

Forensics as Preparation for Participation in the Academic World

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This paper examines the question of whether forensics preparation helps in making public presentations specifically within the academic world of professional conferences. The study analyzes data collected from a questionnaire administered to students who have participated in intercollegiate forensics and who have presented a paper at an academic or professional conference, as well as interviews with students who have presented a paper at an academic or professional conference but have not participated in intercollegiate forensics. Results indicate that skills learned from participation in forensics are also used in professional presentations. In addition, many of the major fears associated with conference presentations by the non-forensics students are found to be skills gained from participation in forensics.

Almost all undergraduates write papers, but only a few take advantage of the opportunity to present their work at an academic or professional conference. I had an opportunity to co-write and present a paper last year at the Midwest Political Science Association's annual conference. It was my impression that my participation in forensics helped me to be better prepared for this presentation. This paper addresses the issue of whether participation in forensics prepares students for life outside of the forensics environment. Specifically, I will examine if forensics training helps students to be better presenters at professional and academic conferences. Because there is little research regarding this subject, this paper should be viewed as an exploratory study. Further research will be useful to document the benefits of forensics participation in making professional and academic presentations.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Forensics coaches have long argued that becoming a good public speaker takes practice and hard work. Public speaking textbooks as well as articles teaching people how to become "good public speakers" agree. Kent Menzel and Lori Carrell argue in *Communication Education* that total preparation time was a significant predictor of the quality of speech performance. Menzel and Carrell videotaped 119 students giving speeches and then gave them questionnaires, which included information on preparation time. They found that their students

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"perceived a positive relationship between the time they spent preparing for a speech and the quality of the speech that followed" (1994: 18). In an article entitled "Practice Makes Perfect: Speaking in Public," Gary Jader (1991) states that the key to a good presentation is "plenty of preparation." Three major components of preparation are audience analysis, research and organization.

Audience analysis involves understanding and responding to the needs, wants and values of the audience. Arnold Zenker and Terry Chapman (1992) state that "effective speakers know their audience." (20). Within the forensics setting this involves learning about what sorts of topics are acceptable for platform speeches, which interpretation pieces will be considered "overdone," and what type of argumentation will be most effective. In the context of a professional or academic conference, audience analysis involves the recognition of which portions of the paper observers will be most interested in and who most likely will be in the audience.

Research skills are a necessity for forensics students. Participation in forensics teaches students the most effective methods for gathering data for use in debates, platform speeches or limited preparation events. For students making professional or scholarly presentations, research skills are necessary for the writing of the paper and also for preparation for the presentation.

Organization is the third major component of preparation. This involves arranging major points into logical patterns. Within platform speeches this often involves relying on a speech model as a frame for the information. Limited preparation speakers are taught to organize their speeches into two to four major points using the outline format. For debaters, organization often wins the debate which is why learning the skill of "flowing" is so critical. Within the context of academic or professional conferences, organizational skills are a necessity not only in the writing of the paper but also in determining the structure of the presentation.

Practice is another important component of public speaking. Gary Jader instructs his readers in the article "Practice Makes Perfect: Speaking in Public" to "rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse some more." (1991:19). Menzel and Carrell point out, however, that, "as necessary as practice is, it does little good when not backed up by instruction." Within the forensics setting, students are able to practice public speaking regardless of how much time is spent outside of tournaments practicing. Each round can be seen as practice with instruction coming in the form of ballot critiques.

Because making scholarly presentations is expected of academics, the professional disciplinary conference can be viewed as an extension of the classroom. Wendy Zabava Ford and Andrew Wolvin assessed the impact of a basic communication class on class, work and social settings. Their results showed that "while students showed perceived improvements for all three contexts, the improvements were

significantly greater for the class context than for the work or social context" (1993: 215).

Since this improvement was based on a single communication class, we can assume that active participation in a communication activity such as forensics will provide students with similar, if not greater, improvements. This is because students are not only learning about communication, but are actively participating in becoming better communicators by participating in forensics. Forensics competition requires that students take what they have learned in the classroom setting and apply it in order to do well in competition. Since the conference setting can be seen as an extension of the academic classroom setting, these benefits should also be evident.

