

Forensics Can Change Lives

Ella Shaw

spent the summer of 1986 dreading the start of school. I had just finished a very trying semester with Tim, a hyperactive, intellectually gifted freshman who could not stay on task or in his seat. I knew Tim's mischievous grin would greet me on the first day of the new school year, and I had run out of modifications, tricks, and ultimatums to use to control him.

Finally, the light bulb switched on—Tim needed to focus his energy and intellect on something other than causing trouble. He needed to join debate and forensics. I needed to spend a year working with Tim rather than against him.

On the first day of school, I invited Tim to join debate. He hesitated (for dramatic effect, I'm sure) but then agreed to give it a try. Once he attended his first tournament, he was hooked. From that point on, he took his compulsion for creating noises and spitwads and transformed it into an obsession for library research. In three short years, Tim became an award-winning national debater. He developed effective interpersonal skills, gained self-esteem, and even improved his grades slightly. All this was accomplished during a time when his family life was literally falling apart. He went on to college where he became an active leader and served as the president of the student senate. I have no doubt that Tim will continue his success, and it is largely through his involvement in speech and debate that he found a place for his talents.

BENEFITS OF FORENSICS

Forensics can change lives. I need only look in the mirror to know this is true. As a 9th grader, I moved to a large, suburban school district in a different state. As is typical, the group most open to newcomers was the least desirable—the smokers, drinkers, druggies, the freaks. I was quickly headed down the wrong road when I was encouraged to join forensics. Through three years of high school competition, I found a creative outlet. Forensics gave me goals to work for and dreams to achieve. My self-

esteem skyrocketed when I won my first trophy at a major tournament. I began to work to improve my grades so I would be able to go to college. At the college level, I went on to successfully compete in forensics for four years.

These success stories are not rare exceptions; every coach I know can relate similar anecdotes of the difference speech activities have made in the lives of students. Because forensics changed my life, I feel a tremendous responsibility to provide other students the same opportunity by serving as a coach. Because forensics can change lives more dramatically than any subject we teach, it should remain an integral part of language arts co-curricular activities.

Of course, I can go on about the advantages of involvement in forensics; it can increase student self-esteem, promote leadership skills, increase communication skills, teach research methods, and provide an outlet for creative expression. Most coaches and students can enumerate these benefits, but I think forensics goes beyond this: it teaches students lessons about language and communication that cannot be taught in the confines of the language arts classroom.

FORENSICS, LANGUAGE, AND LITERATURE

Because of my role as a forensics coach, I can teach students about language and literature in a meaningful way outside of the school day. But when the last bell rings, I am no longer lecturing, utilizing a dazzling array of multimedia devices; I sit down at a desk next to a student and develop a one-to-one relationship as we work to realize a common goal. We are working together, and the students know I deeply care about their efforts. This relationship is difficult to achieve in a classroom with 30 students. Our partnership becomes a creative collaboration.

Nowhere is this more true than when I have coached readers' theatre groups in the past. For a few years we wrote our own scripts. We brainstormed, outlined, drafted, revised, struggled with wording together. Readers' theatre groups learn to bring in

A forensics coach shares ideas and techniques, especially for novices

their own suggestions for line divisions, techniques, choreography. We share many laughs during practice sessions and learn to work together as a team.

When I am working with forensics students, I am able to step down from my authoritarian teacher pedestal and become a partner in learning with my students. This, however, does not diminish my students' respect for me; in fact, it increases it. The most polite, productive students I have in my classes are students I have coached. I may hear other teachers complain about these same students in the teachers' lounge (for some reason, the biggest troublemakers become the best speakers), but they rarely cause a problem for me because they have had the chance to know me in a way other students do not.

