

Innovation and Assessment in Forensics: Format Diversity for Sustainability

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In this paper, I explore two general claims, that both the playful character of debate and the nature of our position with respect to assessment support at least a questioning of the conservative presumption regarding format diversity in forensics activities. I argue that consistency in format causes forensics to become overly routine and instrumental, preventing the naturally playful and innovative elements of forensics as a practice from operating as well as they might. I also argue that our fixed formats may be holding us back from using assessment to advance our programs' credibility in the larger academic community.

Why does NPDA have different topics for every round, but the same time format for all of eternity? There are at least three or four distinct formats of debate available, but the typical debater experiences only two at most and then only in a series or because of some unrelated contingency regarding a given league. Format issues simultaneously evoke intense interest and systemic neglect in the forensics community. My interest in engaging the topic derives from my observations of both these phenomena. I have observed intense responses from individuals concerning even modest format changes. The decision of whether to go from 8 to 9 minute constructive speeches in CEDA comes to mind, as does the use of the British format at a NPDA tournament. Tournament formats are subject to even more intensity. The NCFCA was recently embroiled in a slow-moving controversy over the move from 3 to 2 individual events rounds at its annual championship tournament. In spite of intense interest on some issues, examining the forensics system as a whole reveals little in the way of careful attention to evidencing claims about format issues. Such decisions frequently are made automatically or based on informal networks. Worse, such decisions often are based simply on competitive imperatives. Several issues serve to illustrate this point: Why do tournaments hold debaters and/or IE competitors hostage to one another? Why do some tournaments have 5, 6, 7, or 8 debate rounds? Why are judge briefings so rare and untrained judges so pervasive?

These questions smack of accountability—that meddlesome movement involving accreditation agencies, government bodies, and tuition paying parents (Zernike, 2002; Allen, et al., 1999). This paper develops a proposal for experimenting with format diversity as a modest way of getting at several important assessment issues in forensics education and

administration. Specifically, I argue that format diversity offers a catalyst by which the forensics profession can develop a public posture that is more accountable, effective, and therefore sustainable. To be clear, I don't mean to replace our entire system of event and tournament formats with a new one. Rather, my humble objective is to overcome a conservative presumption nesting in the hearts of every over-worked forensics administrator and open the door for a willingness to engage in or at least support modest experimentation, assessment, and documentation concerning the nuts and bolts of what we do. If just a few tournament planners would take this paper to heart, I think I would be satisfied as long as a few tournament participants decide to do so as well.

By format diversity I mean that some tournaments every year would experiment modestly with format modifications and assess the results of those modifications. Format issues concern the time limits, number of teams, mode of topic presentation, form of topic, number and type of speeches, sequence of events, et cetera. For example, a tournament might offer 6 rounds of parliamentary debate, 3 in the standard NPDA time format and 3 in the CEDA time format. Another tournament might take a stand against hostage holding and run debate so it finishes in two days with individual events finishing on the third day (the already existing alternative is to avoid the full-service tournament altogether by offering just debate or just individual events). Another idea would be to offer various ways of getting more immediate feedback on speech performance at a tournament. Other examples include judge briefings, judge consensus decision-making, topic scenarios, and pre-announced topics among others. Some of these are already being tried sporadically, but my point here is to provide a justification that might help bolster support for these practices. Too often, experimentation is offered outside the context of sweepstakes, or in ways that fail to motivate participants to try the new thing.

Unfortunately, the structure of forensics governance may disallow some applications of this proposal. NPDA tournaments have the freedom in the sanctioning rules to offer modifications to the format as long as they are pre-announced. CEDA tournaments also seem to have some freedom on format issues. Other organizations may be more restrictive. In that case, I nevertheless offer this paper as advocacy in favor of organizations reflecting on their rules, whether they connect with program or learning objectives, and whether they might not be overly restrictive. While much research exists documenting positive and negative effects of forensics participation in general (Allen, et al., 1999; see also Bellon, 2000; Littlefield, et al., 2001; Williams, et al., 2001), too much of forensics education and administration operates without assessment or sometimes even without any justification at all. I offer two general arguments in favor of format diversity as a way of jump-starting an ethic of innovation and assessment. First, the character of debate as a playful practice (in the neo-Aristotelian

sense) suggests that format diversity may be beneficial. Second, the nature of the assessment and accountability movement itself lends support to format diversity. In my conclusion, I address several practicality issues.

