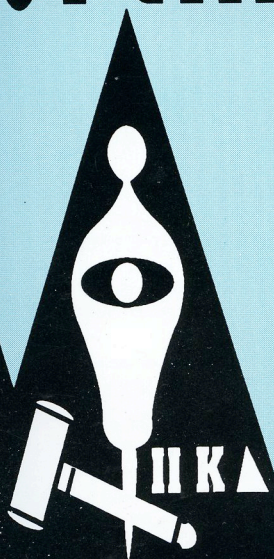


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Improvisational Duet Acting as a National Event

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■ In the spring of 1986, District Three of the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament voted to offer Improvisational Duet Acting as an experimental event during the 1986-1987 forensic year. A description for tournament entries and rules for the event were developed. The event was described as "an improvised acting exercise where participants strive to creatively and spontaneously display their sense of dramatic structure and character analysis. The event is composed of two students who portray an original scene by incorporating (1) an object, (2) two characters, and (3) a setting." During that year, students from the same school performed together at invitational tournaments. At the end of that season, the district voted to continue the experiment for another year. However, the district also decided to change the rules by requiring participants to be paired with students from other schools.

Whereas improvisational duet acting was well-received by the students of District Three, it should be considered for adoption as an experimental event for a national tournament. Before adopting the event, however, some issues should be explored: (1) the rationale for IDA as an event in the forensic community; and (2) the evolution of a set of rules for the event.

First, one should examine the rationale for IDA as an event in the forensic community, AFA's District Three coaches and students orally discussed the rationale for adopting the event as the district's experimental event. That rationale included helping students lose self-consciousness, increase self-awareness, and sharpen the powers of observation. Students were encouraged to develop a capacity to see items with a keener eye, listen with greater intensity, and feel with greater sensitivity.

Through participation in the event, the competitors become more aware of size and shape, texture and quality, and a myriad of other details. The event encouraged students to think since participation in the activity placed them in human situations that involved other people. They were asked to think about a situation before, during, and after it had been experienced. Greater freedom and coordination of bodily movements were gained by putting the body into imaginative circumstances and cultivating a controlled freedom. Students also gained confidence through a flow of spontaneous speech. In addition, the event was designed to foster creativity since the individuals had to use their imaginative powers to create the scene. Cooperation was also encouraged because the individuals were to work together as a team. The students were gaining a sense of dramatic structure, and they were learning to analyze many different characters quickly.

District Seven of the AFA/NIET, when proposing the event as the AFA/NIET's experimental event for the 1988-1989 forensic year, offered the following rationale for its adoption:

1. This event requires students to combine the skills of the limited preparation events with those of the interpretation events. Students develop the ability to organize their thoughts under restricted time constraints, to structure their ideas, to be creative, and to work together as a unit.
2. This event has been offered at the local level throughout various sections of the nation during the past 10 years with high levels of student interest and participation. (District Seven Proposal, p. 1).

In short, there are strong reasons to adopt IDA as an experimental event. The event fosters cooperation, creativity, self-confidence, body coordination, and increases the powers of self-awareness, observation, and thought.

The second issue that should be explored in the evolution of a set of rules for the event. District Three proposed the following rules for its experimental event:

Improvised duet acting is an improvised acting exercise where participants strive to creatively and spontaneously display their sense of dramatic structure and character analysis. The exercise shall be composed of two students who portray an original scene by incorporating (1) an object, (2) two characters, and (3) a setting. Each of these categories will be determined by a random drawing of topics from each category. The judge will be given three envelopes of topics (one from each category) before the round begins. The first contestants to perform will draw for the three elements of the scene, and they shall be used by all remaining contestants in the round. Contestants will not be allowed in the room prior to their performance in the round. The scene may be serious or comedic but should be structured to provide believable characters in a situation or problem with a solution to the conflict. A brief narrated introduction may be used. Time limits: Maximum of 10 minutes in which to prepare and perform with performance being a minimum of 4 minutes. (District 4 Proposal, p. 1).

