Reconsidering the Laboratory Metaphor:  
Forensics as a Liberal Art

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"We who teach and do research desperately need a Utopian vision—a vision of the kind of society we want ours to be. We also need a vision of the role communication teachers and scholars can play in creating that Utopia," urged Samuel L. Becker in his keynote address to the 1991 annual conference of the Central States Communication Association (Becker 4). Such a vision is what participants at the First National Developmental Conference on Forensics attempted to create in 1974. As members of a field struggling for cohesion and coherency, conferees formulated a statement intended to unify and legitimize forensics activities. The statement, in part, read: "forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences" (McBath, Forensics 11).

From this statement emerged a hardy metaphor—the laboratory—that many forensics professionals have used to guide their efforts in the years since that conference at Sedalia. Five years after Sedalia, at the first Alta conference on argumentation, David Thomas explored the implications of the laboratory metaphor for forensics and offered suggestions to enhance the laboratory experience. In 1981, Michael D. Bartanen offered event revisions designed to enhance the laboratory experience as did Jack Kay ("Individual") in 1984. At the 1984 developmental conference in Evanston, the laboratory metaphor is employed in the "Rationale for Forensics" chapter of the conference Proceedings (McBath, "Rationale" 9-10). Finally, in a 1990 issue of the National Forensic Journal, Herbeck as well as Kay ("Research") indicted the forensic community's lack of work with the metaphor.

At the risk of mitigating one-half of the indictment offered by Herbeck and Kay (the claim that forensics scholarship requires improvement—a claim with which I agree), I maintain that the laboratory metaphor is not as valuable as its longevity may imply. In fact, the metaphor is counterproductive if its aims are to provide a defining theoretical groundwork for forensics which enhances the activity and establishes its credibility among other disciplines. In the following pages, I expose the unwanted baggage the laboratory metaphor brings to foren-

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Implications of the Laboratory Metaphor

The literature establishing and perpetuating the metaphor of forensics as a laboratory offers a number of beneficial implications of the metaphor. Thomas, for instance, calls the metaphor "a happy one, for it provided a marketable rationale almost poetic in its rich ambiguities" (245). The "marketability" envisioned by Thomas seems to stem from the communication discipline's relatively newfound (at the time of the birth of the metaphor) interest in the social scientific approach. Plus, the whole of academe seems to place more weight on knowledge generated by the scientific method. The "rich ambiguities" of which Thomas writes are rooted in the breadth of meanings available from the metaphor. Working from the Sedalia conference recommendations for forensics, Thomas identifies three meanings for the laboratory metaphor: "workshop for service, learning environment, and research setting" (246). In the workshop meaning, forensics is considered a laboratory where "argumentative communication can be created and/or analyzed for world uses" (Thomas 246). The learning environment meaning suggests that forensics activities are "learning laboratories where students could be provided with experience in learning to communicate with people" (Thomas 247). And the research setting meaning implies "that new knowledge could be generated by experimentation by students and forensics educators" (Thomas 249). Kay ("Individual"), in a synthesis of each of the three potential meanings identified by Thomas, proposed new limited preparation events designed to parallel communication activities in the world outside of forensics.

The breadth of the laboratory metaphor as illustrated by Thomas, and its potential applications as illustrated by Kay, suggest that the metaphor possesses merit. But as Thomas demonstrates and numerous scholars of metaphor indicate in theoretical works, metaphors call to mind a number of associations. Unfortunately, no scholar among those passing the torch of the laboratory metaphor examines its full implications. The most important association overlooked is the connection between laboratory and science.

Laboratories are places where scientific experimentation occurs. This "extra" connotation of the laboratory metaphor imbues forensics with the qualities of science. Rather than serving only as a workshop for students and faculty, then, the laboratory metaphor also suggests that forensics participants engage in scientific work. The type of results produced by science are generally agreed upon within the academic
community. "Ideally, the knowledge science produces is certain, universal, and non-judgmental" (Condit 323). Science seeks to represent reality, generates covering laws that explain recurring relationships among variables, and is linear and cumulative (Bochner 28-29). In short, "the scientist would say the most important thing is the discovery and testing of truth..." (Campbell 3). Working in laboratories, scientists discover new truths to add to the cumulative knowledge of the discipline. The progressive nature of the scientific method, a constant moving from the known to the unknown, imbues the process with a strong sense of legitimacy. Not surprisingly, then, the method of the physical sciences has served as "a paradigm of knowledge to which the rest of culture had to measure up" (Rorty 322).