Forensics as a Playful Practice

Delight in the face of novelty is no stranger to organizers of activities. I remember reading a story about the origin of basketball where a gym teacher needed a way of engaging a group of students trapped inside for a rainy day, and I often reflect on how excited the students must have been over the break in their expected routine. It may be that those students were getting more out of their play on that day than any basketball player since, because since that day basketball has become more routine and more oriented toward external goods, two aspects of modernity with which many have found fault (Stone, 1989; Giddens, 1991). Forensics is another activity that often takes the form of play, and which has often been observed to deteriorate under the force of external goods and colonization (Mitchell, 1998). Thinking of forensics as a playful practice from a neo-Aristotelian perspective (Stone, 1989; see also MacIntyre, 1984) suggests some potential benefits of format diversity, that it may help us reconnect the practice with its expected internal goods, and that it may help us to realize unexpected creative and transformative potential.

Play is a difficult concept to define because in the act of definition it loses some of its play character. Brad Stone (1989) defines play as "any activity engaged in for its own sake" (p. 64). Johan Huizinga (1950) essentially views play as a ritualistic and agonistic civilizing function in human society. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1989) gives play an independent status as something that happens to us not something we do. Gadamer and Huizinga are important to understanding play because their conceptions interact to form a notion of play as at once voluntary and involuntary. In Gadamer's (1960/1989) conception, play is independent of human will: "For play has its own essence independent of the consciousness of those who play," (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 102). A chess game is one example. While each player does make individual decisions throughout the game, the character of the game cannot be known by the players except as a memory after the game. Every game comes out differently.

Huizinga's (1950) conception of play emphasizes its voluntary aspect. He states that play is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own" (p. 8). For him, play is free and voluntary and it occurs in a special sphere of being. Huizinga's account can be reconciled with Gadamer's in appeal to the 'space' where play occurs. For Huizinga, this space is defined as separated, temporary, disinterested, and open. Gadamer (1960/1989) also holds that play must occur some place. For Gadamer, the player can choose the structure of the

place within which he plays. He writes, "Setting off the playing field just like setting off sacred precincts, as Huizinga rightly points out-sets off the sphere of play as a closed world, one without transition and mediation to the world of aims" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 107). Thus, for both Gadamer and Huizinga, play involves choice in terms of the play-space but defies choice in the play itself.

The connection to format diversity is that a speech or debate format constitutes the human choice of context within which the play of language can occur. The idea is that perhaps forensics formats have become too ritualistic to allow for the generative and productive capabilities of language to operate as freely as they might. Huizinga (1950) sees no substantial difference between play and ritual, but according to Victor Turner (1974), ritual is re-affirmative and celebratory, while play is creative, inventive, and transformative. On Turner's (1974) account, both ritual and play require a certain *kind* of space that is characterized by liminality, a concept describing what occurs in the middle phase of ritual rites of passage. This middle phase happens when the neophyte(s) have been symbolically removed from a previous social status or milieu but have not yet been reincorporated into a new status (pp. 52-53). Apart from this sense of betweenness, there are two other characteristics of liminality, that it liberates its occupants from normative demands in the sense that anything can happen during the liminal phase (p. 13), and that it entails a feeling of communion or sharing called 'communitas.' Liminality thus contains an innovative potential that may even transcend the purposes of a given ritual. As Turner (1974) observes:

The besetting quality of human society, seen processually, is the capacity of individuals to stand at times aside from the models, patterns, and paradigms for behavior and thinking, which as children they are conditioned into accepting, and, in rare cases, to innovate new patterns themselves or to assent to innovation (pp. 14-15).

Such playful innovation is likely to happen in a liminal space, what might be called 'play space.' This space is 'betwixt and between', it entails liberation from normative demands, and it is pervaded by a potential for communion between individuals (Turner, 1974). Within this liminal space, creation, invention, reexamination, and transformation can occur. Moreover, the medium of this innovative potential is language. According to Gadamer (1960/1989), the nature of language is that it constantly forms concepts and that these concepts often form as a "result of accidents and relations" (pp. 28-29). On Gadamer's account, language is naturally productive and its manifestation in human communicative practices is manifestly connected to play.

