THE ROLE OF DEPARTMENT CHAIR AS FORENSIC PROMOTER

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Neil Postman claimed that often the frequency of contacts and the relationship of sender and receiver were as important a source of analysis as the content of the message. That contention provides an important principle for a department chair administering an active collegiate program in forensics—"speak frequently and positively about your forensics program to administrators throughout the university."

The three issues which will be developed in this article form my personal philosophy as a department chair in a department with an active forensics program. These issues create the substance of the messages which I am often sending about the Forensics Program at George Mason University. My own coaching was at an urban, commuter university and a rural, residential college. Also, my four years of college participation in a combined debate/individual events program merge with the administrative viewpoints I have developed from seven years as Director of Educational Services at the Speech Communication Association and three years as chair at George Mason University.

Coaching as Teaching

The oft-cited ideal of teaching as "John Hopkins at one end of the log and the student at the other" is most often realized in coaching an individual events program. This concept predominates in directing a forensics team. While most universities understand coaching in the "athletic" concept, it is imperative for the speech communication department chair to note that the coaching function is an essential ingredient of effective teaching.

While administrators and some departments perceive forensics coaching as service, a department chair needs to promote coaching as teaching—one of the best forms of teaching. Not only does it earn such a distinction by the process of constant "practice, instruction, and practice," but it also merits attention because of its integrative nature. Given the narrowness of focus of most university classes, forensics provides students with both an application of skills and a breadth of topic exposure from literature to contemporary politics. This range calls for special skills from the Director of Forensics—skills associated with the best of teaching.

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The most important decision a chair makes about the Director of the Forensics program is the role developed for considerations of promotion, tenure, and retention. Since special considerations are often made for the forensics coach, this decision frames the department evaluation, the chair's evaluation, and the presentations to upper administrators. This context consists not only of time devoted to teaching, but also includes a wide range of knowledge and a variety of teaching techniques.

While many universities, i.e., Central Michigan University, view coaching as "university service," the intrinsic nature of coaching is teaching. For most faculty members the classroom and courses define the nature of teaching. The forensics coach teaches in many different locations other than the classroom—practice rooms, motel rooms, in cars/vans, and on other campuses. The forensic coach applies many methods that other educators rarely utilize. For example, most coaches use video cameras for tutorial sessions in ways that the student would not otherwise experience in the normal curriculum. Also, few teachers are skilled in integrating feedback about performances from different teachers from different universities into the instruction for a given student.

Since time pressures allow few teachers to spend tutorial time with a student on the same performance, the forensic coach has a unique opportunity to teach. When teaching a public speaking class, the instructor might give a student feedback on five to nine speeches during the semester and, under the best of conditions, office appointments with that student three or four times. Yet, the forensics coach will hear the single oration at least ten times during the season as well as integrate the comments of others.

The feedback that other coaches give provides the forensics coach with a teaching tool that few teachers can ever apply—the ability to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of other instructors from other universities in the teaching of one student. In the course of a single season, a student may get feedback from over twenty different instructors! How this information is used by the coach is a creative teaching decision and something that makes coaching a different type of teaching activity.

The time the coach spends with a student has two important teaching dimensions—quantity in the single season and duration over the two, three, or four years of participation. The coach creates by this time commitment a different type of teaching that is not found in other classes. While other coaches of activities, e.g., newspaper advisor, choir director, athletic coaches, have a similar time advantage, the university theorists writing about collegiate teaching do not address this important aspect of teaching undertaken by the forensics coach. Quantity of
time without quality of instruction provides only a descriptive measure. Thus, it is important to include the more significant products of this time investment—both skills and knowledge attained by the student. Good informative and persuasive speeches tend to require far more research and analysis than most "A" level term papers necessitate.

The success of the time spent often provides external measures of teaching—measures the profession rarely applies to our unique type of teaching. For me, the number of tournaments attended is an important measure of this interaction. While one-to-one comparisons of coaching forensics and teaching a class are difficult, ten, twelve, or whatever number of weekends at tournaments is a commitment to teaching that members of the academy rarely make. While to many students, and most of the public, the number of trophies won is the measure of success, the department chair needs different measures which reflect the teaching nature of coaching.

Measures of coaching as teaching not only include time and the tutorial approach, but other standards that incorporate the breadth of coaching responsibilities. For example, the selections of literature for oral interpretation events give an important viewpoint about the quality of exposure to significant literature. The intense competition of forensics means that students are constantly seeking new and challenging pieces of literature for interpretation.

