Competitive Speech and Debate
How Play Influenced American Educational Practice

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The authors identify competitive speech and debate as a form of play that helped democratize American citizenship for the poor, who used what they learned through the practice to advance their personal social and economic goals. In addition, this competitive activity led to the development of speech communication as an academic discipline and legitimized the pedagogy of game theory. Through a brief overview of the evolution of competitive forensics, an overview of the theory of play and its role in personal development and interpersonal and group interaction, and an explanation of the theory of forensics as a form of playfulness, the authors show the impact of forensics on the course of educational practices in America. **Key words:** debate as play; competitive forensics; game theory

Systems theory tells us that the whole affects its parts and the parts affect the whole. This truism is most certainly the case when we examine competitive speech in American higher education during the twentieth century. Competitive speech—particularly debate—represents a form of high-level, intellectual play that involves critical thinking, skillful speaking, and a thorough knowledge of subject matter. The marriage of these skills produces a form of play that offers participants and observers an experience some consider thrilling, others believe daunting, but all think of as fun. Historically, debate competitions helped establish speech departments in colleges and universities. Once established, speech department faculties shifted their focus to theory and research, minimizing the competition they considered a form of play. By the end of the twentieth century, that, too, began to change, as secondary and higher education radically changed. Moreover, the change was, fittingly, reciprocal: debate changed educational systems, and educational systems changed competitive debate.

We find the intrinsic qualities of competitive speech and debate, or what we will call forensics, of particular interest because of its role in the educational practices in high school and college programs. Forensics, for example, depends on research, relies on critical thinking, and requires the ability to speak and

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respond to questions. We use the term *forensics* to describe competitive speech and debate because forensic or legal oratory requires a third party to determine which of two positions is superior. Forensic oratory in the form of competitive debate constitutes a form of play in that a winner is determined after two teams present arguments for the benefit of a judge or audience. As the popularity of competitive speech and debate grew during the first three decades of the twentieth century, many organizations adopted the word forensics as a part of their name to reflect the nature of the activities they sponsored—the National Forensic League, the American Forensic Association, and the National Forensic Association, for example (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

In this article, we argue that competitive speech and debate in the twentieth century became a form of intellectual play that made citizenship more democratic by altering the playing field for poor and socially disadvantaged individuals who used their forensics training to advance their personal economic and social goals; that this game-based activity led to the development of the discipline of speech communication as a distinct field of study; and that competitive speech and debate served as an exemplar of game theory. First, we offer a brief overview of the emergence and development of competitive speech and debate, then an overview of the theory of play and its role in personal development and interpersonal and group interaction. We follow these discussions with an explanation of forensics as a form of playfulness, and we conclude with a description of how forensics changed the course of educational practices in America.

The Emergence and Development of Competitive Speech and Debate

In America, the use of debate to teach argumentation began in the colonial period, as communication scholar David Potter documents in his landmark *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges* (1944). Potter provides a thorough description of the development of forensics—its introduction in colonial colleges as a formal classroom instructional technique conducted in Latin, its transformation in student-run, literary societies as a form of intellectual play and declamation using English, and its change after the decline of the literary society movement in the mid-nineteenth century. It was then that students, seeking a more competitive form of interscholastic intellectual play, turned to forensics to demonstrate their critical-thinking and speaking skills in a broader context.

In debates before the twentieth century, an instructor assigned a student a philosophical or literary topic to defend or refute in Latin using classic rhetorical concepts. For example, the original form of debate was called the syllogistic disputation, which followed strict rules (inclusion of major premise, minor premise, and conclusion) in the construction of arguments to prove or disprove claims. A typical assigned topic might be something like "Logic is the art of investigating and communicating truth." A student wrote a formal paper that affirmed or denied the premise and presented it to the class. The others in the class acted as opponents, writing arguments exposing flaws in the first student's reasoning, also presenting their objections in syllogistic form but orally. The initial student-advocate then proffered a rebuttal of the objections, and the instructor followed with a critique of the entire exercise.