Even highly ritualized debate entails a degree of liminality in much the same way as Chess players may feel betwixt and between while absorbed in a game. Forensicators may feel a sense of Flow while speaking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), may feel closer to others, and may even feel receptive to creativity. But the problem with ritualized forensics is that it frequently does not entail even the celebratory and affirmative functions of ritual under Turner's account. Debaters do not emerge from the debate with a new and more highly prized role in society. Indeed, many emerge as angry and disappointed to such a degree that they have lost the ability to debate for its own sake, since that ability is thwarted by the corruption of external goods like winning (Stone, 1989; see also Mitchell, 1998). This is the commonplace critique of debate practice, but if debaters were better able to experience liminality in its creative and playful mode, the commonplace critique might be made irrelevant. Clearly, the way of doing this is to de-stabilize the routines and structures that place debaters in the instrumental mindset, to shake-up those elements of format that persist in all their boring consistency to the point of forever. These include time limits and roles in the debate.

One culprit in the standardization of debate formats might be the laboratory metaphor itself (Mitchell, 1998). Ways of doing things becomes so cemented in the community that innovation is rare and even more rarely is it spontaneously generated within a debate. Instead, creative ideas we see in debate are frequently generated outside of debating during other *formats* of interaction like team discussions, debriefings, and research sessions. These modes of interaction are diverse because the institutions that use them are comprised of a variety of coaching structures, knowledges, experiences, and priorities. Where formats of interaction become narrow to the points of putting creativity to sleep is where they become institutionalized among forensics organizations in such a consistent way that a conservative presumption can really stick.

Actual laboratory learning is hardly as consistent in format as our forensics events. Indeed, what laboratories do is experiment, and lab instructors play around with the structure and framing of the experiments. In discussing public debates, Mitchell (1998) observes that, "Some public spaces are vibrant and full of emancipatory potential, while others are colonized by restrictive institutional logics" ("Limits . . ." section, para. 7). I connect Mitchell's concern with debate formats themselves and argue that the emancipatory potential in debating as a practice can be re-discovered if we re-connect with the playful elements intrinsic to debating and speaking in forensics. The way to do that in a non-moralistic way ("Lose yourself in the discourse, young debater!") is to do what we can to nurture conditions for playfulness, read here as conditions of liminality. In other words, we can try to nurture a space in forensics that is new and exciting even for seasoned participants.

In play, according to Stone (1989), the principles of excellence are probabilistic: "One can justify one's move, but seldom can one prove it is the best move" (pp. 66-67). Play-spaces that are overly routine lose their liminal character and consequently some of their innovative potential. The non-routine, novel, and unexpected are the source of potential for the play of language. Using Stone's (1989) notion, if forensics were playful, it would not be possible to know for sure if a strategy was best, but in our community now it frequently is possible to be that sure. With a consistent format, there is an arbitrary limitation on conditions for creativity. We conflate format with legitimate procedural ethics and in the process inhibit the potential for language play that may underlie many of the cognitive benefits to participating. "Individuals improve in an activity by moving from the comfort of the repetitive to the unknown" (Stone, 1989, p. 67). Thus, the character of forensics as a potentially playful practice suggests that format diversity may be beneficial.

Format Diversity and Assessment

Another element of the case for format diversity derives from the nature of assessment itself. Over the past couple of decades, there has been a rising emphasis on accountability and assessment moving from primary and secondary school systems into the university setting. I do not mean to defend all that assessment entails, especially to the degree that the meaning and purpose of schooling can become restricted by lack of imagination and unsophisticated measurement. Nevertheless, to some degree accountability is here to stay, and one way of dealing with its potential problems is actively to engage it and carve out a way of assessing what we do that is meaningful both to us and our various audiences (administrators, students, parents, and taxpayers). In this section, I argue that format diversity will be helpful in the assessment context.