Interest in the event was minimal at first; however, as people observed and learned more about the event, entries grew quite rapidly. Students who entered the event felt that it was an activity, which permitted them to release pent-up emotions created by participation in other events. In addition, the participants felt that they were able to develop numerous characters. They learned action and reaction to different characters in a variety of situations. The event drew entries not only from most interpreters, but also from those who normally entered only the public speaking events. Every student on our squad competed in the event. Our students became so

enthusiastic that most would have dropped any of their regular events to participate in IDA.

As a result of their entering the event, my students experienced growth as performers. The activity gave them confidence in performance of their other events. They learned to control their body movements; they learned to think quickly and creatively; and they learned how to react effectively. Their growth in those areas helped them give better performances in their other events.

There were some problems in that first year of competition because some teams chose to do generic scenes. For example, a team might choose to do a court room situation in every round of competition. The characters would almost always be the same regardless of what was drawn. References to the object were almost nonexistent. To approach the event from that perspective violated the intent of the event since participants were supposed to "creatively and spontaneously display their sense of dramatic structure and character analysis." Consequently, several of the coaches and participants became somewhat disillusioned with the event during the first year of the experiment.

The district voted, however, to continue competition in the event for one more year. The rules for the event were changed in an attempt to prevent the generic scene from becoming the norm. The following rules were developed for the second year of competition:

Students will enter the event as individuals. The tournament director will pair contestants from other schools when possible. After that point, students will advance in competition as a team. During the event the first team will draw a situation, character, and an object. The team is expected to present a scene that depicts thematic and character development which utilizes all of the elements for which they draw. cursory references to the object, character, or situation would not constitute effective utilization. All teams in the section will use the same situation, character, and object. The team will have ten minutes to prepare and present the scene (at least four minutes must be presentation). Separate awards will be given and sweepstakes points will be divided between schools. (Second District Three Proposal, p. 1).

In addition to the rationale given for adopting the earlier version of the event, it was felt that students would learn to adapt to working with new people and increase their cooperative ventures. They would learn to act and react to different kinds of individuals in various types of situations, strengthening their acting abilities. They would not be able to depend on their usual partners to "carry" them. The new rules provided an additional advantage over the original ones in that contestants from one school would get to know a good many people from other squads.

Some positive results occurred during that second year. Several coaches felt that some of their weaker students grew in self-confidence and poise as a result of their working with stronger students from other schools. This was particularly helpful to programs that were just getting started or to

those squads that had several novice competitors. In addition, students felt that they did get to know members of other squads quite well. During the second year of the experiment, many of the goals for the event were realized.

There were some major problems, however, with the format during that second year. Quite often, experienced performers were paired with individuals who had little or no interest in the event. Comments given to some of the competitors were: "You decide what we will do. I don't know what I am doing. My coach made me do this event." As a result, the dispassionate competitor usually contributed very little to the scene. A good participant could usually carry the team to the final round, but most of the time they "bombed" there. Sometimes, the apathetic competitor caused an excellent actor to overact and overreact when trying to lift the scene from the doldrums. The scene was quite often criticized for being imbalanced toward the enthusiastic individual.

A major problem for one of the students occurred during one of the early tournaments in the second year. A female competitor was paired with a male competitor from another school, and the team went through the preliminary rounds with no difficulty. During the preparation period for the final round, the two people agreed on the strategy they would employ for their performance. The scene began as they had planned; however, as the presentation progressed, the young man began to use language that would be very offensive to most people in mixed company. His gestures would have been inappropriate in a men's locker room. In short, he was lewd, crude, and unpolished. The young woman was horrified. She tried to cover the scene as best she could. Finally, having been totally embarrassed, she wrestled the young man to the floor, saying: "don't you open your mouth again! This scene is over!" She subsequently left the room in tears.

While there were problems with the event during the initial year of the experiment, many more problems seemed to proliferate during the second year. By the end of January, tournaments in the area had ceased to offer the event, and the district committee voted to drop it as a contest at the next district tournament.

A strong measure of criticism for the event was expressed by some of the more traditional performance-of-literature coaches. They believed that the event did not achieve its rationale, arguing that it was an acting "exercise," and the value of the activity was in the coach's ability to stop the students and work with them as the scene progressed. The goal of the "exercise" was not that of providing a finished product, but to foster growth in the individual actors and actresses. It was not regarded as an event to be performed for an audience.

