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ABSTRACT

The social scientific research focus of major United States universities places the forensics programs at these institutions in a unique position. Three areas of tension between forensics and research based communication departments are as follows: research quality/utility, applicability of forensic training, and resource conflicts. Solutions to each tension area include more regularity and rigor in journals and conference paper selection procedures; an adoption of B. J. Logue's criteria, particularly focusing on more sophisticated methods and increasing generalizability through an expanded notion of forensic research; greater linking between communication research and forensics (both debate and individual events), which is viewed as an initial step to making forensics even more applicable to outside settings; and a recognition of the resource problem as more of a misperception than a substantive tension. A forensics program provides benefits for the communication department: it is an excellent recruiting tool, it serves as an outlet for community service and visibility, and it helps fund graduate study. (Twenty-nine references are attached.) (Author/SR)

Present and Future of Forensics in the Research Based Communication Department

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Running head: FORENSICS AND RESEARCH

Abstract

The social scientific research focus of our nation's major universities places the forensic programs at these institutions in a unique position. Three areas of tension between forensics and research based communication departments are discussed: research quality/utility, applicability of forensic training, and resource conflicts. Solutions to each tension area are discussed, including more regularity and rigor in our journals and conference paper selection procedures; an adoption of Logue's criteria, particularly focusing on more sophisticated methods and increasing generalizability through an expanded notion of forensic research; greater linking between communication research and forensics (both debate and individual events), which is viewed as an initial step to making forensics even more applicable to outside settings; and a recognition of the resource problem as more of a misperception than a substantive tension. Several benefits of forensics programs for the communication department are also discussed.

Present and Future of Forensics in the Research Based Communication Department

There is little doubt that most of our nation's major research institutions have moved to view the field of communication as a social science. We see this in the type of research our discipline's journals produce and in the recent trend to remove the word "speech" from department, journal, and association titles. As the research oriented communication department moves in the direction of scientific methodologies, it has and may continue to disassociate itself with its rhetorical and humanistic roots. This movement to treat certain elements of our field as diminished artifacts (Dudczsk, 1985) clearly has important implications for forensics.

Forensic programs, which are clearly based in notions of argumentation, public speaking, and performance, may be perceived as one such artifact to be removed. As Thomas (1983) noted, "At present, many major universities do not bother with forensics. ...Universities listed as among the leading research institutions, or doctoral degree-producing departments, frequently have weak or non-existent forensics programs" (p. 20). Parson (1990) pointed out that today one is more likely to see schools with doctoral

programs reduce in size or even eliminate the forensic program. Finally, data gathered by Porter indicated only seven doctoral granting programs that also supported forensic programs (cited in Dudczsk, 1985).

We believe that this trend will have negative repercussions for both the forensic community and the communication discipline as a whole. Given this trend, it is now more important than ever for forensics to be able to justify itself within the department, university, and community. Forensics must make a worthwhile contribution to the larger discipline of which it is typically a part. On the other side, one of the reasons for communication's rising prestige in academia is its diversity; movements away from this approach may be counterproductive.

In order to address some of the fundamental concerns for forensic programs based in the research oriented communication department, we begin by exploring the current problems and areas of tension between forensics and communication research. Next we discuss some solutions to these issues. Finally several benefits from our proposed solutions are analyzed.

Tensions

The problem areas or points of tension between

forensic programs and the communication departments in which they are housed tend to focus on three issues: research quality and general utility, applicability of forensic training, and resources.

Research Quality/Utility

McKerrow (1990) noted that the question of whether forensics is a valued field of study is a very real one. Unfortunately, there is a general perception that forensic research offers little insight into broader communication issues and is of dubious quality (Rieke & Brock, 1975; Walwick, 1969). Thomas (1983) found that much of the research reported in the Journal of the American Forensic Association from 1978 through 1983 was also directed chiefly toward forensic educators, although it offered potential contributions to the areas of argumentation and decision theory.

In an evaluation of articles appearing in the National Forensic Journal from 1983 through 1989, Logue and Shea (1990) found that many of the articles could not be generalized to other forensic events. In fact, only four of the 93 articles were potentially useful to the field of communication in general. Most articles were thought pieces or position papers, and not research based. They determined that over 50% of the articles were descriptive in nature and utilized no

quantification. Approximately one-quarter of the articles advanced positions by developing arguments. Finally, one-quarter of the articles used numerical quantification, but even these works incorporated few statistical procedures. Given the importance with which both qualitative and quantitative researchers view "data" and methodology there can be little doubt why, in light of these findings, the rest of the field views forensic research with such skepticism.