Finally, there is a lack of academic research regarding the conferences themselves. What is clear from the few articles which do exist is that presenting at, or at least attending, conferences is a necessity for academics. Anthony Platt writes in his satire of the scholarly conference trail that "for a budding academic . . . who wants to survive the long, tense years of apprenticeship and enter the hallowed guild of professorhood, trips to annual conferences organized by the professional association of your discipline are obligatory" (1993: 179). This is not to say that all graduate students want to go into academia, but for many graduate students, professional and academic conferences are a part of the graduate school experience. Heather Hill writes of her first presentation experiences in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. She states that, "graduate students' first presentations at conferences do not generally leave the audience cheering in the aisles, and mine was no exception" (1997: B7).

Through the use of survey data, information from interviews and personal experiences of the author, this paper will examine the relationship between forensics participation and successful academic presentations. Based on a review of the literature, five hypotheses will be examined.

First, I hypothesize that the skills respondents said were necessary to be a successful forensics competitor will correspond with the skills they used in their academic presentation. Essentially, I will argue that the skills learned in forensics will carry over into the academic conference setting. This will be measured by comparing the skills respondents say are most important in their events and skills that they have most improved in with skills that were used in their presentations.

Second, I hypothesize that students will feel better prepared for academic presentations and more confident because of their participation in forensics. Since the literature shows that students who practice more and are better prepared are better public speakers, it follows that students who speak in public on a regular basis and learn how to prepare for a public speech will be better prepared and more confident than students who do not have these same experiences. To determine if this is true, I will compare the skills forensics respondents said they

used in their presentations with the major fears of students who have not participated in forensics.

The third hypothesis is that reactions from audience members and panel members will be positive. This is based on my belief that the skills academics value in presentations are the skills forensics students are being taught and practice at each speech tournament. If these skills match up, the reaction from audience members should be positive.

The fourth hypothesis is that some events will prepare students for academic presentations better than others. Specifically, skills learned from platform, limited preparation and debate events will be more useful in the conference setting than skills learned from interpretation events. This hypothesis is based on my experience with these events as a competitor and observer. Also, James McBath suggests in *American Forensics in Perspective* (1984) that skills learned in events differ. He argues that debate teaches students to create arguments, research, organize and analyze data, synthesize ideas and understand the logic of decision making. "Public Address contest events incorporate an argumentative perspective in the research . . . but are unique in that they also utilize a wide range of rhetorical strategies including audience analysis, language choice, and delivery skills" (11). McBath says that Oral Interpretation events are "distinctive because they focus on the human perspective from a poetic stance" (11). Oral interpretation requires that "students understand literary analysis, history, the emotional and intellectual aspects of literature, and effective vocal and physical expression" (11). While the skills learned from interpretation events are important, I would argue that they are not as essential in the context of most professional or academic presentations. Comparing the skills that were used in the presentations with the respondents' major competitive events will test this claim.

The final hypothesis is that undergraduate students presenting papers at professional or academic conferences will be likely to plan on attending graduate school. This is based on the reasoning that students who want to attend graduate school will be interested in presenting papers as a method for improving their chances to get accepted to graduate programs. If these hypotheses are true, forensics participation will help students to give better professional presentations and will therefore make them more desirable to graduate programs. A look at the reasons for presenting will be used to test this hypothesis.

Method

The major method of data collection was a survey. Only students who had participated, or were participating in, intercollegiate forensics and who had presented papers at academic or professional conferences were eligible for the survey. The survey was sent out on the Individual Events List Serve and the Parliamentary Debate List Serve. Both list serves reached a national audience. I also collected surveys

from students and critics in the Northwest region who I knew met both criteria. The survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions, which were post-coded followed by a short section of questions based on a Likert scale.

The first portion of the survey focused on forensics participation. I asked respondents to list the events they had competed in and which events they considered to be their "major events." I defined major events as events they were successful in or those they considered their favorite events. I then asked respondents to list skills that were necessary for successful competition in those events and to list the areas of public speaking they thought they had most improved on through participation in forensics.

The second portion of the survey focused on academic or professional conferences. Respondents were asked to list the conferences they had presented at, the factors that inspired them to participate in the conferences, and whether the response from the audience and panel was positive or negative. I then asked them to list skills they used in their presentation that were gained from participation in forensics.

The third portion of the survey focused on future plans. Respondents were asked if they were planning on attending graduate school within the next ten years and, if yes, in what field.

The final portion of the survey consisted of four questions based on a Likert scale. Possible answer choices included "strongly agree," "agree," "no opinion," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Based on responses, I also added a "not applicable" option. These questions attempted to measure how strongly the respondents felt their experiences in forensics had helped strengthen their academic performance at the conference.