Even with all the negative criticism and the problems associated with the event, there are strong arguments that the activity has merit and would make a good national tournament event. Some changes in the rules and format would make the event work somewhat better. The following suggestions could be used as guidelines for competition:

1. The duet team would be two people from the same school.
2. There should be a message to get across to the audience so that the event becomes didactic theater. The story could teach lessons about values,

ethics, morals, etc. Other suggestions for themes include: dependability, honesty, courtesy, frugality, patriotism, generosity, and industry. Much of Alger's fiction and McGuffey's Readers used such messages. Participants would do well to read some of their material to get the idea of teaching high ideals through performance.

3. Competitors would be assigned one of two characters, the situation, and the message. All contestants in a particular section would use the same elements in their scenes for that round; therefore, contestants would not be allowed in the room before their performance. The elements of character, situation, and message would be varied round by round, section by section, as in the impromptu speaking event.

4. The time limit would be ten minutes. Within that time frame, competitors would prepare and perform (performance time would be a minimum of four minutes).

5. Students would use an introduction to establish the scene, establish the mood, etc.

6. The scene could be either humorous or serious in nature and should be structured to provide believable characters in a scene that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The message must be conveyed to the audience in a convincing way.

7. If adopted by national tournaments, at-large qualification methods might be the same for this event as the procedures used for those participating in dramatic duo; however, each student should be restricted to one entry in this event at the respective national tournament.

For those tournaments that use the AFA/NIET event groupings, it is suggested that the event be placed with the Group A events of prose interpretation, informative speaking, and impromptu speaking.

The event should be evaluated as any duet acting scene is assessed. The following criteria from the Texas Forensic Association's Duet Acting ballot could be used as tools of assessment:

1. Adequacy of introduction: Is there adequate information to prepare the audience for the scene? Is the information relevant? Does the introduction set the mood for the scene?

2. Characterization: Do the actors establish believable characters, and are they consistent with the mood of the scene?

3. Voice and Diction: Are the voice and the diction used in keeping with the characters established? Is the vocal variety appropriate and sufficient for the scene?

4. Movement and Strategy: Is the acting area used effectively by the actors? Is the blocking consistent with the overall effectiveness of the scene?

5. Ensemble: Is the scene shared equally? Do the actors react, interact, and respond to the motivation of the scene? Does the team exhibit unity?

6. Message: Was the message transmitted to the audience in a creative and convincing way?

7. Overall Effectiveness: Is the total effect of the performance pleasing? Did the actors hold the interest of the audience, and is the intent of the message clearly communicated?

With the changes suggested above, the event could be a creative and substantive event. Improvisational duet acting offers a new vehicle for presenting issues which is not presently being used in the collegiate forensic community. The adoption of the event as an experimental event would offer students an outlet for having fun, releasing pent-up emotions, and allowing opportunities to be creative, persuasive, and cooperative. The activity would help increase the students' self-awareness and decrease their self-consciousness. These features represent reason enough to adopt the activity as a national tournament event.

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Business Leaders' Perceptions of Forensics: Is It Preparation for the Marketplace?

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■ I recently conducted a two-day public speaking training session for ten managerial-level employees of a Minneapolis company. One of the course participants was an attorney in the company's legal department who had earned her degrees at a large university in the upper Midwest. Because I knew that university's historical reputation for having a strong debate and forensics program, I asked the attorney during one of our breaks whether she had participated in any of those activities when she was an undergraduate. She chuckled at my question, smiled ruefully, and replied, "No, I've never liked to speak in public, and so I avoided any classes or activities at the University which might have involved public speaking. At law school, I thought that if I avoided criminal law, I might never have to speak in a courtroom. And when I took my present job, I thought that by becoming a supervisor, I'd be able to have other junior attorneys do my speaking for me. But it didn't work out quite that way; that's why my supervisor asked me to take this course."