When this metaphor is applied to forensics, it is even easier to understand why Thomas terms it "marketable" (245), it becomes imbued with centuries of positive perceptions. Such a metaphor is inappropriate for forensics, however, precisely because it is "positive"; the positivist nature of the scientific method suggests that those involved in forensics can find "Truth" and compile cumulative knowledge. First, forensics is hardly a natural science. Second, even assuming that social science can be squeezed into a laboratory metaphor, Roth notes that social science generally suffers from a belief in what he calls the "unity-of-method" thesis. This tenet asserts that there is, in principle, no methodological distinction to be made between the natural sciences and the social sciences" (1). Thus, remnants of thought mistakenly persist in the social sciences that Platonic Truth is knowable (Rorty 377) and that knowledge is always cumulative (Roth 118). Even social scientists who modify their claims still frequently imply universality and near certainty for their findings (Condit 324-325).

These remnants, in turn, color the laboratory metaphor in forensics. The detrimental implications of assuming a knowable Truth and a cumulation of knowledge in forensics are several.

First, a myth that "real" research precludes anything but empirical investigations is perpetuated. Given the dearth of such research in forensics, this privileging of a particular method hurts forensics. Administrators evaluating directors of forensics for tenure likely expect such empirical research if they believe in the implied standards for research set by forensics professionals who adhere to the laboratory metaphor. As Porter writes: "The forensic community is most deficient in experimental research, which sadly is the type of research that carries the most credibility in the academic community" (99).

Second, judge/critics and students may mistakenly assume that there are "right" and "wrong" approaches to the various forensic activities rather than avenues that are more or less educational depending
upon the perspective of the evaluator. For example, Reynolds notes the existence of unstated norms for evaluation held by judge/critics while I have argued elsewhere that students imitate practices they see succeeding *competitively* without questioning the educational value of such practices ("Imitation"). That such imitation occurs is not surprising, for repetition is a hallmark of science. Scientific norms dictate that a correct repetition of the procedure guarantees the same result (Scott 32).

In forensic terms, if the national impromptu champion uses an historical, literary, and political example for each "point," then countless students and instructors will repeat that magical formula for success (neglecting the fact that any public speaking textbook suggests that examples are *support* for points rather than points themselves).

Third, the humanistic aspects of forensics are marginalized in the laboratory, causing stagnation. Viewing forensic activities as arenas to test arguments and produce cumulative knowledge limits innovation while encouraging specialization. For years, forensics scholars have bemoaned the increased emphasis on information processing in debate (e.g., Friedman; Rowland & Deatherage; Zeuschner), yet the laboratory metaphor favors this trend because of it emphasizes producing knowledge in a controlled environment.

In addition to granting favored status to the quests for Platonic Truth and cumulative knowledge, the laboratory metaphor contains characteristics that, if continued, limit the educational value of forensics. Specifically, laboratories are: controlled, secretive, run by elites, sterile, and involve the manipulation of variables. All of these characteristics are not inherently negative. In fact, in the investigation of natural science phenomena they are desirable. For example, scientists working to discover a cure for AIDS should probably toil in a laboratory that is controlled, secretive, run by elites, etc. In forensics, however, these characteristics are not desirable. The aura of mystery and specialization surrounding the forensics laboratory may foster community identification, but identification without questioning produces negative effects within a community (Burke 294). As Bullis and Tompkins warn in their discussion of the organizational culture of the U.S. Forest Service: a "'strong' culture made the organization less flexible and adaptive to changes in it: environment" (304). Evidence for the forensic community's inflexibility appears on several fronts: repeated concerns voiced, but not acted upon, regarding the style of debate; frequent worries about the lack of inclusivity in all forensics activities; a hesitancy to articulate broad standards for students despite many unwritten norms; little crossover between debate and individual events because of time commitments and disparate practices in the two activities. These problems, while not directly caused by the laboratory metaphor, likely
linger because of the closed nature of the forensics community—a characteristic of a laboratory.