To supplement this information, I also conducted informal interviews with six students at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. All six students had either presented a paper at an academic or professional conference or were scheduled to present a paper within the next month. None of the students who were interviewed had ever participated in speech or debate. Each of these students was asked to list the three biggest fears they had before their presentation or the three biggest fears they have for their presentation. These responses were post-coded.

A comparison of forensics with non-forensics students is somewhat problematic because it is difficult to discern if forensics participation is the factor that makes the difference in professional presentations. However, for the purpose of this study, this comparison will provide interesting information regarding perceptions of public speaking between forensics and non-forensics students.

Results

I received a total of six responses, which suggests that the number

of students participating in both forensics and academic conferences is relatively low. Of these responses, the average number of semesters of participation in forensics was seven. The majority of the respondents participated for eight semesters indicating that most respondents are either seniors in college or recent college graduates. Between the six respondents, all nationally recognized events were represented including both parliamentary and cross-examination debate. All respondents are planning on attending graduate school with the exception of one recent graduate who is currently enrolled in law school.

My first hypothesis looks at whether the skills gained in forensics are used in professional presentations. One question asked respondents to list up to three skills that they believed were necessary to be a successful competitor in the events that they considered to be their major events (table 1). The respondents listed a total of twelve skills. Those skills that were mentioned by more than one respondent include organization (2 responses), knowledge of current events (2), analytical skills (2), and the ability to think quickly (3). Other skills included: characterization, tone, timing, research, the drive to succeed, fluency, the ability to articulate thoughts and humor.

Table 1:
Necessary Skills for Major Event

- Organization
- Knowledge of Current Events
- Analytical Skills
- Quick Thinking

A second question asked respondents to list the components of public speaking that they have most improved in (table 2). Ten responses were given. The top answers were the ability to adjust to a new speaking environment (3 responses) expanded knowledge base (3), delivery skills (3), analytical skills (2) and organizational skills (2). Other answers included increased confidence, strengthening of research skills, increased eye contact, improvement in interpersonal skills and increased quickness in thinking on one's feet.

Table 2:
Most Improved Skills

- Adjusting to Environment
- Knowledge
- Delivery
- Analysis
- Organization

A question from the second portion of the survey which focused on the academic presentation asked respondents to list skills used in the

presentation that were gained from participation in forensics (table 3). Six skills were listed. Organization was listed most often (4 responses) followed by delivery (2), confidence (2) and the ability to speak within time limits (2). Quick thinking and awareness of non-verbal behaviors were also listed as skills used in the presentations.

Table 3:

Skills Used in Presentation

Organization

Delivery

Confidence

Time Limits

My second hypothesis is that students who participate in forensics will feel better prepared and more confident because of their participation in forensics. Preparation includes audience analysis, research and organization. Improved research and preparation (1 response), the ability to adjust to the environment (3), and organizational skills (2) were listed as components of public speaking that respondents had most improved in. Organization was also the most listed skill that was used in academic presentations. Four respondents out of six identified organization as a skill they learned from participation in forensics and subsequently used in their presentation.

The respondents who had never participated in forensics listed major fears they have about their presentation (table 4). Delivery was the most listed fear with five out of the six respondents reporting that they were worried about their delivery. A lack of confidence was the second biggest fear (4 responses). Other fears included not being able to work within the time limits, receiving negative nonverbal signals and not being able to think quickly enough to answer questions.

Table 4:

Major Fears of Non-competitors

Poor Delivery

Lack of Confidence

Responses from the Likert scale questions showed that four respondents "strongly agreed" that they were better prepared to present because of the skills they learned from participation in speech and debate.

The third hypothesis is that students will receive positive reactions to their presentations from audience members and panel members. Four respondents reported that they received positive responses. One respondent remarked that she received some negative feedback from members of the audience who were opposed to her research (the topic was pornography). I talked to many of the respondents about their presentations after they had completed the survey and they remarked

that the responses were not just “positive,” but they received numerous complements on both the presentation and the academic material. In my own presentation, a few of the audience members found it hard to believe that I was an undergraduate because of the strength of my presentation.

The fourth hypothesis was that certain events would better prepare students for presentations. Only one respondent listed interpretation events as her major event, which makes it difficult to compare between interpretation events and other events. However, the skills listed by this respondent as being necessary for a good competitor to possess-characterization, tone and timing-were not listed by any other respondent as important skills and were not listed by any respondent (including the respondent who listed them) as skills used in academic presentations.