Kay (1990) noted that our forensic journals are full of articles about ballot design, event rules, tournament norms, etc., all of which are written with little concern for anyone beyond our self-contained activity. He summarizes the consequences of this approach to research: "At many institutions across our country and in many circles within our discipline's professional associations, forensic directors are regarded as second-class citizens and forensic-related research is perceived as less than a scholarly endeavor" (p. 61). It seems likely that the relative ease in getting forensic papers/panels selected with merely abstracts at most of our regional/national conferences and the delays that frequently characterize the release of conference proceedings/journal publications only promulgate this view.

Applicability

The applicability of forensic training to a broader context is also raised as a problem between forensic programs and communication departments. At one level is the notion of skills training. First, many research oriented departments place little value on anything resembling skills training, which helps to explain some of the disdain for public speaking courses, organizational training, interpersonal skills management, etc. But not only is forensics in the business of skills training, it has been criticized for failing to do that well. Forensic activity has often failed to resemble the practical discourse situations students may face outside the university setting (Kay, 1990; Madsen, 1990). Logue and Shea (1990) also noted that very few skills articles have appeared in the forensic literature. Although much of the communication research can be indicted on similar accounts of failing to be widely applicable, the failure of forensics (which makes claims to enhance skills) to be applicable is a source of concern.

At another level, this argument takes the form of a tension between theory and practice. To the social scientific researcher, the knowledge process begins with theory (see Babbie, 1986). But as Kay (1990)

observed, most forensic events lack an underlying theoretical foundation. In this case, practice exists independent of theory, or at best, loosely connected to it. From a social scientific standpoint, any activity not grounded in theory is less than scholarly.

Resources

The resource problem takes a variety of forms. There is conflict, at least perceived, between the communication departments and the forensic programs about everything from money and space to staffing and time commitments.

There is little question that a successful forensic program requires some funding, as travel, tournaments, and educational supplies cost money. Several forensic scholars have noted the critical role funding plays in forensics (Derryberry, 1991; Littlefield, 1991). Financially, forensic programs are seen by some communication departments as taking funds that might otherwise go into departmental budgets. Although most forensic programs receive administrative monies that are not even directly tied to department budgets (see Hunt, 1987; Littlefield, 1991; Stepp & Thompson, 1987), the perception of such ties creates tension. Hunt's research concluded that the average forensic budget for the nation's top 50 programs was

approximately $27,000 per year. Stepp and Thompson have reported that most programs have an operating budget ranging from $6,000 - $18,000. Though substantially smaller than the annual budget for most collegiate athletic programs as well as communication departments themselves, this still represents a dollar amount that many research oriented communication departments may feel could be better spent.

Though substantially less addressed, issues of space and staffing are also a concern. Because forensic programs are most often physically located in the vicinity of the communication program, they are perceived to take classrooms, offices, and general areas that might otherwise be used by the department. Furthermore, directors, assistant directors, and any other professional coaches associated with the team may take positions and/or faculty lines that could be used for communication researchers.

A final resource concern is the time problem. Forensics is viewed by many communication departments to take an inordinate amount of time of those involved with it. This perception stems not only from non-forensic members of the communication departments, but from forensic professionals as well. Clearly the hardest hit area would appear to be the graduate

student assisting with forensics. Kuper (1991) presents a rather dim view, claiming that "every moment spent on forensics is time spent away from one's program of graduate study" (p. 2). Schnoor (1986) has echoed similar concerns, noting an increasing use of graduate forensic assistants and a failure by the forensic community to address this issue. While we do not see the picture to be nearly as bleak as these authors, the time problem is nevertheless a very real concern.

Summary

We raise three primary areas of tension that are perceived to exist between forensic programs and the research oriented communication department. First, forensic research is generally not perceived as being of high quality by standards of the field, nor is it seen as contributing to the discipline at large. Second, forensics is looked down upon for providing skills training and for not doing that as well as it might. Furthermore, it is practice rarely grounded in theory. Finally, the resource problem manifests itself in tensions over money, space, staff, and time.

