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Missing

Learning to Play Well With Others: Forensics as Epistemic in Creating and Enhancing Communication Competence

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ABSTRACT: *An often-undersold dimension of forensic activities is the opportunity they afford within the tournament, team, and partner context for building relationships and expanding the horizons of their participants. The relationships and abilities to communicate competently within those relationships are essential to the quality of the forensic experience. We explore the connection between socialization within forensic activities and the epistemic nature of the activity, arguing that social skills are important benefits accrued through forensic participation, and as such are educational values of our activity. We focus particular attention on competence in areas of mentoring, cultural communication, and conflict management. We treat forensic participation as a laboratory in which these communication abilities are honed as critical dimensions of the forensic experience. Implications for program direction and assessment are discussed. Key Terms: communication competence, forensic participation, mentoring, cultural communication, conflict management, epistemology*

Most programs have students who stand out as exemplars for programs, perhaps because of their competitive success, leadership, or other factors. One of ours is a student we will call Sally. Sally joined us as a freshman from a very small town, having had little exposure to a world outside her rural high school and community. Her high school forensic team traveled very minimally. Sally had never ventured outside of the eastern part of her state. She brought with her to the University a dogmatic attitude regarding politics, urban life, and what was appropriate and inappropriate communication. Understandably, she entered college as a student influenced by little beyond her town, high school, and family. Sally's life changed in many ways as she navigated her way through four years of college education. She got married, she changed political affiliations, she earned countless forensic awards including qualifications for a number of national tournaments, she rode on a plane—several planes—(despite not telling her family until after the fact because of their concern over air travel), and she moved from a dogmatic approach to the world to a more assertive, informed approach to individuals and

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unfamiliar contexts. She maintained a certain lack of objectivity that created tensions with some individuals. Still, most who knew Sally for all of her four years in the program agree that her involvement had a positive influence on her life.

Sally is not unlike countless students and professionals whose communication and very identities evolve through forensic participation. Few activities are as diverse in their nature as those that constitute forensics. At the same time, forensic activities are educational and competitive. Their content ranges from evidence-based policy debate to group performances of literature. Some programs travel nearly every weekend, often to all corners of the nation, while others limit their travel to a small number of tournaments within a limited geographical region. The choices afforded by forensic programs, through the diverse nature of the activity, make it difficult to generalize about the face of forensics; however, regardless of the nature of the specific program, forensic activities are epistemic. Forensics is rich in its potential for pedagogical and competitive benefits. The epistemic nature of forensic activities that we discuss falls within areas of socialization. Specifically, we argue that participants at all levels of involvement in forensics have unique opportunities to become more competent communicators due to the nature of the activity. We offer our view of what it means to communicate competently, examine areas of mentoring, conflict management, and cultural communication; and then discuss implications for this view of the activity and individual programs.

Forensics as Epistemic: An Overview

Much has been written regarding the values of forensic participation. Studies point to the impact of forensic participation on intellectual or cognitive skill development (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Colbert, 1987; Littlefield, 2001; Rogers, 2002; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001). Essays argue for including debating and speaking as centerpieces for curriculum in courses and in institution-wide curriculum (Bellon, 2000; Keller, Whittaker, & Burke, 2001; Millsap, 1998). Freeley and Steinberg (2005) have offered perhaps the definitive list of values of academic debate for 11 editions of their noteworthy debate text. With an emphasis on debate activities, they allude to the importance of the forensic context for realizing potential benefits of debate participation. They write, "Although not all these values are unique to debate, a successful academic debate program is an important means of attaining them" (p. 22). Even critics of contemporary forensic practices and culture speak to the potential value of the activities and importance of improving perceived shortcomings in order to help forensics maximize its epistemic potential (Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2001; Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003). The volume of scholarship that argues the myriad benefits of forensics is impressive. That forensics is epistemic, has become a commonly accepted reality among most familiar with the activities, even though this awareness is not always articulated as such. Within the

literature there is significant attention paid to traditional academic skills and outcomes. What receives less attention among proponents of forensics is the connection between forensics and improved communication and socialization.

Forensics and Communication Competence

Spitzberg (2000) tells us that competent communication is both effective and appropriate. In order for communication to be effective it must meet its desired goal. To achieve appropriateness, one must operate within the norms of a given context. Further, Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2004) explain that communication competence is a multifaceted idea. They stress that competent communicators adapt their communication to the context, stating that there is not one single way to communicate in all situations. Further, they explain that communication competence is a learned behavior. Among the behaviors central to achieving communication competence is being empathetic and self-monitoring. Finally, it is suggested that to communicate competently, a person must "construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue," (p. 23) instead of relying on a single method. DeVito (2007) crystallizes communication competence by writing that it includes "knowing how to adjust your communication according to the context of the interaction, the person with whom you're interacting," as well as "instruction by trial and error" (p. 20).

