The Tournament as Laboratory: Implications for Forensic Research

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The intercollegiate forensic community, particularly those involved in the coaching of individual events, traditionally has emphasized the pedagogical nature of the activity while often neglecting the research opportunities inherent in forensic education. Our colleagues in debate have long claimed the field of argumentation theory as a link for many of their research efforts. Individual events, however, despite its obvious roots in argumentation, persuasion, and rhetorical criticism, has only begun to lay claim to its theoretical foundation and offer insights and refinements of theoretical precepts through well developed research.

Forensics is now viewed by many within the field as an activity which unites both pedagogy and scholarship. However, the national organizations which oversee and govern modern intercollegiate forensics have for too long ignored the research aspects of our activity. Individual events has long needed a research policy which, on one hand, fosters research opportunities while, on the other hand, safeguards forensic participants and the educational and competitive aspects of the profession. Absent such a policy, individual events research will flounder without direction and be subject to arbitrary limitations based on fears for the integrity of our competitive efforts.

The relationship between teaching and research in forensics was clearly articulated in the definition of the activity adopted by the second National Developmental Conference on Forensics in September 1984:

The National Developmental Conference on Forensics, held in 1974, defined forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." Such a definition, here reaffirmed, views forensics as a form of

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rhetorical scholarship which takes various forms, including debate, public address, and the interpretation of literature. Forensics serves as a curricular and co-curricular laboratory for improving students’ abilities in research, analysis, and oral communication. Typically, forensics activities are conducted in a competitive environment so as to motivate students and accelerate the learning process. Now, in 1984, forensics remains an ongoing, scholarly experience, uniting students and teachers, in its basic educational purpose.¹

In order to underscore the importance of this balance, this essay is divided into two parts. The first section presents a rationale for forensic scholarship and suggests several areas where research seems most appropriate. The second section reinforces the pedagogical terms of the equation by presenting a number of guidelines to be implemented in the conduct of research.

The arguments favoring increased research in forensics are virtually the same as the rationale for scholarship in any academic field. Research, in broad terms, is the foundation of any discipline. The pedagogical function is the dissemination of what we have learned through scholarly inquiry. Organizational techniques, the formation of arguments, the development of ethos, and other individualized compartments of learning are united in cohesive theories of rhetoric. As the members of the Sedalia conference concluded: "Because research and scholarship are the foundation from which all specific areas within a field evolve, and because they establish the basis for interrelationships among the areas, a field of study is both as strong and weak as its research and scholarship."²

Yet there is another, more pragmatic argument to be made for increased forensic research. Scholarship enhances the image of forensics both within the field of speech communication and in the larger academic context. Many colleagues feel that we are merely, in the words of Plato, teaching a "knack" which is not worthy of academic treatment. This negative image may be changed if the forensic tournament is viewed as a place to study the relationship between communication/rhetorical theory and practice. The link between these two academic entities is obvious, since they "are best served when progress in one informs the development of the


The forensic tournament is the perfect opportunity to conduct such research — a potential laboratory for inquiry which could add much to the field of speech communication.

The key concern is to develop scholarship which is appropriate for the field of forensics. As Polk and Parson argued in the Sedalia report: "Certainly, the role of research in forensics should be modified and improved, but the kind of research must be consistent with the interests and abilities of the educators in forensics." Understanding this rather emphatic admonition, we should ask what areas of inquiry seem to be most appropriate from the perspective of individual events?

There are at least six potential individual event areas in which scholars may contribute to the greater field of speech communication. The first of these has been suggested above: using the forensic tournament as a laboratory to study the relationship between theory and practice. Tournaments provide an outstanding opportunity to examine the principles of persuasion, competition, argumentation, ethos, and a host of other theoretical perspectives. Given proper safeguards, this can be accomplished without significantly altering the educational experience of the tournament participants.

A second major focus for research would be to study the relationship between what we teach in forensics and the knowledge we need to succeed in the "outside world." For years, forensics has been justified as an activity which teaches necessary "life-skills." Yet the 1974 Project Delphi inquiry noted a deficiency of research in this area which, sadly, is still the case some eight years later. In Project Delphi's view, "Forensics needs hard evidence regarding the transfer value of forensics participation" to the world beyond academia. With the current pragmatic emphasis upon measurable competency development in higher education, this appears to be a particularly important area of inquiry.