A larger implication of the laboratory metaphor is its indirect association with the argumentative perspective on forensics articulated at the Sedalia conference and propagated in the nearly two decades since. Of the two sections of the Sedalia definitional statement printed in italics, the second is the laboratory metaphor excerpt referred to earlier in this essay; the other section of the definitional statement reads: "forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people" (McBath, Forensics 11). As the Sedalia definition read as a whole suggests, forensics is an argumentative activity occurring in a laboratory setting; argument and laboratory are intertwined. Despite a few initial complaints from the then developing individual events community (e.g., Rhodes), the Sedalia definition of forensics has informed forensics scholarship in the years since. Much scholarship in forensics focuses on how to improve the argumentative aspects of the activity, individual events included (e.g., Aden & Kay; Dreibelbis & Redmon; Kay & Aden; Manchester & Friedley; Murphy, "Theory"; Reynolds & Fay; VerLinden). Within the individual events community as a whole, however, "the argumentation philosophy [has] failed to generate lasting enthusiasm" (Aden 8). Thus, a second chief goal of the developmental conference definitions—unifying the various forensic activities—seems to have also fallen short of its goal.

Since forensics scholars are still wondering why the laboratory is underemployed, since the metaphor itself conjures up negative associations, and since its counterpart—the argumentative perspective—has not captured the imagination of the forensics community, it appears that forensics is in need of a new definition. The next section offers both a definition and a perspective in which to interpret the definition, then outlines the implications of both moves.

**Redefining Forensics as a Liberal Art**

The failures of the laboratory metaphor to invigorate forensics scholarship and to unify forensic activities seem, in hindsight, inevitable. Forensics has never been either a natural or social science. In fact, all of the previous attempts to "scientificize" forensics kinds of activities, from sophistry to elocution to hypothesis testing, have led to routines that hurt the perception and practice of forensics. Forensics is most educational, I argue, when it is viewed as a liberal art.

At its core, a liberal arts education is designed to produce individuals who are able to think independently rather than relying solely on existing knowledge. To a degree, a liberal education is the antithesis of a
science education. The former emphasizes the discovery of answers within a person and thus, the answers vary. The latter suggests that answers are "out there" waiting to be found. A liberal education empowers the individual; a "science" education empowers information. As Cambridge education professor Charles Bailey writes:

> What the liberally educated person is released for is a kind of intellectual and moral autonomy, the capacity to become a free chooser of what is to be believed and what is to be done .... Scientific "truths, especially in our age, often are accepted as unquestionable once the "truth" is allegedly demonstrated by duly qualified scientists (21 and 140. emphasis original).

Metaphorically, a liberal education liberates an individual while a "science" education holds a person hostage to existing information.

More specifically, a liberal education program is designed to teach students in ways that allow them to "respect themselves and others, as rational and autonomous persons" (Bailey 137). By teaching students how to evaluate evidence and the beliefs behind the evidence, how to understand relationships between new concepts and those already understood, and how to learn while caring about reason and other individuals, educators can help students grow as persons (Bailey 161). The similarities between a traditional liberal arts education and the educational experience of forensics are striking. In fact, the similarities are exemplified in one of recorded civilization's first teachers of liberal arts, Isocrates, who is also recognized as "the foremost speech teacher in the world" (Golden, Berquist, and Coleman 41). The fundamentals stressed by Isocrates strongly resemble the primary aspects of both a liberal arts education and contemporary forensics: one-on-one instruction, a well-rounded education, civic development of the student, and the pursuit of good (Golden, Berquist, and Coleman 41-42). While Isocrates taught delivery skills, he believed that the most effective communicators were those whose communicated content reflected the mark of a liberally educated person (Golden, Berquist, and Coleman 41). In addition, Isocrates taught that communication skills should serve noble ends rather than expedient aims (Bryant)—a contrast that parallels the learning versus competition tension in contemporary forensics. Thus it is certainly no stretch to define forensics as a liberal art. In fact, as Bartanen notes, the eminent scholar A. Craig Baird envisioned the connection between liberal arts and forensics in 1923 (406).

