High school life is drama. Do not get caught up in it. Personal trauma, emotional involvement, and/or the natural emotional evolution of young students is normal and must be accounted for, but should not become the primary focus of the student-teacher relationship. To nurture the mind and skills is the role of the best coach, but not to think or act in terms of equality and friendship. Thomas Wolfe⁸ came close to describing the best relationship: "I put the relationship of a fine teacher to a student just below the relation of a mother to a son..." A great teacher cares, but is not a friend.

Myth #7: Its important to be flexible, to adjust most classes or practices to what your students say they need. But flexibility too often sacrifices important learning. Instead the greatest coaches will usually be flexible only *within* both the immediate and long-term lesson plan.

The best teachers have an organized and often disciplined approach to build knowledge and skills. Tossing that aside in the name of flexibility is rarely the right move. A good coach learns to counsel and

advise but as part of or in addition to the teaching plan, not at the expense of the plan. A good teacher is organized, prepared and clear—factors that are all but impossible in impromptu lessons derived spontaneously from what students say they need in that hour or practice session.

Expert teachers have very well-developed schemata and know how to tie subject matter to a creative diversity of teaching methods. They are very effective lesson planners but are reflective enough to carefully integrate student needs into creating intellectual and skill growth.⁹ Students needs are the fresh fodder and practicum for future days and plans, not the reason to jettison or down-scale the current lesson plan.

Myth #8: A good coach will often let students work on their own. The logic of this myth is an oxymoron. By definition students are there to learn and are rarely successful at learning or improving their skills "on their own." Research on the characteristics of effective teachers¹⁰ reports, "Their worst teachers were characterized as requiring isolate behavior with little interaction, activity, or discussion."

If skill development in different events requires dividing into practice subgroups, for example, the best teachers will give each

group a very clear purpose, critique and feedback forms, and immediately follow-up the practice with teacher-involved discussion. The casual speech class with a teacher who divides into groups by event and then advises "practice" or "work on the problems from the last tournament" is a far cry from the coach with a solid, immediate lesson intent drawn from a longer term, detailed learning plan.

There are Roman myths, legend, folktales, and fables. And there are myths about the best coaching and teaching. If you are a coach or speech teacher, challenging and reviewing education myths can stimulate you to find better alternatives to mentor your students. ■

About the Author

William H. Bennett is Chair of CDE. His students have won 12 NFL national championships, five collegiate national championships, and four international championships.

References

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- ² Prof. Karen B. Rogers. *Teachers Who Make a Difference in Gifted Children's Lives*. College of Applied Professional Studies, Univ. of St. Thomas, <http://www.scgifted.org>.
- ³ See, for example, K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer. "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychology Review* 100, #3 (1993), pp. 363-406. See also Daniel J. Levitan, *This is Your Brain on Music*. (New York: Dutton, 2006), p. 197.
- ⁴ For those offended or dubious about my indictment of education classes, I refer you to:
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- ⁵ Stephen Crabbe, *Quality Teaching for Australia*. Copyrighted April 13, 2007. Accessed Nov. 23, 2009 at <http://educationalissues.suite101.com/>. See also Footnote 2, p. 4.
- ⁶ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*. 1711, publisher unknown, sec. 1, p. 15.
- ⁷ Richard T. Walls, Anne H. Nardi, Avril M. von Minden, and Nancy Hoffman, *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Winter 2002. "The Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Teachers," pp. 39-48.
- ⁸ Thomas Wolfe in a contribution to Claude and Emory S. Basford Fuess' *Unseen Harvests—A Treasury of Teaching*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1947).
- ⁹ J.J. Gallagher. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 1994. "Teaching and Learning," pp. 171-195. See also G. Leinhardt and J.G. Greeno, *The Cognitive Skill of Teaching*. (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1991).
- ¹⁰ See Footnote 7, p. 46.