Typically, assessment involves a variety of imperatives from various levels of the educational system. In many cases, the drive for assessment is generated at the level of accreditation (Benander *et al.*, 2002). The idea is that educational programs should be able to document their success to various stakeholders. This principle frequently takes form in very simple ways. For example, administrators want to know assessment is being done, but are frequently uninvolved in specific assessments of learning in a given unit. The process is very simple. Objectives are stated, the program is delivered, assessment is used to see if objectives were met, and the results of the assessment are used in planning the next round (Nichols, 1995). The main imperative from an accreditation perspective is to document that one is actually going through this whole process. However, since the underlying idea is that programs should be trying to improve and should be able to document success in their intended objectives, the benefits of assessment (and risks of non-assessment) move far beyond

the internal audience responsible for documenting our efforts to the accreditation agencies.

Forensics programs are familiar with program assessment variables like number of students served and publicity, among others, but learning assessment seems dramatically underdeveloped, and even program issues too often get settled by last minute public relations campaigns. The issue of accountability is apparent in some recent research concerning forensics (Allen et al., 1999; Bellon, 2000; Mitchell 2000). Also, specific research connecting forensics and critical thinking is extensive (Allen *et al*, 1999). However, some suggest the need for research connecting specific elements of forensics experience with desired outcomes (Allen *et al*, 1999; Littlefield, 2001; Williams *et al*, 2001). This suggestion seems more salient given the discovery that students report similar advantages and disadvantages to debating regardless of the league in which they participate (Williams, *et al*, 2001). Clearly, the forensics community can do more, as indicated in the observation of one group of researchers:

The forensics community needs to contribute to the issues regarding how to improve the practice [in the area of public communication]. Knowing that our contributions are positive should encourage *confidence in our ability to experiment and to evaluate*. The challenge is to integrate these experiences as a part of our overall curriculum rather than to view public communication skill training as a separate component. After all, improving critical thinking skills should benefit all students, regardless of the major or which class they next enroll. (Allen *et al*, 1999, p. 28, emphasis added).

These researchers' point is well taken, and supports the position on format diversity as it relates to assessment. Where my argument may or may not diverge from these authors' opinions is on the issue of placing bounds on their recommendation. One way of eliminating the rhetoric of separation is to include skills training in more kinds of courses, but another way would be to diversify the kinds of skills-development experiences available in our current structure. Separation is created by practices of inclusion and exclusion on both ends: the traditional curricular standpoint and the standpoint of intercollegiate forensics preparation and competition. Much of the discussion about the learning effects of debating for example, assumes as a constant not only a given format of debate, but a specific league as well. Forensics remains structurally the same, but the recommendation is to export some elements of it for the edification of all students. *After* the exportation, we can experiment, be flexible, evaluate and contribute. I would say that exporting is not enough.

The point is that forensics activity formats have no apparent compelling need to be so cemented in place. Most exported formats, like in-class debates, oral presentation assignments, methods of discussion and the like, are readily accessible to students who have not seen them before, but we assume it is vital for our competitive formats to remain predictable and consistent for fear of confusing students. In fact, students who have prepared for competition are probably the best-prepared students to experience experimental designs without undue confusion. If we want to develop, we ought to try out new ideas on populations of students that are better prepared to cope with uncertainty and assess the outcomes. Moreover, if we want to include more students from outside the forensics in-crowd—read here as those folks with significant format experience constructed as competency—it might just make sense to have opportunities available for them where the deck is not already stacked against them. Currently, we might encounter a talented, curious, and enthusiastic student and recommend they try out forensics. Unfortunately, part of our invitation must be a warning about whole sets of skills that they lack and the in-crowd doesn't—skills which have nothing to do with authentic ability (high speed delivery skills, format-specific time management competencies, etc.). Opening up formats reduces entry barriers and makes more experimentation available for assessment and documentation for others' use without undue pollution of the results by format-familiarity.