The rules of this exercise were specific to prevent students from trying to discredit each other with trivial arguments, sarcasm, or other playful means, but students found the rules unsatisfactory precisely because they were so restrictive. Perhaps more importantly, fewer students entered the university to join the clergy, and they found debating in Latin so difficult that it hindered their ability to be extemporaneous and inventive in the arguments they introduced. Also the type and focus of the students was always in flux given the political and social issues confronting Americans—beginning with their conflict with Great Britain, then the rise of town meetings and law courts, immigration, civil rights, women's suffrage, and so on. Because the whole purpose of the exercise seemed to them unrelated to the changing demographics and needs of individuals entering the academy, students favored a format that could be conducted in less rule-bound ways.

By the late 1800s, a looser form of argumentation known as forensic disputation had replaced the older syllogistic format. Forensic disputation introduced the use of English as the language of instruction, and the topics changed from being literary and philosophical to more practical ones related to issues of the day. A typical topic for debate might be "Resolved: that the national government should require compulsory arbitration of disputes between capital and labor and constitutionality be waived." The introduction of pertinent topics and the use of English made forensic disputations more interesting and fun for the students. However, as the college curriculum expanded and students could choose their course of study, they began selecting practical courses focused on applied or professional training, and their interest in preparing formally written arguments waned. These students found appeal in the extracurricular literary

societies featuring poetry reading and the declamation of critical essays, music and singing, and debates in which participants argued more freely and extemporaneously about contemporary issues, such as the success of the American Revolution and the policies and practices of the American government.

Literary societies provided a break from disputations and the highly regulated classroom environments characterized by long lectures, memorization, and strict rules. Eventually, literary societies emerged as the means by which argumentation and debate moved out of the classroom altogether and into a less formal setting. As an extracurricular activity, the intellectual play of discussing and debating issues of the day became a way for students to gain a better understanding of what was happening in the world around them. Societies provided a space in which to socialize, a context for identifying like-minded individuals interested in participating in public speaking and debating, and a library to serve their intellectual and aesthetic needs. The appeal of the literary society centered on freedom. The students controlled these entities without faculty or administrative influence. Colleges typically had two or more literary societies that competed vigorously with each other (rhetorically, athletically, and playfully). They also created extensive library collections that often rivaled the main college libraries.

By the late nineteenth century, some literary society members had grown dissatisfied with the staging of intersociety debates, and the debates changed from vigorously and passionately argued discussions of key issues of the day to more parliamentary-style wrangles and self-aggrandizement (Potter 1954). In the context of a college or university campus, these looser forms of debate may have leveled the playing field and created more fun for those less concerned about how their classmates perceived them. However, students seeking the challenge of high intellectual play regarded these less competitive variations of debate less satisfying. In response, they formed competitive debate clubs and societies and engaged in interscholastic debates about contemporary issues arising from the industrialization of the United States.

America's Progressive Era—roughly from 1880 to 1914—provided fertile ground for the expansion of competitive speech and debate. In Progressive America, citizens who had despaired about their lack of control over economic and political forces began to realize the potential for social change and embraced issues such as the popular vote, woman's suffrage, presidential primaries, campaign reform, improved work conditions, and social justice, to name a few (Broderick 1989). In short, Progressives were educated, middle-class people

who believed in the need for change (Chandler 1954). Progressives—recognizing that specific policy issues had a direct bearing on their quality of life—focused on constitutional reform to curb the power and control of big business interests over their lives. As we have described elsewhere, "They believed that in order for democracy to survive" citizens rather than elites needed to step up and confront the problems facing society, championing the interests of average folks versus those of banks and financial institutions or of big industrialists (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014, 36). Their promotion of active citizenship proved an essential element of Progressivism, and forensics often provided the training ground for those Progressive leaders seeking what they believed were the reforms necessary for the American republic to thrive.

As we then concluded, students used their research in forensics to become informed about the economic, social, and political problems of the day, and their practice in public speaking and argumentation provided the skills required of engaged and active citizens. This focus on the public good was an inherent aspect of forensics activities during what we have called the Public Oratory Era (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014), which began in the 1880s and continued through World War II. A typical topic of this period might be: "How should the United States work out a strategy for orderly social change brought about by industrialization and capitalism?"