A third area for research would be concerned with how human beings process information. Unfortunately, "information processing" has been used in the pejorative sense to describe certain delivery practices in debate. The concept we suggest for research in "information processing" is best explained by Samuel Becker as "the way in which individuals integrate increments of information to which they are exposed; integrate them with each other and with other stimuli they have stored previously; the way in which they

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4Lee Polk and Donn Parson, "Responses to Research and Scholarship in Forensics," Forensics as Communication, p. 137.

5"Project Delphi Statements," Forensics as Communication, p. 75.
create meaning from these stimuli; and the ways in which these meanings are stored and retrieved.\textsuperscript{6} The events of Extemporaneous and Impromptu Speaking seem to be especially appropriate categories for such research.

A fourth potential area for scholarship would be pedagogy. The tournament provides a laboratory for testing the effectiveness of teaching techniques. In essence, forensic educators do this at an individual level when formulating coaching strategies for team members. An expansion of this individualistic effort could include, for example, a discussion of alternative competitive formats or the comparison of a variety of pedagogical techniques.

A fifth area for study would be that of decision-making. Information might be obtained regarding the role of values in this process by studying judging criteria in various events. How does subject expertise affect the evaluation made by a judge? What makes students establish preferences for a certain event category? The relationship between style and substance and ballot decisions appears to be particularly fertile ground for research.

Finally, there is a need to develop a theory of forensics. Is it applicable to the "real world"? Is it merely an intellectual "sport"? Are there certain communication principles peculiar to the activity? What are the assumptions of forensics regarding human behavior? There is a need for a definition of forensics beyond the realm of lexicography. To be viewed as academically legitimate, forensics should claim theoretical grounding. Ultimately, the activity is judged by scholars, and the only way to shed its sophistic image is through the establishment of theoretical underpinnings.

Although the thrust of this essay is in the direction of empirical research, scholars in forensics should also utilize more traditional rhetorical or historical methodologies in the conduct of their inquiries. The kinds of questions asked will inevitably determine the methodological approaches used in research. While traditional, rhetorical research and empirical inquiry may both be equally enlightening, the notion of viewing the forensic tournament as a laboratory poses peculiar problems for the empiricist.

In individual events, it may well be that the national forensic organizations (the National Forensic Association, the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament) must come to grips with the difficult questions of how to foster empirical research and cope with the attendant problems of its implementations without jeopardizing the rights of student competitors, judge-critics, or tournament managers. While research

\textsuperscript{6}Samuel L. Becker, "Research Needs in Forensic Communication," \textit{Forensics as Communication}, p. 60.
design is and always will be the primary concern of the researcher, the national forensic organizations must bear some responsibility for formulating guidelines which protect the competitive nature of the national competitions while providing a framework in which serious forensic scholarship can flourish.

Many scholars see the N.F.A. National Championship Tournament as an ideal opportunity for research projects. In the last five years, the N.F.A. has received an average of six research requests per year. Typical petitions for research projects involve the taping of elimination rounds, distribution of various questionnaires, contacting individual students for manuscripts, and reproduction of ballots and comment sheets. Unfortunately, the N.F.A. lacks a coherent policy for dealing with these research requests. Although some proposals have been made in advance, the majority have occurred immediately prior to the start of competition, or even after the tournament had commenced. As a result, these requests received little scrutiny, and there was little time to suggest revisions in the research proposal. The net effect of late submission and lack of review standards has been to discourage research at the national tournament. Each of the four research requests submitted in 1984 was either withdrawn, altered in scope, or significantly restructured after last-minute N.F.A. Executive Council objections. This is not to say that the N.F.A. is anti-research; rather, it is indicative of the problems associated with the lack of policy to guide researchers as they conceive, organize, and implement research proposals. In each of the above instances, the N.F.A. had sound, logical reasons for objecting to the research request. Many of these objections involved issues of informed consent, sound tournament management, and confidentiality of tournament data. But the impact of the non-policy on research is that virtually no research was conducted at the 1984 tournament and valuable opportunities for inquiry were lost.