My argument here is particularly important considering that there seems to be substantial evidence indicating our relevance to others outside forensics. A significant body of research outside of forensics provides an additional motivation for making our activity more accessible and assessable. Bellon (2000), for example, documents some of the cognitive research that supports debate, tracing the lessons constructivism holds for teaching and learning. Potentially forensics relevant principles include: students must be active in their learning, better learning happens through interaction, and better learning happens when students can apply it in a "realistic context" (Bellon, 2000, para. 18). As Resnick and Klopfer (1989) put it, "To be skilled is not just to know how to perform some action, but also to know when to perform it and to adapt the performance to varied circumstances" (pp. 3-4). Thus, to some degree, cognitive research supports format diversity to the extent that format diversity can help forensic educators explore ways of more closely tapping into mechanisms for thinking improvement that have already been documented.

Bellon's (2000) discussion of assessment results from urban debate leagues shows another way we can be relevant to folks not already in the "in-crowd." These students were introduced to a whole new practice, and remarkable results have been and continue to be documented (Fine, 1999). Also, Garside (2002) calls for more research into what needs we can serve through Communication Across the Curriculum. If we take Gar-

side's (2002) advice, it seems forensics should be capable of making offerings to meet these needs. Bellon (2000) even endeavors to bolster the case for Debate Across the Curriculum. But we can't just continue saying "we should be in a good position to make a real contribution to interdisciplinary communication needs," and refusing actually to put ourselves "in position" and start generating results. We seem to know that we can document results from debate, but we don't appear to be making many changes that move competitive debating into a more serviceable and service-oriented position. Exporting is not enough.

Our potential relevance for others is further evidenced by research outside forensics that specifically focuses on critical thinking assessment. Halpern (1993) observes that the evidence is diverse and significant that thinking can be improved by instruction, but also emphasizes the need for a more nuanced account of what elements of instruction gained the effects. She finds critical thinking to be uniquely valuable because it allows students to function in new and unusual situations. One reason for this is that, on her account, most jobs for which we are preparing students do not even exist yet (p. 284). In terms of the assessment of critical thinking, Halpern (1993) raises the issue of ecological validity, or whether students can apply what they know to novel contexts (p. 274). With a greater focus on assessment in forensics, we could find out to what degree competitors ever really enter "novel" situations given the consistency of the formats we provide. To the degree that we would find a substantial lack of novelty, as I would argue, the need for format diversity is further supported. In other words, format diversity can provide a catalyst and context within which to develop ecologically valid measurements of critical thinking outcomes.

Keeping in mind that the forensics community has done seemingly little to explain its own apparent learning outcomes (the improvement of critical thinking), we might be encouraged by others who may support elements of what we do in their research. For example, Yeh (2001) in particular offers positive conclusions for forensics. First, he explores the connection between critical thinking and workplace needs, finding that those needs are best matched by a definition of critical thinking focusing on "careful argumentation." This means job skills in high demand are specifically those skills in argumentation that we study and teach in forensics. More importantly for my purposes, Yeh (2001) defends authentic assessment of argumentation skills in a way supportive of forensics and of format diversity, even suggesting an "oral debate" model of instruction in argumentation. He takes care to show how forced choice assessment of critical thinking skills is practical and how this would be good for teaching because teaching to this kind of test would be high quality in comparison to teaching directed as tests focusing on trivial memorization of facts.

On the validity issue, Yeh (2001) observes that common assessments lack content validity because they focus on component skills as opposed to the actual argumentation skills needed in real contexts. He offers an apt analogy to sports by pointing out that a tennis player may be good at drills but unable to win matches consistently (Yeh, 2001, para. 18). My point in connection to Yeh's work is that format diversity may enhance our ability to offer more authentic assessments of argumentation skills needed in the workplace. Like other researchers in learning psychology, Yeh (2001) describes the connection to specific contexts as important in assessing critical thinking. Current forensics formats do not necessarily offer a way of testing these skills without, as I said before, an intervening variable of format familiarity. On-topic debaters may be very deep on a topic and quite familiar with their format, but it would also be useful to show them performing on critical thinking measures across a variety of topics and formats of argumentation. Parliamentary debaters may be proficient in argumentation when topics are of a certain kind and the speaking times are quite familiar and comfortable, but it would be helpful to be able to show them performing under unfamiliar constraints of role and time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored two general claims, that both the playful character of debate and the nature of our position with respect to assessment support at least a questioning of the conservative presumption regarding format diversity in forensics activities. I argued that consistency in format causes forensics to become overly routine and instrumental, preventing the naturally playful and innovative elements of forensics as a practice from operating as well as they might. I also argued that our fixed formats might be holding us back from using assessment to advance our programs' credibility in the larger academic community. It remains to address practicality issues and answer potential objections.