The unique nature of forensics allows its participants to achieve communication competence, creating an important and largely undersold argument for why forensics is epistemic. If a person applies the above-mentioned criteria of communication competence to forensics, the link between forensics and improved communication becomes clear. If a person is to be a competent communicator, s/he must both be effective and appropriate (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2004). Forensic education and participation helps individuals meet these criteria in their development as communicators. Similarly, forensic educators become more "effective" and "appropriate" communicators through their own forensic participation. These individuals must balance their approach to their students by preparing them for educational and competitive success, as well as meaningful social experiences. In pursuing these outcomes, educators are honing their own communication competence. A forensic educator can easily pair together in debate two individuals who are both very talented and have a winning team. By doing so, the team is "effective" in that it meets a goal of competitive success; however, the educator must also appropriately pair the personalities of debate partners. The educator must take into consideration the ability of the two partners to get along, their ability to practice together, as well as the experience levels of other team members. By considering other factors besides just the likelihood of a particular pair to be successful, the educator is achieving appropriateness.

Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2004) argue that communication competence is a learned behavior. While people of all abilities typically join collegiate forensics teams, the one thing that all of these teams have in common is the ability to teach and improve communication competence. Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor argue that even if people do not have formal training, they can learn to be better communicators through observation, and through trial and error. What makes the forensic laboratory so unique is that its participants spend countless hours together. While scientific laboratories are generally stable and sterile, the forensic laboratory is quite the opposite. It is dynamic, moving anywhere forensic participants gather, including the squad room, the classroom, the van, the hotel, tournaments, or restaurants. Carmack and Holm (2005), for example, point to the squad room as not only a place for team members to practice, but also to interact, socialize, and build relationships. In other words, the squad room is a laboratory for practicing communication competence.

In order to be a competent communicator, a person must also be adaptable as well as empathetic. Spitzberg (2000) explains that because competent behavior varies so much contextually and between individuals, one must be able to adapt personal communication skills and tendencies. Further, in pursuance of the desired effect, a person must strive to understand the other person's point of view (Ifert & Roloff, 1997). Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2004) elaborate, stating that people do not always express themselves, and others must derive their feelings from verbal and non-verbal cues. By allowing themselves to understand the point of view of another person, and trying to see the issue from the other side, a person is achieving empathy. Redmond (1989) argues that communicating empathically is inherently communicating competently because of the other-centeredness that defines empathy.

Forensics students must learn to adapt their communication styles in order to work more effectively with partners as well as teammates in general. For example, within parliamentary debate, the government team is asked to construct a case within a 15-minute preparation time limit. In this timeframe, partners have choices to make about what type of case they choose to put forth. The pair often has to choose between a direction with which they both have limited familiarity, one in which both are knowledgeable, or a direction that one partner knows more about than does their colleague. These partners are reaching communication competence when they are being collaborative and working on their ideas together.

Additionally, forensic educators are often called upon to express empathy in one fashion or another. Consider that many teams are made up of a combination of outspoken and reticent individuals. At times, it is up to the forensic educator to empathize with the soft-spoken members of the team in order to preserve their voice as well as their identity with the team. At the heart of forensics is teaching a

person to be an advocate; however, it is up to the coaching staff to mentor these individuals and ensure that what evolves is a "team," and not a group made up of forensic participants. Forensic educators, in guarding against outspoken members of the team dictating policy or directives, are achieving a degree of communication competence.

Another facet of communication competence includes involvement and self-monitoring. Much of communication competence lies within choices made by the individuals engaged with one another. There are no rulebooks for what are the best or least advised responses to communication behaviors, individuals, or contexts. Individuals must monitor their own behaviors to ensure that they are communicating effectively and appropriately. Essentially, self-talk helps us to maintain a degree of competence when we communicate in our various situations. Forensic experiences help to build skills of self-monitoring. We listen to arguments that we may not accept as true. We listen to performances of literature that we may not find appealing. We travel and work with—and in some cases, share a room with—individuals we may find to be objectionable for any number of reasons. In these ways, forensic laboratories uniquely test our abilities to self-monitor, whether we are student or professional participants. No forensic educator has likely escaped the team member who they dislike personally, or at least like less than others. Still, that less-endearing individual has as much right to expect fair and impartial treatment from the professional staff as the next person. Educators learn to remain engaged in conversations they may not understand or want to nurture, or they may even have to temper positive treatment of certain team members in order to avoid preferential treatment that separates less *valued* team members.