Clearly we cannot permit research at nationals to supplant the principal goals of the tournament: education and competition. Nor can we permit ill-conceived or misguided research to detract from positive student and judge-critic experiences. Fortunately, we do not need to ban research to safeguard the experience of the students, coaches, or judges either in terms of education or competition. With an established, well-defined research policy, we can protect tournament participants and still foster worthwhile productive forensic research.

If we think about the role of the student, the researcher and the activity, we must conclude that what we find is a classic opportunity, a situation that any scholar would agree is or could become
a living laboratory for the advancement of the field, growth of knowledge, and for the testing of hypotheses. With this opportunity, however, comes a responsibility — a responsibility to protect the integrity of the activity and the rights of the student subject.

Over the many years that scholars have been conducting research, the issue of ethical standards has been a source of concern. Various professions have sought to impose restrictions and guidelines on the research practices of its members. These guidelines are designed not only to protect research subjects from well-intentioned projects whose long range side effects could not be fully understood but also to insure that perspective researchers provide important information to subjects. For example, in 1973 the American Psychological Association, in an effort to respond to these issues, published guidelines for the use of human subjects in the conduct of research by its members. Those responsible for these rules found compelling reasons to protect the subjects involved in research. In summary, the guidelines suggested that strict adherence to ethical standards in planning and conducting research was critical and that researchers had obligations to their subjects as well as to their profession.

Claire Selltiz describes ten questionable practices involving human subjects that should be considered before any organization formulates a research policy:

1. That researchers might involve subjects without their knowledge;
2. That researchers might withhold important information about the nature of the research from the subject;
3. That researchers might give misleading information to the subjects regarding the nature of the research;
4. That researchers might deceive the participant;
5. That the researcher might construct a project that would lead to a diminishment of the subject's self respect;
6. That the researcher might violate the subject's right to self determination;
7. That the researcher might create a situation that leads to either or both excessive physical or mental stress;

8. That the researcher might invade the privacy of the subject;

9. That the researcher might withhold some benefit from the control group; and;

10. That the researcher might not treat the subjects fairly or show them consideration and respect.\(^8\)

Some might think that questionable research practices are confined to experiments in psychology, but concern for protection of human subjects must be paramount in any research environment. In forensics, researchers could seriously diminish the educational experience of students by involving them in demeaning or embarrassing research situations. Misintended research might easily force judges into questionable educational practices or sway them in their competitive deliberation. Unrestricted research could easily undermine competitive outcomes of a tournament and thus destroy the laboratory which makes forensic research possible and desirable.

Even if we assume that most investigations will fall within the realm of acceptable research behavior, we should nevertheless develop safeguards to prevent misguided, misintended or otherwise questionable research practices. Consider the following scenarios:

A researcher hypothesizes that the probability of success in After Dinner Speaking is increased by positive audience response. To test the hypothesis, the researcher proposes to have a number of non-participants observe various After Dinner Speaking rounds and positively respond to selected student presentations. The observers would not respond to the remainder of the presentations. The researcher will verify this hypothesis by the ranking of the positively responded-to presentations versus non-responded-to presentations. Although this might seem to be a relevant topic of inquiry, the research design risks competitive distortions of the tournament and fails to provide information to participants. If judges are informed prior to the experiment that selected presentations will receive special audience response, then the validity of their reactions to the presentations are altered. If no prior warning is given and the hypothesis is correct, then some students have obtained a competitive advantage over others because of the research project.

An investigation is conducted to determine if academic rank is a significant indicator of the criteria employed to judge various events. Further, the researcher requests that nationals judge assignments be made so that judges with earned doctorates be assigned to judge with graduate students. The researcher then proposes to examine student comment sheets during the tournament to determine if different evaluative criteria were employed by the two groups of judges. The design of this research asks tournament officials to violate their

policy of random assignment of judges and compromise sensitive competitive data.