Solutions

Research Quality/Utility

In order for forensics to improve its image within

the research oriented department, as well as the discipline in general, there needs to be an increased emphasis on scholarship and research. While there has been an increase in the amount of forensic research published since 1979 (Thomas, 1983), most of that research is not useful to the discipline in general (Logue & Shea, 1990). We would argue that this research emphasis could be facilitated within the forensic community by taking steps to legitimize the research process.

Porter (1990) called for the organizations that sponsor professional journals to encourage manuscript submissions based on empirical research. Also, publishing journals and conference proceedings in a timely and regular manner will enhance, not only the credibility of the journal, but the research it contains as well. Regular publication suggests that our professional journals are an integral part of forensic activities. This notion also needs to be central to the way we view our individual research programs. Too often research becomes viewed as separate from our daily activities and thus is not held to the same critical standards we insist on in the rest of our work (Klumpp, 1990).

As noted earlier, the tendency to accept papers for national and regional conferences based on abstracts instead of completed works diminishes our legitimacy. We would suggest that conferences move away from such policies. If only completed papers are accepted, we believe this sets a more rigorous standard for our research. This could also serve to increase the quality of papers, even if an initial, short-term decrease in quantity occurs. We see the support of top three panels by the national forensic organizations (similar to the one used by the SCA Forensic Division) as one way of acknowledging the best of our competitively selected research.

Beyond these notions of how forensic research can be improved at our conferences and in our journals, there are specific ideals toward which forensic research could be directed. Logue (1988) is arguing for these ideals when she suggests that forensic scholarship should be criticized by application of three criteria: examination of the core issues of the discipline, methodological concerns, and generalizability of the research. The bulk of current research focuses on the area of forensic pedagogy, thus generally meeting Logue's first criterion. However, expanding the study of other core issues in forensic

research would be more useful to the community at large.

In terms of the methodological criterion, steps taken to improve methods would not only improve the confidence that could be placed in the results of forensic research, they would also position this research more closely to the current standard for the rest of the discipline. Along these lines has been the call for less emphasis on the forensic activity for its own sake and more focus on theoretical aspects. Hample (cited in Thomas, 1983) urged the employment of more sophisticated measurement techniques and the pursuit of programmatic research. Furthermore, Thomas has discussed the use of ethnographic methods in forensic research. Porter (1990) also seems to suggest the viability of conducting field experiments and research. We view these recommendations as helping to overcome the research quality and utility tensions that currently exist.

By expanding its study of core issues and utilizing more sophisticated methodological procedures, the third criterion of generalizability can be more easily met. We take issue with Dudczsk's (1985) claim that "If research of the effects of forensics training are viewed now as having limited scope and application,

then whether it is conducted by more social scientifically minded directors of forensics will be irrelevant" (p. 11). If this is the case, the underlying premise of this paper is severely questioned.

We believe there are additional steps the forensic community (as well as the communication discipline at large) can take to increase the generalizability, and thus the legitimacy, of forensic research. One such option is to expand our notion of forensic research beyond argumentation and rhetoric. Future, as well as some current, directors and coaches will have training in emphases slicing across the field, including interpersonal, group, intercultural, and organizational communication. The forensic "laboratory" may well offer opportunities for research in all these areas. Organizational network studies of coaches backgrounds and of teams who participate in same tournaments; interpersonal conflict between debate partners; socialization issues with culturally diverse participants; and group dynamics of team members over time all represent rather obvious research areas that forensic scholars could explore in the context of mainstream communication research. While we are not suggesting that forensic directors do their research in

another area nor that research in argumentation and rhetorical studies is somehow invalid, we are implying that the domains of what forensic research might entail should be broadened. Doing so will no doubt contribute to the enhancement of forensic research.

One more general suggestion seems relevant here. Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal (1986) say that encouragement from the national forensic organizations could help foster the type of research needed. By developing coherent policies for research conducted at tournaments, scholars would have a clearer notion of what an experimental design would have to look like prior to developing a full proposal.

Applying Research

Related to improving the quality and generality of our research is the attempt to make better use of communication research in forensics. Doing so helps resolve the lack of theory based practice discussed earlier and also helps strengthen the relationships between forensics and communication research. While debate and several individual events have utilized argumentation theory and communication analysis/rhetorical criticism employs various models often developed by our field's scholars, application has not been as widespread as it might be.