An underview to the connection between forensics and communication competence is the potential for this combination to create collaborative learning. Our discussion of communication competence has included illustrations that center around both students and educators. The reality is that all participants' communication competence can be improved through the opportunities created by forensic experiences. Students, by joining a forensic program, often find themselves working with people different from them, being exposed to new ideas, and traveling to unfamiliar places. At the same time, educators and others associated with programs have the same opportunities to engage the same differences, and subsequently, benefit from the same opportunities for intercultural communication.

Forensics and Mentoring Competence

The notion of mentoring is relevant to any educational setting. Educators have the potential to impact students simply because of the teaching that is part of the educational environment. Ideally, educators effect students through introductions of new ideas and experiences, and by their criticism and questioning of student ideas. Johnson (2003) explains that mentoring, in contrast to other faculty

roles, “requires a faculty member to engage in a dynamic, emotionally connected and reciprocal relationship with the protégé” (p. 129). He adds, “mentoring connotes intentional and generative career development, as well as some degree of personal nurturing or care giving—typically in the context of a relatively enduring and emotionally bonded relationship” (p. 129). Johnson proposes a triangular model for conceptualizing competence in mentoring that involves “three essential components: mentor character virtues, mentor abilities, and mentor competencies—encompassing both knowledge and skill” (p. 134).

The nature and characteristics of mentoring discussed by Johnson are found within four models of mentoring discussed by Buell (2004). Her research reveals four communication models of mentoring: cloning, nurturing, friendship, and apprenticeship. Important to these four models is that they may well overlap within the mentor/protégé relationship. Further, she reports that most mentors and protégés reject the cloning model of mentoring, and prefer nurturing and friendship models. While the dialectical elements of friendship and nurturing are preferred, Buell also reports tendencies for mentors to communicate in ways that promote cloning, or “a relationship in which a mentor seeks not simply to direct, but to control, a mentee” (p. 64).

While the literature points toward a clear definition and even models of mentoring, the communication that leads to competent mentoring is more subjective. Young and Cates (2005), for example, advocate playful communication [“a non-serious type of informal communication that includes humor, telling stories, teasing, and gossiping” (p. 692)] as effective mentoring communication. They explain that, “playful communication leads to effective mentoring because these forms of communication help the protégé ease tensions of socialization into an organization” (p. 692). Essentially, the same communication that builds healthy interpersonal relationships is necessary for healthy mentoring relationships. At the same time, the inherent element of influence of mentor over protégé makes the combination of effectiveness and appropriateness particularly important. As suggested in the cloning model, a mentor can exert undo influence by trying to create mirror images of him/herself in the protégé, potentially limiting degrees of self-determination that are essential for creating self-identity for the protégé.

While all educators have contact with and the potential to mentor students, forensic settings are highly open to mentoring possibilities. Few forensic educators have the same breadth and depth of interaction with classroom students as they do with their forensic students. White (2005) writes, “What often takes new coaches off guard, however, is the significant amount of time one spends functioning as a ‘life coach’” (p. 89). As White explains, the amount of time students spend with their forensic educators makes it logical for those same educators to become advisors on career, academic, and even social

decisions. White concludes that, "out of these discussions evolve forensic coaches as fundamental mentors" (p. 89). This can also create challenges for educators. For example, it can be difficult to develop a friendship or nurturing mentor/protégé relationship with a student who is also enrolled in a traditional classroom. We have both had students who, intentionally or unintentionally, have tried to take advantage of the forensic relationship by asking for extended deadlines on work, missing class for unannounced reasons, or reacting negatively to grades they earn but do not expect. At the same time, communicating the distinction of the mentor/protégé and educator/student relationships can help to pre-empt tensions that can arise as a result of the duality in relational roles.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for collaborative learning comes in recognizing examples forensic educators set for their forensic students (Jensen & Jensen, 2002). We have become more aware of our communication and life choices as a result of their potential influence on our students. For example, while we may drink socially, we do not drink while supervising students at tournaments. We will also overtly reserve times for family, and we avoid scheduling tournaments on holidays, as a way of communicating the importance of family and relationships that can be threatened by the time demands of forensic participation. In the end, we have become better time managers, better parents, and hopefully, better mentors.