Personal after-the-fact testimonials, such as this one, are frequently heard by people who do communication consulting work for businesses. Many companies acknowledge the value of public speaking training by investing substantial amounts of money and employee time in on-site training sessions. Those of us who are also professionally involved in forensics might argue that training in public speaking and critical thinking can better be gained by prospective employees when they are undergraduates competing in the programs which we direct. That argument led me to ask the question, "Do business leaders perceive that participation in forensics provide preparation for employment?"

Review of Related Literature

Many researchers have investigated the relationship between communication training and occupations. Much earlier in this century, Rankin (1928) studied the communication patterns of teachers and other occupational groups, asking subjects to keep inventories of the time they spent in communication during the waking day. His findings that 70% of the waking day is spent in communication and that listening is most pervasive (42.1%), speaking second (31.9%), reading third (15%), and writing least frequently used (11%) have been quoted so often that they have become commonplace among communication educators.

Other more specific studies have been frequently done in more recent years, both in academic and occupational publications. Weitzel and Gaske (1984) expanded and updated McBath and Burhan's (1975) earlier catalog

of studies related to career development and speech education. Weitzel and Gaske reviewed dozens of studies, all of which generally concluded that communication training was occupationally valuable, to greater or lesser degrees. None of the studies reviewed concentrated specifically on forensics training, which was an area of interest in my study.

Methodology

Twelve years ago, my colleague at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls, Jerry Carstens, had distributed a questionnaire in which he inquired about corporate attitudes toward a variety of communication skills and competencies. He and I revised the 1978 questionnaire to include items related to forensics, and we sent it out to the same list of companies which he had surveyed previously. Seventy-two corporations (all those with 1,000 or more employees) in the Ninth Federal Reserve District were chosen to receive this questionnaire. The list of companies was found in the **Corporate Reports Directory**, and the addresses were updated from current telephone directories. Copies of the questionnaire were sent to the Chief Executive Officer, the Director of Education and Training, and the Human Resources or Personnel Director at each of the companies.

The questionnaire sought the respondents' evaluation of current university and corporate training in a variety of listed communication activities. Respondents were also asked to identify in what areas they expect business communication graduates to have had training. Finally, respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their work week devoted to listed communication activities. The questionnaire was distributed during September, 1988.

Questionnaires sent to fourteen of the companies on our list were returned to as "undeliverable" by the post office. Presumably those fourteen companies had either merged with other companies or have gone out of business. Of the surviving fifty-eight companies, representatives of sixteen of those companies, or 27% returned our questionnaires.

Results

Each of the items in the questionnaire is listed below, followed by a description of the responses:

Table One**Comparative Importance of Paired Communication Forms**

1. In the following series of pairs, circle the item which represents the form of communication of greater importance to your organization. (Please circle one item per pair.)

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
Sending messages	9/1	or Receiving messages	6/2
Initiating messages	6/2	or Responding to messages	8/1
Internal communication (within organization)	12/1	or External communication (between organizations)	2/2
Writing	5/2	or Speaking	9/1
Listening	14/1	or Reading	1/2
Speaking	4/2	or Listening	14/1
Writing	15/1	or Reading	1/2
Persuading	7/1.5	or Informing	7/1.5
Face-to-face communications	10/1	or Indirect communications (telephone, memo, letter)	5/2
Informal communications	8/1	or Group presentations	6/2

Comment: This forced-choice item revealed a few clear preferences. Sending and receiving were reasonably balanced, as were initiating and responding to messages. Internal communication was perceived as more important than external communication. Speaking was seen as somewhat more important than writing, although the comparison between speaking and listening produced a wide preference for listening. Listening was also seen as more important than speaking. Persuading and informing were evenly split. Face-to-face communication was chosen by twice as many respondents as indirect communications. Informal communications and group communications were balanced.

Table Two**Communication Deficiencies**

2. Indicate the communication competencies most lacking in the personnel of your organization.

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
A. Conference Leadership	2/8.5	F. Giving Directions	3/6
B. Group Problem Solving	8/3	G. Motivating People	8/3
C. Listening	8/3	H. 1 to 1 Conferences	1/10
D. Negotiating/ Bargaining	2/8.5	I. Formal Presentations	3/6
E. Delegating Authority	10/1	J. Handling Grievances	0/11.5
		K. Using the Grapevine	3/6
		L. Other (Specify)	0/11.5

Comment: When asked to identify communication deficiencies within their organization, respondents most frequently listed delegating authority, followed closely by group problem solving, listening, and motivating people. A few respondents also noted conference leadership, negotiating/bargaining, giving directions, formal presentations, and using the grapevine. One respondent listed one-to-one conferences; no one identified handling grievances as a deficiency.