The nature of competitive forensics changed after World War II in what we have previously described as the Technical Era (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014). The change emerged from several converging forces. First, the return of troops from the war led to an explosion in the demand for higher education. As a result, the number of colleges grew, and the newly enrolled students sought out leisure activities such as forensics, athletics, and other student organizations. Second, the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union led to a demand for more technically trained graduates to help the United States gain scientific and technical supremacy during the Cold War era. Third, colleges began to develop graduate programs and emphasize the individualistic values of achieving a college degree.

Competition for the sake of competition replaced the earlier emphasis in forensics on training future citizens as a social good. In an effort to keep pace with the increasingly scientific and technological emphases taking place in higher education, forensic educators shifted their focus. Forensics competition at all levels became more about achieving technical competency in a competitive environment. While earlier debate styles emphasized individual oratorical

flourishes and dramatic persuasiveness before an audience, the new competitive environment de-emphasized public performance in favor of mastering an argument and marshaling proof.

Participants continued to enjoy forensics, but they understood its fun to lie primarily in the development of individualized competencies. The desired outcome of forensics became the artful display of critical thinking and strategic argumentation. Oral communication and persuasion were devalued in favor of information gathering and the creation of technically sophisticated arguments and presentations best evaluated by technically trained judges. Where one literary example—artfully developed—might have satisfied a judge and won the debate in the Public Oratory Era, several examples of fact supporting a claim seemed to be required to win an argument in the Technical Era. The public good became a private good. This shift from public to private good changed the nature of forensics and alienated some in the academic community who no longer viewed forensic activities as educational. Rather, these critics considered forensics to be a game and the techniques debaters used to be noneducational.

An Overview of Play and its Role in Education

We believe that competitive speech and debate, as practiced in the United States, should be justified as a form of play, both enjoyable for participants and offering them important intellectual, social, and personal benefits (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014). This perspective is consistent with theories of play. We strongly agree with Eberle's (2014) observation that "play is not susceptible to definition in the way we might define an automobile as a 'four-wheeled, powered vehicle for transporting passengers and things.' And, at its most maddeningly imprecise, play becomes an evaluative emotive term such as 'art' or 'love,' carrying social, moral, and aesthetic freight that adds to the challenge of defining the word and the concept. Perhaps we could more safely argue for play as an aspect—and a function—of human development. Play plainly offers a mix of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual rewards at all stages of life" (217). Summarizing a body of research, Eberle identifies six elements that provide a conceptual framework for play: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise.

Competitive speech and debate fits nicely into this conceptual system.

Debaters and public speakers experience anticipation when the time and place of a competitive round is set and its participants and judges announced. Although the general set of processes and rules remain constant, the individual experience itself always proves unique, thus adding an element of surprise. No two competitive rounds, particularly in debate, are ever the same. Different opponents, different arguments and responses, and different outcomes create the pleasure that emerges from a competitor's growing sense of confidence in his or her own abilities as well as from the uniqueness of the competitive experience. Forensics offers participants intellectual, social, and personal growth precisely because of the understanding that comes with the repetition of a speech or argument in a new and unique setting during each competitive round, which encourages greater flexibility and the ability to apply competitively derived skills to a wide range of situations. A significant percentage of people are afflicted with communication anxiety, some with physical symptoms severe enough to excite concern (Verderber, Sellnow, and Verderber 2015), and this widely recognized anticipatory fear of public speaking (some rank it with sky diving), makes it a physically and emotionally stressful activity. In this way, competitive speech and debate also call for strength and poise.

Forensics as a Form of Playfulness

When considering forensics as a form of playfulness, identifying the characteristics of play becomes a useful point of departure. Gray (2008) identified several characteristics: "Play is self-chosen and self-directed; play is an activity in which means are more valued than ends; play has structure, or rules, which are not dictated by physical necessity but emanate from the minds of the players; play is imaginative, non-literal, mentally removed in some way from 'real' or 'serious' life; and play involves an active, alert, but nonstressed frame of mind." While the essence of what constitutes play is best characterized in the player's mind, an examination of forensics confirms that competitive activities constitute a form of play for those engaged in speech and debate. What follows is a brief illustration of how forensics meets each of these characteristics (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

Initially, forensics is a form of self-chosen and self-directed play. Rarely, if ever, has participation in forensics activities been required. While students may have been compelled to compete as a classroom assignment, the vast majority of participants enroll in the enjoyable activity of their own volition. Certainly, self-motivation and self-direction influence students to seek competitive outlets

to demonstrate their thinking and speaking skills and to engage in an activity they enjoy that empowers them.