White (2006) addresses another important value of mentoring competence through forensics, when she writes: "A coach who serves as a positive mentor for his/her students will help teach those same students to perform a similar role for others" (p. 93). Shortly after accepting our present appointments, we encountered a student who personified this sentiment; we will call him Charlie. Charlie was a four-year member of our program and is now an actively engaged alumna. As a team president, he worked hard to model behavior that the professional staff expected of all team members, and was quick to call attention to unacceptable behavior and attitudes when exhibited. While not all team members responded to Charlie's example or guidance, those who did went on to become team officers and respected team colleagues. Many of those who were impervious to Charlie's example became disengaged members of the team. Even now, Charlie's legacy is seen in current team members seeking his advice (for forensic and non-forensic matters), asking for his coaching, and longing for his approval in their forensic and non-forensic lives.

Forensics and Intercultural Communication Competence

The greatest challenge to intercultural communication competence is the inherent difference that is at the heart of communicating with people not like us. While understanding culture is an important contributor to competence, experiences with differences are the best teachers. Martin and Nakayama (2000) write, "You can't learn how to be a good [intercultural] communicator just by reading books . . . Just

like learning to be a good public speaker or a good relational partner, it takes experience" (p. 317). Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) conclude that being a competent communicator, "means you have the ability to analyze the situation and select the appropriate mode of behavior," adding that competence comes most easily to "those who are (1) motivated, (2) have a fund of knowledge to draw upon, (3) possess requisite communication skills, and (4) are of good character" (p. 314). Central to intercultural communication is the presence of differences in culture that become salient to that given communication experience. A man and woman may talk about impact of the designated hitter in managing baseball teams—an instance in which cultural differences among the communicators exist—but intercultural communication is not taking place. That same man and woman may also talk about sex roles and parenting responsibilities—an instance in which their cultural differences are important to the interaction—thus creating an intercultural communication experience.

Not all forensic contexts are good training for intercultural experiences and, ultimately, intercultural competence. The activity itself, along with programs and their participants, helps to determine the potential for forensic experiences to become intercultural communication encounters. At the same time, there is infinite potential for forensic activities to hone intercultural competence in its participants. In calling for forensics to adopt an ethic of diversity, Jensen (1994) explained that such an ethic "is meant to incorporate the range of ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, ideologies, performances, and cultural experiences represented within a program" (p. 105). Perhaps the first and most important step toward creating a training ground for intercultural competence is to establish this ethic. As one study concluded, "If diversity is not measured, expected, rewarded, encouraged, or in some other manner considered in terms of accountability, the probability is that diversity will be less likely to occur" (Allen, Trejo, Bartanen, Schroeder, & Ulrich, 2004, p. 176). When such diversity is present, participants are able to better understand and experience intercultural communication. Allen et al. (2004) connect the health of forensics to its ability to reflect diverse populations when they write, "the long-term success of forensics requires that its participation rates reflect the changing dynamic of the population" (p. 173).

There are countless ways that diversity and intercultural communication can be part of a forensic context. The very nature of the team and the tournament is such that people come together for a common purpose. Freeley and Steinberg (2005) write that, through forensic participation, "students learn to communicate with sensitivity in a multicultural environment that may not be available on their home campus" (p. 29). Geographical differences are created when programs travel outside of their region. Ethnic and racial differences are present when Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCU) programs and all-Caucasian programs attend tournaments together. A myriad of differences are created when programs include participants who bring

their own unique life experiences and perspectives to programs, such as age, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Ideally, both teams and tournaments should feature diverse participation (Billings, 2000). The important point to understand is that with groups as inherent features of forensic arenas, the propensity for difference to exist is great. Similarly, the parallel relationship between the amount of difference and the potential for intercultural communication suggests that promoting diversity in forensics is valuable.

Most programs need to exert little to no effort to bring intercultural experiences into their context. Traveling to tournaments outside of their region exposes programs to differences in approaches to forensic events, foods, populations, and other cultural perspectives. Welcoming students and educators from a variety of life experiences into a program affords participants opportunities to develop their intercultural communication skills. The range of literature performed, topics debated, and issues presented within original speeches exposes individuals to a variety of worldviews.

Communicating about differences is as important as the actual presence of the differences. We validate and understand the experiences we have with diversity through talking about those experiences. Interaction, combined with experience, allows for our frames of reference to change. Several years ago a female student approached one of us about our use of "girls" when referring to the female students in our program. She explained that she was offended by the term, and that "women" would be more appropriate. That conversation changed language choice and perceptions of women for an educator, thus illustrating the potential for collaborative learning in cultural awareness and competence.