The final hypothesis is that undergraduate students who chose to present papers at professional conferences plan to attend graduate school. The most cited factors for participating in the conferences were for experience (4 responses), the chance to share research (4), to get into graduate school (3), and encouragement from professors (3). All of the survey respondents were either planning on attending graduate school within the next ten years or, in the case of one respondent, already attending law school. Of the six non-competitors I interviewed, three were planning on attending graduate school.

Discussion and Implications

The results of the first hypothesis dealing with corresponding skills show that the skills overlap somewhat but do not match up perfectly (table 5). Organization clearly seems to be a skill used in presentations that is strengthened through participation in forensics. Delivery skills were also used in presentations and improved on through participation in forensics. This suggests that forensics is preparing students for something other than tournament success. The fact that students used skills gained from forensics in the conference setting shows that forensics educators are emphasizing important skills.

Table 5:

- Necessary Skills for Major Event:** Organization
- Most Improved Skills:** Organization, Delivery
- Skills Used in Presentation:** Organization, Delivery

Results for the second hypothesis, that forensics competitors will be better prepared and more confident, indicate that the hypothesis is true. When comparing the fears of non-competitors with the skills of competitors, it seems that forensics competitors may be more prepared to deal with certain portions of the presentation (table 6). All five of the fears listed by students who had not competed in forensics were listed as skills learned by students who have participated in forensics.

Table 6:
Presentation Skills Gained from forensics:

- Delivery
- Quick Thinking
- Confidence
- Nonverbal awareness
- Time limits
- Organization

Major Fears of Non-Competitors

- Delivery
- Quick Thinking
- Confidence
- Nonverbal Signals
- Time Limits

Since all but one of the respondents who answered the question said they received positive feedback from the audience and panel, the third hypothesis also appears to be confirmed. The positive reactions received by forensics competitors may be traced to participation in forensics. The skills that are valued in academic presentations—organization, delivery, analytical skills, working within time constraints, quick thinking for questions—are all skills that are learned and perfected from participation in forensics. Once again, we see that the skills used in forensics are applicable in other settings.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding the hypothesis that some events prepare students better than others for conferences because of the small sample size. The fact that the skills used in the major events of the respondent who listed interpretation events as her major event were not mentioned by any respondents as skills used in the professional presentations suggests that the various skills learned from different competitive events may be more applicable in certain settings than in others.

Finally, it appears that most undergraduate students who present papers at conferences also have the desire to attend graduate school. I view this as beneficial for academia because it suggests that students entering graduate programs are coming to the programs not only with experience, but also with a proven desire to participate in scholarly activities. Also, student participation in professional conferences is beneficial for forensics programs whose educational values can be validated and which will be represented well by these presentations. Since most undergraduate students who are presenting papers are applying to graduate programs, forensics educators may want to encourage students interested in graduate school who have not pre-

sented papers to consider participating in a conference to strengthen their application.

Conclusion

On the whole, it appears that participation in forensics helps to prepare students to present papers at academic or professional conferences and to be successful in their presentations. In addition, there is reason to believe that certain events help to prepare students for these presentations better than others.

The major weakness of this research is the small sample size. While this may be reflective of the small number of students who present papers at conferences, it makes it difficult to draw major conclusions. It also restricted the use of a quantitative analysis of the data. Another weakness lies in the questionnaire. Questions regarding the fears of forensics competitors would have provided for a comparison between competitors and non-competitors. Further research should expand this sample to include graduate students as well. This will help to increase the sample size and to provide an additional factor for analysis.

There are many avenues of research based on questions brought up in this paper. A lack of substantial data about conferences themselves presents an opportunity for research. It seems as though scholars are either loathe to research their own scholarly activities or have simply overlooked the conference as a fascinating cultural study of academia. More research about skills gained from various events and the applicability of those skills in disparate settings would provide useful information to forensics coaches and departments looking to justify funding for, or the existence of, their forensics program.

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Review

Cohen, J. R. (1998). *Communication criticism: Developing your critical powers (Rhetoric and Society, volume 2)*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Reviewed by: Ken Hada, Texas Wesleyan University

Jodi Cohen's new work is part of the *Rhetoric and Society* series edited by Herbert Simmons. In this vein, Cohen has written a text which attempts to demonstrate how rhetoric functions within society. Her book is worthy of our consideration.