The same can be said of the topics for the informative and persuasive speaking events. Extemporaneous speaking inherently develops a keen knowledge of current events; informative speaking provides its own unique challenge. For example, the traditional distinction between a topic explaining the variety of hair care topics available, and a topic explaining recent molecular discoveries in bonding as to their impact on hair care, reveals a teaching philosophy by the coach. A list of topics used by students for persuasive speeches and for informative speeches will indicate one dimension of the quality of instruction. These types of teaching decisions by the coach reveal a quality of instruction that aids the arguments of coaching as teaching.

Statements participants make about their coaches having a significant influence on their lives reflects a concern for the changes that one associates with superior teaching. Former coaches often mention how much they miss the extensive interaction with students—an opportunity to have a profound impact on their lives. My own college coach is the one professor from my undergraduate institution with whom I am still in frequent contact. This influence should be associated with superior teaching.
Forensics as a Curriculum Segment

The debate about communication competency hinges around oral performance—is oral performance as well as knowledge about theory a necessary ingredient of communication competency? While our scholars debate the issue of oral performance skills, the more important question for the chair, is whether the forensics program plays a "unique" role in the curriculum of the department? For me, the unequivocal answer is "yes." If the program were not a curriculum segment, then it could best be run like the athletic department, with separate budgets, coaches, and expectations. If it is a curriculum segment, then the unique properties of the program need to be an integral part of the curriculum.

Both critiqued practice and critiqued performance allow forensics to extend the opportunities for oral communication performance available through the department. This intensity of guided practice is not found in the regular course work. Although practice varies with the program, several examples will illustrate this unique contribution.

If a student attends five tournaments with an oration that is practiced in front of the coach two times before each tournament, the student has given the oration at a minimum ten times for practice and ten times in tournament competition. Thus, eleven different, trained people have heard that performance. If the oration is 10 minutes long, that is three and one-half hours of critiqued practice—something few courses could ever offer. The student who is competing at a national level (so that the student attends ten tournaments and makes it into semi-finals half the time, and to finals the other half the time) has fifteen more opportunities for oral performances. If three judges are used in finals, feedback jumps to thirty-five critiqued performances. If the university paid only $10 for each critique—a sum that would be impossible to obtain without the dedication of forensic coaches—the critiquing cost alone would be $350 for outside opinions for that one event. Thus, the program generates a type of teaching that the department cannot develop in its classrooms.

If the students in the example above participate at the same level in three other events then the critiquing cost of the program generates its own logic for funding. For example, the student who participates in only five tournaments has forty critiques, at a cost of $400 as well as an equivalent number for practice at a sum of $400. (Although if practice sessions are generally twice as long as a tournament situation, the real price would be doubled.) Therefore, that student receives between $800 and $1,200 worth of critiques. Also, the better students receive, using the same type of calculations (4 X 350 = 1400 + 200/400 =
1600/1800) over $1,600 in services. If there are 10 students on the team, the critiquing value alone varies from $8,000 to $16,000 for this type of calculation. If the squad has twenty students, then this minimum figure would double. This analysis is limited to the production of critiques, which is only part of the instructional goals of a good forensics program. Such analysis allows one to quantify one of the teaching functions of a forensics coach.

At George Mason University, if I hire an instructor to teach four public speaking classes, the university is paying $12,000 to generate between 440 and 800 critiques. This teaching power is at a cost of $15 a critique using the maximum number or almost $28 at the minimum number of critiques. The public speaking instructor teaches 88 students with a minimum number of speaking experiences, while the forensics program provides fewer students with extensive experience at a lesser cost per critique, but more money per student. The essential part of this analysis is that the number of experiences provided to the student is in a unique way that would not be generated in the classroom. Thus, the curricular impact stems from a method of rewarding students who are willing to put a tremendous effort into their education.

From a chair's perspective, the events and content provide an additional perspective for analyzing the forensic program. The forensic program allows the student to gain skills by participating in a spectrum of activities. Using the theoretical perspectives needed to adapt methodology in rhetorical criticism to the interpretation of a wide variety of forms of literature, the student gets an exposure to many speaking styles and formats. If one takes the SCA standards for program review at the secondary level and applies these guidelines to college forensic programs, two additional standards are met. The standard curriculum can barely touch those guidelines which state that instruction must cover a variety of audiences and a variety of speaking forms.

The person who participates all four years can easily experience a wide variety of events. Even the student who is on the squad for only one year often enters several different events. Rare is the student who is enrolled in only one event—an impossibility in most forensic programs. While critics argue that a major weakness of debate and forensic programs is the lack of real audiences (a situation remedied by some of the more creative tournaments), a department chair cannot spend too much time with students without learning how they adapt to different judges. These students study the judges' arguments, so that they know how to adapt the next time the judge hears them. Often these differences in audiences are learned by students in what to them is a most painful way—losing.
Thus, forensic programs offer a segment of instruction that the classroom does not replicate. This curriculum segment gains its uniqueness by giving the student critiques by many different listeners. This type of teaching is an inherent part of any curriculum.