FORENSICS AND READING

One of the greatest ways that forensics enhances the English curriculum is by promoting reading. Students who compete in literature-based events such as oral interpretation of prose or poetry are constantly reading new poems, short stories, novels, and plays to find a selection that will "work" for them. In the selection process, students may read volumes of literature. (If we were to assign this amount of reading in the classroom, we would encounter loud complaints and downright resistance.) In the past, my students have read collections of poetry by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Diane Wakoski, as well as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Macbeth*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*—all outside the classroom. As students compile literature programs, they begin to see connecting themes in the poetry of Marge Piercy; they realize the different perspectives on the topic of domestic abuse in "The Wifebeater" by Anne Sexton, a newspaper article, and the novel *Virgins* by Caryl Rivers.

Once students choose their selection, in order to prepare to perform they must complete an in-depth analysis of the literature: what are the characters like? How do they sound when they are speaking? What do they mean when they say this? Students must dissect the literature piece by piece in order to convey its nuances to the listeners. Often students must edit the piece in order to conform to time restraints. In doing this, the students must pay close attention to

mood, author intent, and the integrity of the writing. No work of classroom literature is ever scrutinized to the degree that a performance piece is examined. Ultimately, students form a personal connection with the literature with which they spend so much time.

Beginning with the Greeks, literature was a performance-based activity. Today as we trudge through the required novels and American literature anthologies, we tend to forget that literature takes on a new life when read aloud. Learning to read literature aloud is a skill often neglected in the classroom—but it flourishes in the forensics environment.

FORENSICS AND THE TEACHER

Forensics can enhance the English curriculum, and it can change lives: these are strong reasons for coaching this activity. But forensics not only benefits my students; I receive personal satisfaction from this activity as well. As a forensics coach I have an arena that encourages my own creative thought processes and forces me to examine literature in new ways. Choreographing a readers' theatre, helping to design thematic programs stimulate my own thinking, and this carries over into the way I view my classroom lessons. More importantly, because I coach forensics, I take the time to read. Everything I can lay my hands on may be a performance possibility. I spend my summers scouring contemporary poetry collections, devouring novels and short story collections. Anytime I pick up the newspaper, a possible speech topic can be found in a headline.

Thus, coaching forensics enlivens me as a person and as a professional. It also gives me the opportunity to interact with coaches from other schools and share professional concerns and a lot of laughs. Over the years, we have spent many Saturdays together celebrating each other's students and their progress.

FORENSICS AND THE NOVICE TEACHER/COACH

Because forensics has changed my life and the lives of my students, I feel a strong commitment to this activity. I also believe that coaching forensics provides an excellent opportunity for beginning teachers to form positive relationships with students

and colleagues. Because of the strong inter-relationship between language and literature in the classroom and competitive speech, all beginning teachers of English should spend some time coaching. However, it is not a responsibility that a novice should assume with little background, since this can lead to frustration and disappointment. A teacher who plans to coach forensics students needs to do a lot of self-preparation before attempting to assemble a team.

Participating in Forensics

One of the most important steps potential English teachers should take in preparation for their careers is to participate in forensics themselves, either at the high school or college level. This experience is invaluable in learning about the nature of the events. I often draw on my own experiences as a competitor to help students deal with disappointment and confidence problems. When I tell them of the time I spoke in a final round of oratory without realizing my pants zipper was open, they laugh and realize the stage fright they feel is not nearly as embarrassing as this faux pas (plus now they always do a zipper check before they speak). The advice I can give students on dress, grooming, and presenting a professional appearance comes from my own experience as a competitor, not from a methods classroom or textbook.

Using Universities as Resources

Universities can provide many opportunities for the beginning coach to learn about forensics. Several workshops for coaches are available in the summer at universities. These institutes can provide useful resources and connections for the novice coach. When I was first assigned the task of coaching debate, I knew little about the complicated jargon and theory. Attending a university-sponsored institute explained the mysterious world of counterplans and paradigms to me. I have walked out of other workshops with stacks of resource bibliographies and the phone numbers of college and high school coaches I would otherwise not have met.