Forensics and Competence in Conflict Management

Wilmot and Hocker (2007) write that interpersonal argumentation "has a place in our everyday conflicts and negotiations" (p. 248). In their introduction to conflict, they address the nature of conflict, suggesting, "in conflict, we must learn to 'do what comes unnaturally.' If we do what we have always done, we will keep getting the results we have always gotten—results that may keep us mired in the same old patterns" (p. 5). The reality for many individuals is that conflict is avoided and not escalated. Individuals may be uncomfortable with dissention. The road to conflict competence necessitates a willingness to disagree, but to do so in respectful and assertive ways.

Conflict competence is often misunderstood. Many texts borrow Spitzberg's (1991) notion of competence and appropriateness to define competent conflict communication (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000; Cupach & Canary, 2000). To become competent in conflict behavior, one must be willing to argue, or give reasons for positions that are communicated. Argumentative behavior within conflict means that one argues, or communicates, about issues and not individuals; being argumentative merely suggests that a person is predisposed to engage

in debate about controversial issues (Cupach & Canary, 2000). Argumentativeness, then, is an important characteristic of competent conflict behavior. In their review of argumentativeness and conflict, Cupach and Canary (2000) conclude that a "highly argumentative person's focus on ideas preempts a desire to resort to personal attacks" (p. 58).

Lulofs and Cahn (2000) add to the understanding of conflict competence by noting that we must make choices that may reflect degrees of competence, what they refer to as dialectical tensions. These include being assertive while maintaining levels of politeness; maintaining our socially competent communication behaviors while being flexible to specific relationships and contexts that may call for adaptation; balancing community and individual interests; exercising control that does not appear to be domineering; and avoiding incompetent behavior when one generally exhibits competent communication. These tensions speak to the difficulty in achieving consistently competent conflict behaviors. Finding and seizing opportunities to reinforce such competence is essential to making competent conflict management a part of one's communication personality.

Given what is written about competent conflict management, the potential for forensic participation to hone such skills is tremendous. The foundation of forensics is grounded in an argumentation perspective. The first national developmental conferences on forensics defined the activity as one that uses argumentation as a vehicle and context for its educational, competitive, and communicative activities (see McBath, 1975; Parson, 1984). Similarly, each of Lulof and Cahn's (2000) tensions are almost definitive elements within any team context; certainly they are ever-present in forensic contexts.

Within the team context disagreements abound. Engleberg and Wynn (2007) write that, "conflict is unavoidable in effective groups. Rarely do conscientious group members work together for any length of time without expressing differences and disagreeing" (p. 175). They add, "groups without constructive conflict are groups without the means to analyze the wisdom of their decisions" (p. 21). Whether the issue is developing a travel schedule, deciding debate partners, making daily decisions in team meetings, or co-existing in a van or a hotel room, the need to engage, manage, and resolve conflict is a frequent part of forensic participation. Forensics is unique from the typical collegiate experience in its potential for honing competent conflict management because of both the extended amount of time spent as a group, and the argumentative nature of the activity itself. Forensic practitioners are trained to argue; it is logical to assume that forensic group settings are characterized by debate and disagreement, even though, in general, "many of us go out of our way to avoid or suppress it (conflict)" (Engleberg & Wynn, 2007, p. 175). At the same time, forensic programs meet as groups, but also spend anywhere from two to four days a week traveling and competing together in

contexts that force interaction. The circumstances that characterize typical forensic participation increase the propensity for conflict in any group several fold.

While students engage others within team settings, teams engage other teams within the tournament setting. Here disagreements are just as commonplace, but are accompanied by all that is associated with competition. As Freeley and Steinberg (2005) write, students learn "that they must accept victory or defeat gracefully and that they must respond courteously to the criticism of judges regardless of the decision" (p. 29). As forensic participants socialize with others from different programs, potentially divisive situations can unfold. Rivalries exist between programs in the same way that they do in professional sports. Others may not communicate in respectful or otherwise competent ways within debate rounds, tournament social settings, or other forensic settings. Whatever the challenge may be, there is a distinct possibility that forensic settings will mean dealing with conflict that involves individuals from programs other than our own.