A researcher hypothesizes that Round 4 extemp topics are a significant factor in poor student performance in that event. To test the hypothesis, he requests competitive data on contestants after the first three rounds so that he can tape the speeches of selected students in the fourth round to determine if their rankings are based on topic bias. Sensitive tournament data would again be compromised. Even if we assume that students did not suspect the reason they were taped was based on their competitive ranking, and if we assume that a number of unsupervised research assistants would operate the taping equipment judiciously and inconspicuously, imagine the impact on a student who believes that he or she is doing well, but who is not taped.

Each of these scenarios represents actual research requests. Each is fraught with danger to the student, the judge-critic and the integrity of the tournament. Yet there currently exists no policy which protects us from this type of manipulation and questionable practice.

In order to accommodate legitimate research requests and yet protect the rights of forensic participants and the needs of a competitive tournament, the N.F.A. and other organizations which conduct national tournaments must establish a procedure for submission of research requests and a policy for review of those requests. We suggest that such a policy be structured along the following guidelines:

First, the N.F.A. should determine what, if any, research restrictions should apply to the national tournament based on research policies of the prospective host institutions. Indeed, research restrictions should be viewed as an impediment for accepting the bid for a prospective host. At any rate, the N.F.A. should be clear what latitude exists at any given nationals to conduct research.

Second, the N.F.A. should include in its letter of invitation a statement which informs all participants that they may be asked to consent to authorized research investigations by individual researchers. The letter of invitation should also make clear that the N.F.A. will record on audio and/or video tape every final round possible.

Third, the N.F.A. should routinely tape all final rounds and, based on research requests, routinely tape all elimination rounds. These tapes would be made available on a "fee-for-use" basis to all who request them. Having N.F.A. assume responsibility for taping the rounds should assure some level of quality control to safeguard students. Having the tapes themselves would aid research and promote instruction based on the excellence of the performances in elimination rounds. We suggest, however, that before taping
rounds in interpretative events, the N.F.A. should obtain a legal opinion on the issue of copyright infringement.

Fourth, the N.F.A. should establish a Research Committee charged with the sole power to authorize any audio and/or video taping of contestants as well as establish a committee which has the sole power to approve all other types of research investigations and/or formal information gathering activities which involve tournament participants. Request for authorization should be made in writing to the committee and should include a full research design and implementation proposal. Notice of need to obtain authorization should be included in the tournament invitation. Requests should be made sixty days prior to the start of the tournament.

Fifth, the N.F.A. should require that the Research Committee notify, in writing, each research applicant of the committee's decision regarding the request at least thirty days prior to the national tournament. Authors of all rejected research proposals would receive a written explanation for the committee decision and should be granted ten days for resubmission of their proposal.

Sixth, the N.F.A. should establish penalties for failure to submit a request for authorization to conduct an investigation or for failure to abide by the Research Committee decision regarding such research. Penalties might take the form of public censure or appropriate letters of reprimand submitted to the researcher's employer.

Seventh, in order to guide researchers in preparing research proposals, the N.F.A should, as a matter of policy, discourage taping of any preliminary rounds, collection or dissemination of questionnaires through the ballot process, and use of any result prior to the conclusion of the competition. The N.F.A. should also endorse in all proposals guarantees of feedback and results to all research participants, anonymous twenty-five word abstracts accompanying all questionnaires, and a caution that all researchers conduct their investigation within the bounds of propriety and with respect for all research and tournament participants.9

We realize that these proposals are far from a full research policy, but we believe they provide the framework for such a policy to be developed. This is clearly an initial proposal which could be used to guide a Research Committee in its evaluations of individual research proposals. The net effect of these guidelines is to insist that the N.F.A. take a more vigorous role in supporting research.

9The National Forensic Association adopted these research guidelines for its 1985 National Championship Tournament. The process was initially successful and with revisions will be implemented for future tournaments.
and at the same time assume a quality control function to insure propriety, fairness and respect for students and coaches when they engage in activities that are being empirically evaluated. These guidelines would also require that the N.F.A. be more systematic in its treatment of research proposals and that it continually refines the practices which are acceptable for research activity. In short, research should be accorded a more prominent and more professional role in N.F.A. decision-making. Research in forensics is much too important to be conducted haphazardly or, worse yet, not conducted at all. Yet our first concern must always be the educational and competitive experience of forensic participants. Hopefully these guidelines will help us balance the rights of participants with the needs of researchers.