Harris et al. (1986) have offered a relatively extensive list of general areas in which forensics and broader communication theory can meet: (a) using forensics as a laboratory to study the relationship between communication theory and practice, (b) studying what we teach in forensics and knowledge needed to succeed in "outside world," (c) human information processing, especially as related to debate, impromptu, and extemporaneous speaking, (d) pedagogy, (e) decision making regarding judging criteria, and (f) development of "forensic theory." To this list Thomas (1983) adds the role of argumentation in small group communication, function of nonverbals in various speaking situations, and the connections between economic, political, and gaming theory to argumentation.

These suggestions all represent potential areas for applying and/or testing communication theory in forensics. While these recommendations are predominantly debate-oriented, there appears to be little reason why individual events cannot offer a similar testing and application ground (Kay, 1990). We find Thomas' (1983) claim that it may be useful to classify some of these events as "laboratories in artistic impression" (p. 15) to be too restrictive.

In order to illustrate this concern, to the list of applications already begun we would add several suggestions; however, this list is far from exhaustive. Persuasion research, especially that dealing with one- and two-sides messages (see for example, Allen et al., 1990) would have obvious impacts for forensic practice. Also, the rich research on source credibility (see for example, Norman, 1976) may provide theory relevant to all platform speakers. Although some may not call it social scientific research, the work from performance studies can serve as theoretical grounding for the interpretation events (see Athanases, 1991). One of the frequent calls in communication research is for more longitudinal research (see Monge, 1990), and we believe forensics supplies an excellent platform for that type of study. As a final possibility, new events in forensics that can help bridge the gap between communication theory and forensic practice (e.g., research report speaking or interpretation, communication skills training, etc.) may be an answer, even if such events are currently difficult to imagine.

Thomas' (1983) advice to develop a symbiotic relationship between research and forensics has a great deal of merit, and can be part of the solution toward bridging the application problem between research

oriented communication departments and forensic programs. Kay's (1990) observation that forensics can facilitate knowledge about communication and argumentation strategies, about the specific fields of communication and argumentation, and about theory itself is an important one. It may in fact be that basing forensics more strongly in theory will not only serve to better legitimize the activity, but ultimately help make the skills it teaches more applicable to settings beyond forensics itself.

Resources

Although resources are perceived to be a large problem area between forensics and research oriented communication departments, we see this tension as more of a misperception than anything substantive. Monetarily, forensic programs take little money from communication departments per se since forensic budgets typically come from other sources. Littlefield's (1991) survey revealed that 60% of funding for team travel came from university funds or student government, whereas only 9% came from departmental general or instructional budgets. Again, in many of the cases, the forensic budget is separate from the research communication department. Arguing that supporting a forensic program takes funds away from

communication research projects is no more useful than arguing that supporting the sociology department takes away from monies that might go to communication research. Any association between these two budget areas is tenuous, as the budgets are frequently not directly tied to one another.

To the extent that budgets are separate, staffing issues become less problematic also; however, little data appears to exist regarding this claim. Furthermore, if space is a problem at the research university in question, the problems likely go well beyond forensics. To the extent that forensic directors can educate their department colleagues about these misperceptions, they are less likely to cause tension.

The final resource concern raised was the time problem, especially for graduate students. While we agree that forensic programs and communication departments must work to resolve such concerns, we find the situations presented by Kuper (1991) and others to be overstated. Not every moment spent in forensics is time that could have been spent on graduate studies. That is much like claiming that every moment spent with family or every second doing community service work is detrimental to one's program of study. Not only is

such a claim exaggerated, but time away from studies can be very beneficial in avoiding burnout and providing diversity. Additionally, if forensics can become part of a graduate student's studies (rather than the perceived distraction from it), then this co-curricular activity may become even more valuable.

Summary

The solutions to the perceived tensions between forensics and research based communication departments are several. To increase research quality and utility, we need more regularity and rigor in our journals and conference paper selection procedures; an adoption of Logue's criteria, particularly focusing on more sophisticated methods and increasing generalizability through an expanded notion of forensic research; and the creation of national guidelines for forensic research. Numerous links between communication research and forensics (both debate and individual events) were cited. This linking of theory to practice is viewed as an initial step to making forensics even more applicable to outside settings. Finally, the resource problem, particularly funding and graduate students' time, was viewed as more of a misperception than a substantive tension.