Just as it did for mentoring and intercultural competence, the potential for collaborative learning of competent conflict communication between forensic students and professionals exists. One of the greatest challenges that some forensic educators face is dealing with the confidence and assertiveness that we teach our students. It is not uncommon, for example, for a debater to question a revealed decision after it is announced. While such questioning can sometimes be inappropriately aggressive, student debaters are often merely inquisitive and ask penetrating questions to better understand the reason for the decision. The same professionals who are justifying their decisions may resist this same kind of questioning from their own child, or even a student in a classroom regarding a grade on a paper. Professionals can learn that defending their ideas can be just as appropriate when it involves a student, as it is when the defense involves a peer. Such defenses can also become expectations in group meetings when announcing team policies or decisions.

The first time we were part of a program wherein student input was prominent, our adjustment was awkward. We worked hard to resist using "because we said so" as our justification for decisions that were not in line with student expectations. We learned to be prepared to defend our decisions, whether it involved dinner on a tournament night, or a finalized travel schedule. Our relationship with students in this program was more positive as our communication was more respectful (and at the same time assertive), our conflict styles more flexible (allowing for collaboration and accommodation when appropriate), and our reasoning more transparent. We became better communicators and conflict managers as a result of these forensic experiences.

Implications and Discussion

While a myriad of values associated with forensic participation exist, perhaps the least advocated are those of training for communication competence. More traditional academic skills and traits, such as writing and research ability and critical thinking, are popular and important benefits that are at the heart of our promotion of forensics as epistemic. At the same time, a plethora of studies and testimonies in trade, scholarly, and general public publications annually point to communication skills as critical to success in relational, educational, and career settings. Acknowledging the ability of forensic activities and participation to foster greater communication competence is essential for a thorough understanding and appreciation of the value of forensics.

A number of implications stem from the advocacy of forensics as training for communication competence. Initially, programs can seize these skills as additional rationale for support of forensic activities on their campus. As Jensen and Jensen (2005) note, forensic educators have the opportunity to promote the acclaiming, or valuable nature of their programs in ways that, in the long term, will create expectations and justifications for administrative support. The program that promotes competitive success creates an expectation for consistent competitive success as evidence of a *good* year. Incorporating the nurturing of skills central to communication competence into the selling points of forensics allows for justifying program success regardless of the number of trophies won. At the same time, this communicates to the student members of the program that the life-skills gained through forensics are equally, or even more, important than the awards that line squad rooms and trophy cases.

Codifying communication competence as an important outcome of forensic participation can also help to address the concerns of critics (Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2001; Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003) that forensics over-emphasizes competition over other benefits. While other academic outcomes are frequently mentioned within literature promoting forensic activities as epistemic, these benefits are often framed within the context of competition. Research, for example, is taught in ways that will lead to better evidence, which will lead to more debate wins and awards. Mentoring, intercultural communication, and conflict management competence are benefits that can be seen in educational and competitive dimensions of forensic activities, but are not uniquely an extension of or means toward competitive success. Promoting communication competence as an important outcome of forensics helps to frame forensics as a pedagogical activity that develops participants for success as individuals outside of forensic contexts.

An additional implication of recognizing the epistemic nature of forensics through its honing of intercultural competence is the need for programs to become proactive in their promotion of diversity within their membership and activities. Historically, the willingness

of programs to build diversity has been limited, with efforts to increase diversity being positively correlated with having female coaches and a team with a large number of young participants (Valdivia and Simon, 1997). Encouraging, and even expecting and actively creating, a diverse program is the only way to insure that forensic activities can be arenas for teaching and experiencing intercultural communication competence.

Summary

The claim that forensics is epistemic is difficult to debate. The range of positive outcomes that stem directly from forensic participation is impressive, as are the outcomes themselves. At the same time, members of the forensic community might reflect on the epistemic nature of forensics in order to more clearly understand and better appreciate the nature of these benefits. Communication competence is much different from competitive and other more cognitive outcomes. At the same time, enhanced communication abilities can be paramount in selling the additional benefits accrued through forensic participation. We have advocated the inexorable relationship between forensics and competence in mentoring, intercultural communication, and conflict management.

Sally, our sheltered student mentioned earlier, has now graduated and is a mother. She also teaches at-risk students in a sheltered, communal educational setting. She has moved back to her small hometown and is quite happy. At the same time, she is a different person from the woman who left that town in 2001. She appreciates, values, and upholds the importance of difference and uniqueness in others, whether it is race, religion, or sexual orientation; all issues she has come to grips with since her first day as a collegiate forensic student. She is working on a graduate degree in communication. Sally is unsure of what she wants to do in the future. What is more certain is that forensics has helped equip her with the communication competence to succeed by her own measure, as well as by the standards society may set for her.

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