The advantages of redefining forensics as a liberal art are numerous. Before I illustrate the positive implications of such a redefinition, however, I need to address the second component of the forensic definition in need of reworking. Just as the laboratory metaphor required a
context-specific perspective (the argumentative) appropriate to forensics, the liberal arts definition requires a contextual perspective in order to make the whole package more appropriate for forensics. I propose a substitution of "rhetorical" for "argumentative" for several reasons.

First, a rhetorical perspective, as defined by Campbell, more appropriately includes the various ends of each kind of forensic communication: "A rhetorical act, however, is an intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome the obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end" (7; emphasis original). Specific types of rhetorical acts are situated along a continuum ranging from the creation of virtual experience to maintaining action (Campbell 8-14; see diagram 1). No single type of rhetorical act is privileged in Campbell's scheme; each is a worthwhile effort. Such a perspective lends itself well to the diverse communicative experiences that now mark forensic competition. For instance, oral interpretation, public speaking, and debate activities all can concern themselves with everything from creating virtual experience to maintaining action at some point during their performance.

Diagram 1 Continuum of Rhetorical Acts

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<th>Creating virtual experience</th>
<th>Altering perception</th>
<th>Explaining belief</th>
<th>Formulating action</th>
<th>Initiating action</th>
<th>Maintaining action</th>
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Second, a rhetorical perspective places more emphasis upon the ideas of individual students. As Campbell explains, a perspective is "an angle of vision, a way of seeing. All perspectives are partial and, in that sense, distorted or biased: each looks at this rather than that; each has its particular emphasis" (3). Students, then, can be taught to recognize different perspectives and their respective value rather than assuming that one approach is "right" and another "wrong." Further, as McGee explains, the word "perspective" moves us away from the preoccupation with procedure that rests at the core of the scientific method (47). A rhetorical perspective, in sum, emphasizes a comparison of relative concepts rather than the testing of the truth of certain concepts.

A rhetorical perspective for forensics provides an ideal counterpart for a liberal arts definition because rhetorical theories, generally, are concerned with preparing individuals to face future situations (Brummett 104). Writes Brummett: rhetorical theory "equips students for practical experience in the world rather than adding to the store of
knowledge about the world .... Rhetorical studies can thus serve as a kind of integrative, underlying perspective on which liberal arts education is based" (105).

The positive implications of a redefinition of forensics as a liberal art with a rhetorical perspective can enhance students' educational experiences while addressing many of the concerns of the individuals who offered the laboratory metaphor as an answer to forensics weaknesses.

Initially, the meshing of the assumptions of the liberal arts with the rhetorical perspective can increase the open-minded consideration of the relative worth of ideas and approaches. Rather than seeking to test for truths, an absolute yes/no option, students and coaches can assess ideas and approaches as possessing varying degrees of value. Such a philosophical approach can encourage what Rorty calls a scholarly "conversation" in which the supposed answers are constantly evaluated (377). Not only does this option prevent dogmatism in an arena where critical and personal judgements are made, it more appropriately reflects contemporary rhetorical theory. Brummett, for example, borrows from Becker in his discussion of the multiple meanings that can be perceived from one communicated expression (101-102). Following a similar line of analysis, McKerrow notes that messages are fragmented when processed by individuals and thus open to polysemic interpretations (107-108).

Second, the proposed redefinition of forensics may encourage a more inclusive community in two ways. To begin, we can recast the usually unarticulated belief that certain types of forensic activities are better at fulfilling the definition of forensics to a belief that each forensic activity fulfills a valuable portion of the forensic definition. By eliminating the privileged status of some forensic activities, the rift between what Kay terms the "individual fiefdoms" of forensics may be healed ("Research" 63). Also, a redefinition can make all forensic activities more accessible to students who, for various reasons, do not find the argumentative perspective appealing. For example, Murphy ("Separate") convincingly argues that females generally exhibit communication patterns incompatible with the argumentative perspective, a position reinforced by Georgetown University sociolinguist Deborah Tannen's recent work on the differences in male and female conversation patterns. Ironically, some psychological research offers evidence that females think more in terms of relationships, a central component of liberal arts teaching (Toufexis).