**The Chair as an Internal PR Voice**

The chair has an important role to play that even the best forensic director does not have time or the opportunity to do. The Chair must let the administrators know about the unique contributions the activity creates. The two perspectives mentioned above are the foundations of messages which the chair must promote. First, the obligation to the coach as a faculty member is to note the potential for excellent teaching. Secondly, the program must be seen as a curricular arm of the university.

By comparing the forensics program to the music programs, one can help administrators understand the teaching and curricular contributions. Music requires faculty supervision, has both practice and performance goals, uses judges from other schools to measure quality, travels to obtain a variety of audiences, and relates all performances to the theory in the classroom. It is in terms of the faculty role that the comparison serves us best, since the teaching/coaching function for music is well understood. Administrators also understand the practice demands for musicians to achieve an acceptable level of performance.

On the one hand, the chair can serve to help with the minutia of operations from budgets to getting rooms for tournaments. But more important is the role the chair should serve to see that concern for emergency situations are covered, such as the need for having a list of all students and parents' names and addresses during a tournament, to the liability/insurance procedures of the university. The chair may coordinate the budget and annual report procedures as part of an official role.

On the other hand, the chair serves as an unofficial mouthpiece for the program explaining what the success means, how the program relates to curricular goals, and what type of community service is performed. This type of communication requires that the chair formulate a philosophy of how the program relates to the university and to the students.

My own philosophy makes a distinction between teaching by the faculty member and service by the program. The tutorial aspect of coaching is a teaching function. Hosting the local high school teachers for a meeting is a service function for both the program and the university.
It is in the latter that the chair plays the important symbolic role of representing the university. Other coaches should know that the chair/university is supporting the activity. Thus, a visible presence, when possible, at coaches meetings, workshops, tournaments, and public programs, is an important role for the chair.

Just as the high school coach needs an annual meeting with the principal before and after the season, the chair needs to meet with the coach at the college level. While topics may vary from trophy cases to the nature of coaching, these sessions help to keep communication open. From an organizational communication perspective, the chair does serve as the link between the coach and the university community, so the chair needs to ask the question, "How well am I serving as a link?" The meetings are the first step in establishing that link. Because the chair must know what is happening if effective communication with the rest of the community is developed, it is important to know what is different about each year. Questions to be discussed might include: how the university can improve its support, what curricular aspects need to be developed, what other sources of support might be used to aid the program, and what is the quality of student support from the university? These are just some of the questions which might frame such conferences. What is important is that the big questions are covered in a formal sense, so that the little problems throughout the year can be seen in their correct context.

Such meetings often provide the information to be transmitted to the deans and other officers. Few people in higher education understand the distinct properties of the forensics program, so that the chair often serves as "translator." Such a role requires a well developed philosophy. For example, a private school sees its role as serving a national constituency and therefore wants a nationwide high school tournament, while a state institution may have a greater need for reaching only the high schools in the state. In either situation, the chair needs to relate the mission of the school to the dean as to how a specific tournament functions as a recruiting tool, a service to area high schools, and/or a showcase for the university.

In those schools with graduate programs and graduate assistants helping with the forensics program, the chair, or designee, must see to it that the demands on the graduate students reflect the academic nature of the program. Like the doctors who must go through grueling schedules during residencies, graduate students working with forensics programs often give more time than their counterparts doing research or teaching duties. The chair needs to see that these students have opportunities to work directly with the students, learn about effective
coaching techniques, gain experience with administering tournaments, and develop an ethical sense of how the program ought to function.

Besides concern for service by the program, the chair must see that the students have opportunities to develop different skills. While a national champion brings an onslaught of positive publicity for the program, the chair needs to understand the varied measures of successful teaching, student experiences, and program service. These must be explained time and time again to administrators, so that a larger picture of the program can be developed. To do this the chair needs to know the important tensions that the program creates and be willing to both explain these tensions and mediate when conflict develops.

Often such a tension is between course requirements and participation in a tournament. This tension varies from professor to professor as they themselves perceive the nature of their classes and forensic competition. Frequently this is an area in which the chair can negotiate. Sometimes the tension existing for a student is the choice between participating in another tournament and learning by judging at a local high school contest. The key for the chair to resolving these tensions is knowing how to integrate the legitimate goals of the university, the student's educational goals, and the program's goals.

This essay has argued that the primary role of the chair of a speech communication department is to support the forensics program by knowing about the successes of the program and informing the administration about these successes. The key to this activity is developing a philosophy about the program which is based around the assumptions that coaching is teaching at its best and that the forensics program serves as a curricular opportunity for some students to gain experience and knowledge not available under regular classroom conditions.