My first priority should be to clarify the intent of my proposal since to some it may feel a lot like signing a blank check to endorse my position. I indicated that I would be satisfied with just a few tournament planners taking my position to heart. It might then be asked why my aim is so low if I have such a good idea. The short answer is that I believe the change to a forensics world with significant diversity across much of the calendar is unlikely to happen quickly, and it would be irresponsible to advocate rampant experimentation in the absence of assessment data to support such experiments.

Demonstrable benefits can be achieved without radical change,

and the documented success would speak for itself in the future. My perceived barrier in the short term is attitudinal; few tournaments offer experimentation in format, and those that do frequently do not assess outcomes. Additionally, tournament participants share a presumption against unfamiliar structure in tournaments, and a serious predilection for creating structure where none should exist. So, my aim is to chip away at this presumption in the hopes of enriching opportunities for students. To the extent that a great deal of my advice can be taken within the confines of sweepstakes rules, then all I need from the audience of this paper is a willingness to take a soft line on presumptions concerning the nuts and bolts of forensics competition.

It might be objected that I have offered no concrete scenarios to suggest significant benefits to my proposal. I will offer two. My first one operates at the program level of assessment. Suppose a regional tournament offers the innovation of making debate and IEs run wholly separately so that competitors doing only one type can shorten their weekend. It may be a stretch to say the tournament has entered a liminal moment, but from an assessment perspective, the scenario plays out with clear benefits. The planners of course will specify the intended outcome of making forensics competition available to more students. During the tournament, the planners would collect data to assess progress toward meeting the objectives. If the data show improvement, the planners will have discovered something important, and will be on the way toward opening up opportunity for more students in all the programs served by the tournament. Additionally, the planners will have contributed toward the imperative to document assessment efforts for accountability purposes. In the case of no improvement, the planners will still get the second benefit and will be in a better position to understand the possibilities for improved outcomes in the future. One notable point here is that assessment requires an orientation toward innovation and improvement, an orientation which seems to be missing in forensics administration except to the degree that it takes effort even to achieve minimal organizational effectiveness. I would also emphasize that the catalyst for this assessment initiative is a tournament format modification. If the format is always a given, the possibilities for improvement are artificially limited.

A second scenario operates at the level of learning assessment and reconnects to my position about forensics as a playful practice. Suppose a tournament offers an NPDA division with three rounds in the regular NPDA time format (788845) and three rounds in the CEDA time format (939393936666). Such a move would be allowable under NPDA sweepstakes rules. This is speculative, but one intended learning outcome might be something like students becoming better able to understand the role of interactive questioning in advocacy settings. Assessing the results of this experiment and using them to improve techniques would provide

the benefit of meeting the assessment imperative and the additional benefit of potential improvements deriving from the assessment as in the first scenario. From the students' perspective, one outcome may very well be delight at the new and fresh framework within which to practice their developing critical thinking skills. That delight and newness may combine to create a playful space within which new connections of unpredictable character will be made. Again, opportunities for these kinds of things to happen are artificially constrained by our conservative presumption on format issues.

I would like to address a final potential objection in closing. It might be said, "But we aren't trained in these "other" formats." This is no straw-person; I have really heard this argument, and to some degree it is a legitimate concern. Nevertheless, my response is that the only context within which it is a valid concern is the one without my proposed modification in our community's presumptions about the nuts and bolts of what we do. We are in big trouble if our main claim to expert status in forensics is familiarity with specific formats. I believe, along with others, that our intellectual orientation should be towards assessment of student learning and towards improving our understanding of the promise and potential of argument and various kinds of argument practices (Mitchell, 2000, para. 28-29; see also Goodnight, 1991; Olson & Goodnight; 1994). An intellectual orientation nestled in the comforts of format consistency is a path toward frustration and away from sustainability in forensics.

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