We frequently contact the forensics director of our local university for help in locating materials as well as for “expert” panels to listen to our students. University

coaches are very willing to aid high school coaches in the hope that we will direct talented high school students to their college programs. Each year I try to make a point of judging local college tournaments to gather new ideas and techniques for my students.

Using Your State Organization

Because speech activities are often regulated by a state organization, beginning coaches should contact the groups overseeing speech activities in their states for descriptions of events, rules, and tournament calendars. Some state associations may even provide bibliographies and advice on getting a program started. Beginning teachers should seek out the expertise and advice of their high school coaches as well.

Establishing a Program

Preparation of the coach is one important element in establishing a successful forensics team, but patience is also a key element. Chances are, unless the beginning coach has walked into a school with an established program, she/he will have to start from scratch. It is important to remember that dynasties are not built in one season. Every thriving team started out small but gradually built upon success.

I recall the story of one of my colleagues who began teaching English and coaching forensics at a small, rural high school. This school had never won an award in speech competition, but finally, at the end of the season, one student earned a first place trophy in demonstration speaking. The community and school went wild, and, from then on, forensics bloomed at that small school.

Over the years I have witnessed fledgling teams from other schools build to powerful competitors, largely due to the determination and patience of one coach. As Emerson said, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man,” and a growing forensics team is often the lengthened shadow of one enthused educator.

Encouraging Student Interest

The coach may be sold on the power of competitive speaking to change lives, but how can students be made to realize its value? The novice coach may be prepared, enthusiastic, and committed, but, after holding the first team meeting, may be dis-

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appointed at the turnout. Yet, a few techniques can increase student interest.

Often students are not aware that forensics exists or know what it involves. The beginning coach of a small school in our area found an interesting remedy to this problem. In previous years, this school's forensics team had consisted of only five members. This year she invited several award-winning speakers from another school to perform in front of an all-school assembly. The student body enjoyed the chance to escape from regular classes, and, consequently, were polite and receptive to listening to other high school students. As a result of this assembly, 25 students signed up to compete in forensics.

When I first started coaching and needed to form a team, I found one technique to be effective in enticing students. I sent handwritten notes to students whom I felt had potential. I told the student I felt he/she might do well in debate or poetry or drama and that I hoped he/she would consider it. Invariably these students showed up at the first meeting because they were flattered by the personal invitation.

Forensics also offers an opportunity that few other high school activities can boast—the chance to compete at the national level. All new coaches should investigate the possibility of joining one of the organizations that sponsors a national tournament—either the National Forensics League or the National Catholic Forensics League. This chance for travel and recognition gives students one more reason to try forensics.

Funding a Forensics Team

Once a coach has attracted a number of students to the activity, another problem arises: how to get the money necessary to fund a team. That is a difficult situation depending upon the budget of the school district, but strong public relations can help build community support for speech activities. Sending accomplished students out to speak at civic organizations not only provides students with varied speaking forums, it can also encourage donations. This, along with regular press releases, can help to build support for increased budget requests.

Making a Time Commitment

Unfortunately, novice coaches should also realize that forensics can change the lives of coaches in a more negative respect.

Time spent on coaching forensics is time spent away from my family. Coaching involves many late nights at school and long Saturdays at tournaments. Forensics demands a huge time commitment on the part of the coach; yet the time invested in these students is time that is well-spent and professionally rewarding.

CONCLUSION

I am fortunate to teach at a high school that recognizes the importance of competitive speech activities and to coach with three other teachers who share a love of forensics. The administration provides generous financial support of our program, and our success encourages broad student participation. At the organizational meeting last year, over 90 students expressed interest in joining forensics. We pared that number to 65 by the time the first tournament rolled around, but just imagine how many students were exposed to the power of language and literature during one forensics season!

Forensics can empower students and coaches; it can be a motivator and a teaching tool. For these reasons, I am committed to remaining an active coach in this program for the remainder of my teaching career. It is only through the involvement of English teachers that forensics can continue to change lives.

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