Benefits

In addition to co-existing with a research oriented department, there are a number of advantages an active forensic program can provide to the department. Forensics has proven to be an excellent recruiting tool (Littlefield, 1991), and many students gain their first exposure to the discipline through their activity in forensics. Furthermore, Boileau (1990) and Parsons (1990) argue that these students are exceptionally bright and disciplined scholars. McBath (1984) suggests that a significant proportion of the leadership in our field participated in forensics.

Active forensic programs can also increase the visibility of the communication department within the university and community through a wide variety of service activities. Initially, most forensic programs host a variety of competitive tournaments and workshops that bring faculty and students from other campuses and high schools to the hosting institution. These activities frequently have an economic impact for the community as well. Forensic programs may also sponsor different types of showcase events and forum debates that expose the student body to a variety of types of performance as well as current social issues (Boileau, 1990; Derryberry, 1991). Finally, the forensic program

may engage in a variety of performances for organizations off-campus. Ballard-Reisch (1986) and Bodenhamer (1991) explain these types of programs in detail.

McBath (1984) argues that forensics will provide important educational experiences for students with diverse career objectives as well as offer preparation for graduate study in a number of fields. These experiences include a wide variety of research, organizational, language, and presentational opportunities (Derryberry, 1991). The competencies frequently exhibited by forensic students are due, in large part, to the model of instruction employed in the activity. Boileau (1990) cites a number of reasons for the curricular impact of a forensic program: (a) constant practice, instruction, practice format, (b) it is integrative in nature, (c) quantity of instruction in a single season and duration of instruction over years of competition, (d) feedback from instructors at other universities on a regular basis, (e) exposure to many speaking styles and formats, and (f) intensity of instructed practice for the student.

An additional benefit forensics may avail to its participants is the possibility of funding for graduate

studies. Schnoor (1986) suggests that graduate assistantships are often valuable positions for students who want to fund their graduate degree and gain experience that can be invaluable in their professional careers. Porter (1990) claims that 88 colleges and universities offer financial assistance to forensic students wishing to pursue an advanced degree. Some of these positions may include funding beyond what the communication department would receive on its own.

We see all these benefits as not only positives for forensics itself, but critical advantages forensics can bring to even the research oriented communication department. Forensics' ability to bring in top students, to serve as an outlet for community service and visibility, to help fund graduate study, and so forth is even further indication of the important interdependence between forensic programs and the larger departments of which they are part. Communication departments would be wise to consider these benefits when assessing the value of forensics at their institution.

Conclusion

Kenneth Anderson once wrote,

> In an age of educational accountability, the forensics community is and will increasingly be

> called upon to tell what it seeks to do, how well it accomplishes its goals, and what other effects it has. Surprisingly, there seems little interest in such research at this time. (cited in Madsen, 1990, p. 48)

Though written nearly two decades ago, Anderson's call for accountability is perhaps even more salient today. The situation at forensic programs in our nation's research based communication departments demands attention and action. As Porter (1990, p. 103) noted, "For too long the forensic community has been remiss in providing the research that the discipline needs... We must reverse this behavior if we hope to elevate forensics and forensic education to the position they deserve in the academic community."

We have argued in this paper that there are indeed tensions between forensic programs and the research focus of the discipline. While we could wait for postmodernism (see Guba, 1990) to diminish the social scientific drive (an occurrence we expect will be too long in coming for our purposes), or we could leave our home and roots in the communication field (which we see as an unacceptable option), we believe a more sound alternative is for forensics to find a way to evolve with the changes in the discipline. Dudczsk (1985) has

argued that the emergence of the social scientific view demands that we as forensic professionals educate the field of communication on our own growth and evolution. We see that growth and evolution as still very much in progress. Therefore, we have offered what we see as viable solutions to the present tensions. They are not easy answers and many suggest a fundamentally different role for the way forensic programs see themselves in relation to the broader research discipline. But we also see these changes as advantageous both for legitimizing and enhancing the quality of forensics, and for providing numerous benefits to the communication department in general.

While our comments here have focused on the actions that the forensic community should take, the research driven communication department must also take an active role in this process. We believe that forensics does have, and should continue to have an important role in all communication departments, perhaps especially those with a research emphasis.

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