Third, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, a redefinition of forensics should allow students and teachers to more effectively meet their educational goals. Recognizing all perspectives as possessing degrees of
value promotes the kind of thinking cherished in a liberal arts education. Students and teachers must focus on evidence, belief, relationships, and the human condition to evaluate each rhetorical perspective offered. Brummett’s position that rhetorical theory is both heuristic and moral seems valuable in this effort: individuals are better prepared "for apprehending rhetorical experience" and recognize that the choices they make "are moral choices, for how one chooses to structure one’s world shapes what one sees on it and how one acts in response to it" (Brummett 103 & 104). Certainly, a rhetorical perspective within the liberal arts tradition seems to offer more richness and challenge for both student and teacher than does a search for absolute right and wrong.

Finally, a redefinition of forensics may well improve the state of forensics research as well as its reception outside of the activity. If members of the forensic community cease bowing at the altar of the laboratory, they may well discover that "research" can be legitimately defined as works that contribute to Rorty’s conversation as well as those that provide data to digest. Potential scholars, then, need not fear demonstrating their ignorance in matters related to "number crunching." In addition, teacher/scholars may not need to fear the tenure axe to such a large degree of administrators do not expect us to "practice what we implicitly preach" by producing scholarship that embraces the scientific orientation of the laboratory. The danger that must be guarded against, however, is that a forensics research program may become a series of "here’s what I think" papers/articles. As the liberal arts tradition teaches, a respect for evidence is always necessary.

Concluding Remarks

Earlier in this essay, I pointed out that no one had deemed it necessary to explore the full ramifications of the laboratory metaphor. To avoid charges of hypocrisy, then, let me admit that there is a down side to redefining forensics as a liberal art which utilizes a rhetorical perspective. Certainly, forensics may enjoy diminished marketability if it is viewed as less specialized than a laboratory. There is then a possibility that administrators will see forensics as only an activity. Also, scholarship produced by members of the forensics community may be considered "fluffier" by colleagues and administrators. Forensics, too, maybe defined as a theoretical if its participants reject the implication that knowledge is cumulative. Internally, the broad terms "liberal arts" and "rhetorical" may produce a loss of focus that the laboratory/argument definition, to a degree, provides.

Yet, a careful comparison of each alternative suggests, I believe, an advantage for the proposed redefinition of forensics. The negative
characteristics associated with the laboratory, and their detrimental implications for forensics, are too strong to toss aside. The laboratory is hundreds of years old and its elements are strongly ingrained in our culture. Meanwhile, the redefinition of forensics as a liberal art with a rhetorical perspective can still address many of the concerns articulated during and since the developmental conferences. A traditional liberal arts orientation in this era of back to the basics still appeals to administrators and employers. A rhetorical perspective should better unify the various forensic activities. Most important, the forensics community can more accurately represent to students and administrators what its means and ends are, resulting in more appropriate expectations from both groups.

Even a redefinition of forensics as I propose does not necessarily exclude some of the valuable aspects of the laboratory metaphor. Many of the benefits students gain through forensic competition within the parameters of the argumentative perspective and the laboratory metaphor can occur within the liberal arts definition as well: research, analysis, critical thinking, interdisciplinary knowledge, and self-development (McBath, "Rationale" 10). Furthermore, the concept of forensics as a workshop is not inherent to the laboratory. In fact, the tossing back-and-forth of ideas that occurs in a workshop setting is ideally suited to the redefinition I suggest. The goals of the workshop would change—the search for valuable perspectives vs. immutable covering laws—but the process of the workshop can remain intact in a liberal arts definition of forensics.

These similarities, however, do not mean that we can use a small portion of both the laboratory metaphor and the liberal arts definition. Despite some similarities in process, "to be located in a particular paradigm is to view the world in a particular way" and thus, the approaches must be considered mutually exclusive (Burrell and Morgan 24). Such mutual exclusivity should not be a read, though, as an either/or dichotomy. Other definitions and/or metaphors should be allowed to "compete" with the laboratory and liberal arts conceptions.

Forensics needs a redefinition. The exigencies facing it now are hardly different from over 15 years ago at Sedalia. Administrators still question the value of the activities (Kay, "Research" 62-63) splits within the various forensic activities still exist (Kay, "Research" 63), and the demands on the director of forensics still contribute to keeping individuals out of tenure positions (Parson 70). A solution to these exigencies lies in the proposition that forensics is a liberal art employing a rhetorical perspective.
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