Play is also an activity in which following the rules of the game is more important than winning. In forensics, this means stressing the improvement of debating skills over the end result, competitive success. Nevertheless, some debaters compete to win at all costs and often persuade judges to accept practices or positions others might consider unfair or unjustified. For example, debaters might sacrifice clear communication by talking fast enough to introduce more evidence and fuller arguments that overwhelm opponents. Still, many consider the activity of debate itself the primary reason students return to its competitive environment despite their losses and disappointments.

As with play in general, the rules of competitive speaking and debate come from the participants, although rules governing forensics have of course evolved over time to serve the changing expectations of the participants (and their coaches). Elsewhere (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014), we have discussed how the preferences of contestants and judges concerning speaking times, topics, speaker order, and appropriate in-round speaking behaviors generated the rules that facilitated play in forensics.

Forensics also offers an example of imaginative play (i.e., participants are removed from real-life play to develop skills of imagination they use in real life). McBath (1975)—in his role as editor of the proceedings from the first National Developmental Conference on Forensics held to assess forensics practices and chart the future of the activity—describes forensics as a laboratory for argumentation and communication. In such a setting, forensics provides a simulation of the real-life situations in which participants might find themselves. For example, presenting an argument in a competitive debate might resemble presenting an argument to a deliberative body such as a city council, a congressional chamber, or a courtroom jury. Participants understand that these simulations offer opportunities to develop skills they could use later in careers in business, education, or government.

Finally, as does play, debate requires active, alert, stress-free states of mind for participants to be fully engaged. While the pressures of debate—stemming from the intense listening and critical thinking involved in locating supporting evidence, prepping arguments, and delivering speeches—can produce exhilaration, this differs from the debilitating stress that can overwhelm a debater unprepared psychologically or practically for the debate. On one hand, there exists the potential thrill of victory; on the other, there lies the potential for freezing

mentally, for becoming incapable of responding. Whether or not debaters can enjoy a stress-free frame of mind has become a controversial question, but Gray (2008) offers clarification: "The mental state of play is what some researchers call 'flow.' Attention is attuned to the activity itself, and there is reduced consciousness of self and time. The mind is wrapped up in the ideas, rules, and actions of the game . . . . Play encourages conditions conducive to encouraging creativity and skill acquisition" (n.p.).

Although we can easily describe forensics during the Public Oratory Era as an activity causing only limited stress for the participants, we need to be more measured in making such a claim for forensics following World War II. In Bartanen and Littlefield (2014), we described both contexts as play in that some found the oratorical style in literary and philosophical debates exhilarating, but others found speaking quickly and overwhelming a less prepared opponent with extensively developed arguments just as thrilling. Locating a middle ground all participants could enjoy became the challenge for the forensics community.

Justification for Forensics as an Educational Practice

The tensions in conflicting perspectives about forensics and the shifts in forensics practices these tensions produced became evident as the forensics community moved from the Public Oratory Era to the Technical Era, evolving from an activity many saw as primarily serving a public good to one reflecting a more private benefit. Throughout this evolution, forensics educators sought to justify competitive forensics as an educational benefit. We have identified three particular aspects of forensics as play that explain its importance as a learning tool. These three are simulation, socialization, and the creation of social capital (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

Forensics competition became one of the earliest forms of formal learning by simulation. To be sure, simulation in general was always essential to play, an activity by which participants practice and master winning strategies. But in the late nineteenth century, forensics, along with organized competitive sports, emerged as activities intended to allow participants to practice public life and civic engagement (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014). In fact, early advocates of debate and speech competitions were reacting to the looseness of literary societies and the sometimes pedantic nature of classroom disputations that had been characteristic of college life since colonial times—they wanted something more formal. By adopting rules and processes familiar to the courtroom and legislative chamber—taking turns, introducing and questioning the quality of the evidence,

and cross-examination—participants practiced in a relatively low-risk environment the techniques needed for future success, instinctively grasping the nuance of the actual context and situation where policy decisions or particular rulings might affect the real-life lives and livelihoods of individuals.