Cohen neatly combines the notion of rhetorical or communication criticism with the teaching of fundamental rhetorical principles. Though much of this work is a discussion of classical concepts used in most college classrooms, Cohen's focus on criticism appropriately sends the message to students that criticism must be considered as one of the primary ends of communication studies. Her text confronts students, early in the learning process, with the idea that criticism should be involved in any rhetorical discussion. For it is through critical lenses that students may clearly see how the subject interacts with other academic disciplines. Also, a critical approach enables students to understand the larger focus of communication arts. In other words, Cohen begins with the end in mind. Rhetoric, particularly, is too often taught in separate distinguishable phases: first, the explanation of what rhetoric is, and second, the higher critical approaches of what rhetorical does. Cohen introduces the critical role in communication studies along with the basic elements, thus allowing for a practicing of theory simultaneous with the presentation of essential classical and introductory material.

Beyond that, Cohen seeks to find common ground between classical models and post-modern theories of communication. The series editor, Simmons, recognizes the possible controversy this may involve (x). However, Cohen argues that a "unified" understanding of how language works has not been agreed upon probably because we are limited by "terministic screens" which "influence, express, represent and/or constitute human identities, ideas, and actions. . . you do not really enter critical thinking until you reflect on your critical goals, your assumptions about communication, and how various critical tools fit with these assumptions and goals. Critical concepts are, after all, a critic's terministic screens" (204). To this end, the author out-

lines a variety of ways to approach the vague notion of communication, and she is right to recognize that through the use of critical discussion theory, communication is more manageable and understandable for students. The existence of the apparent contradiction does not devalue the book. The author is sufficiently comprehensive to discuss a wide range of theory without simply listing a check-list of theory absent any unifying principle. Her unifying principle centers on using "critical powers," and she makes a legitimate effort to bridge the gap between classical and contemporary approaches. She implies that there is a practical function inherent in rhetorical theory which necessarily makes use of classical and post-modern discussion, though the author leans toward contemporary theories. Her understanding that rhetoric creates meaning seems to be the heart of her idea, and in this way, the book reminds me of Sonja Foss's emphases in Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric.

The book projects a friendly format for students to follow. It is neatly outlined and includes a useful glossary. There are sufficient examples to assist the presentation of theory though the instructor who uses this text will need to provide necessary background and follow up information so students can fully connect the critical discussions initiated. After all, if the goal of communication studies is appropriate criticism, then users of this book will need to go beyond the critique initially provided in the text. However, Cohen shows a clear process of how to successfully mix theory and practice.



Editor's Notes

The current supply of manuscripts is virtually exhausted. Prospective authors are encouraged to submit articles for consideration, following the guidelines found in the front cover of this journal. Student submissions are especially encouraged.

The Fall edition, beginning series 85, will consist primarily of excerpts from position papers commissioned for the upcoming Pi Kappa Delta Constitutional Convention, which will take place in February, 2000, in St. Louis, Missouri.

It is appropriate to recognize the contributions of Robert Littlefield to Pi Kappa Delta. Dr. Littlefield resigned this summer as the Secretary-Treasurer of Pi Kappa Delta. Dr. Littlefield has been an active PKD leader at the Province and National level for 20 years. He has served on the national council as a National Council Member, President-Elect, President, Past President, and Secretary-Treasurer. An active scholar and recognized teacher, Dr. Littlefield has contributed in immeasurable ways to the health and future of PKD. He has never let details get in the way of vision, even when he has overseen the innumerable daily details of managing a national organization. We look forward to his continued contributions to the honorarium as a Past President and as an active faculty supporter of intercollegiate forensics.

Dr. Bill Hill, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, has assumed the responsibilities of Secretary-Treasurer.

Pi Kappa Delta Mission Statement

Forensics, as an extension of the classroom, seeks to create articulate citizens. Forensics participants, as students, and coaches and judges as teachers, seek to encourage an environment where: there is respect for others; there are standards for achievement; there is ethically responsible communication; there is knowledge about important issues; there is intellectual stimulation; and there is nurturing of the general skills of informed advocacy and aesthetic appreciation.

To achieve that outcome, Pi Kappa Delta seeks to:

1. Lead the effort of finding ways for all forensics organizations to work together whenever possible to strengthen the activity at levels and in all forms.
2. Foster the nurturing of the personal and professional lives of forensics educators.
3. Encourage the active and meaningful participation of alumni in the forensics activity, the national association, and the local chapter.
4. Strengthen the ties between forensics and both the communication discipline and the broader community.

5. Provide an environment where learning and growth are seen as equal in value to competitive success.
6. Increase the diversity of the forensics activity and the association. Encourage respect for both the diversity of ideas and life experiences. Enhance the role of forensics as a means of promoting respect for diversity in society.
7. Make forensics relevant and significant to the lives of students.



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