Table Three
Areas of Training Provided

3. Indicate the communication competencies in which your organization provides training:

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
A. Conference Leadership	2/10.5	F. Giving Directions	7/7
B. Group Problem Solving	11/3.5	G. Motivating People	11/3.5
C. Listening	13/1	H. 1 to 1 Conferences	5/9
D. Negotiating/ Bargaining	7/7	I. Formal Presentations	12/2
E. Delegating Authority	9/5	J. Handling Grievances	7/7
		K. Using the Grapevine	1/12
		L. Other (Specify)	2/10.5

Comment: Most companies apparently provide a variety of training programs, although one respondent indicated that no company training was provided. Listening led the list of available training, followed closely by formal presentations, group problem solving, and motivating people. Training in delegating authority was offered by nine companies, and seven companies provide training in negotiating/bargaining, giving directions, and handling grievances. Conference leadership training is available at six companies, and training in one-to-one conferences is offered at five companies. One respondent reports that training is provided in using the grapevine; other training programs listed teamwork and team building.

Table Four
Competencies in which Training Should Be Offered

4. Indicate the communication competencies in which your organization **should** provide training (recognizing that you may not already be doing so):

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
A. Conference Leadership	3/8	F. Giving Directions	4/5
B. Group Problem Solving	4/5	G. Motivating People	6/2
C. Listening	6/2	H. 1 to 1 Conferences	1/11
D. Negotiating/ Bargaining	3/8	I. Formal Presentations	4/5
E. Delegating Authority	6/2	J. Handling Grievances	3/8
		K. Using the Grapevine	1/11
		L. Other (Specify)	1/11

Comment: Listening also leads the list of training which respondents believe their companies should provide, although delegating authority and motivating people receive the same number of responses. Four respondents indicate a need for training in group problem solving, giving directions, and formal presentations; three respondents list conference leadership, negotiating/bargaining, and handling grievances. One respondent indicated training needs for one-to-one conferences, using the grapevine, and teamwork skills.

Table Five
Training Colleges Need to Offer

5. Colleges and universities should place greater emphasis on the following areas of communication education to better prepare their graduates for employment with your organization (check all that apply):

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
Listening	16/1.5	Interviewing	6/6
Writing	16/1.5	Competitive Speaking	4/7.5
Interpersonal Communication	15/3	Reading	3/9
Small Group Communication	12/4	Oral Interpretation	4/7.5
Public Speaking	9/5	Debate	0/10.5
		Other (Specify)	0/10.5

Comment: Nearly all the respondents believe that colleges and universities should place greater emphasis on listening and writing as job

preparation. Interpersonal communication and small group communication were also identified by a substantial number of respondents. About half the respondents want more public speaking training, and six want more training in interviewing. A few respondents want more emphasis placed on competitive speaking, oral interpretation, and reading. The only area in which none of the respondents saw a need for greater emphasis was debate.

Table Six

Areas Expected in Business Communication Major

6. When prospective employees list "Business Communication" as a major, in what areas do you expect them to have had training?

Item	Frequency/Rank	Item	Frequency/Rank
Writing	19/1	Interviewing	10/6
Small Group		Oral Interpretation	6/7
Communication	16/2	Reading	5/8.5
Interpersonal		Competitive Speaking	5/8.5
Communication	14/3	Other (Specify)	1/10
Listening	13/4.5	Debate	0/11
Public Speaking	13/4.5		

Comment: Everyone expects Business Communication majors to have training in writing, and most expect them to have training in small group communication, interpersonal communication, listening, and public speaking. More than half of the respondents expect interviewing training. Six respondents list oral interpretation experience as an exception, and five list reading and competitive speaking. One respondent indicated an expectation for management and marketing training; no respondents expect Business Communication majors to have debate training.