Unfortunately, the ritualization of the rules and norms became an unintended consequence of this simulation during the Technical Era, and the simulation became subordinate to the contest. For example, one of the rules of debate competition dictated that the affirmative team had to win all of the major stock issues to defeat the negative team and win the debate. However, the negative team could prevail simply by keeping the affirmative team from winning only one of several issues. Even if the issue was not a major part of the debate during the round, losing one issue meant victory had to be awarded to the negative team. Much of the richness of the simulation was lost as competitors focused on gamesmanship (e.g., very fast rates of speaking) and the highly narrow and technically drawn processes (e.g, postmodern deconstruction of the premises upon which debate is based). This created generalized disdain for the preferred outcomes of simulation—its preparation for citizenship and its generation of social capital by linking educational forms to outcomes, both clearly beneficial to the general public.

Forensics as a form of play was also understood and valued as as a method of socialization. Debaters believed the competitive experience itself had intrinsic value irrespective of the personal growth and the learning it afforded individual competitors. In those less wired times, forensics was a means by which people could meet others with shared interests and, more importantly, by which they could learn interaction skills and appropriate strategies for winning and losing—in other words, by which they could become members of a larger community who shared common experiences (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

Finally, forensics fostered social capital. Putnam (2000) identified social capital as the building of relationships through shared experiences. Forensics competitions created bonds through common experiences, bonds by which communities become cohesive and functional. In this regard, forensics is not unlike other forms of organized play, such as youth sports and high school football.

But how does speech competition produce this social capital? First, during the Public Oratory Era social capital accrued from the role that competitive speech and debate played in small communities (Littlefield 1998). In a world not yet dominated by broadcast media, forensics competitions were often wildly popular, and towns took pride in the success of their students and teams. Before

collegiate athletics exploded onto the scene in the 1920s, debates between rival high schools or colleges were both highly competitive and widely anticipated events. The recent film, *The Great Debaters* (Washington 2007) provides a flavor for the social popularity of the contests during the early twentieth century—their large audiences, their sometimes bitterly negotiated rules, and the feeling that civic pride rode on the outcome of the contest.

Second, the broadening of public knowledge about controversial social and political issues also created social capital. The resolutions chosen for competition reflected international and national issues of the day. Debaters were encouraged to become more knowledgeable about the topic by examining both sides of the issue and by developing effective arguments that persuade judges and audiences (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014). These competitions created a sense that the world was a large and complicated place where problems resisted easy answers and where the perspectives of those holding different views were worthy of respect—a perspective we seem to have lost completely in contemporary political discourse.

Finally, social capital resulted from the opportunity debates afforded participants to become leaders and to influence their social, professional, and political environments. Unlike participants in other forms of organized play, debaters themselves played a huge role in shaping the activity and its rules and norms. In the early days, student managers like Bruno Jacob—who later founded the National Forensic League for high school students—contacted other schools to set up debate events and negotiate every detail of the competition (Jacob 1928). Student competitors were showered with high regard, and their successes and failures were chronicled in the student newspaper. Student competitors, particularly at the collegiate level, who discovered that teams with faculty coaches were more successful than most of the student-coached teams, were instrumental in pushing schools to hire faculty who could coach and teach argumentation and declamation as part of the academic curriculum. This, in turn, helped lead to the emergence of speech and debate as an academic discipline distinct from English (Smith 1954).

Impacts and Conclusions

We have provided a brief overview of how forensics emerged as a competitive, educational form of play in the years after 1900. We have also discussed the

theory of forensics as a form of play, one that helps participants practice their speaking and argumentative skills in simulated environments, promotes the socialization of debaters, and helps develop a community of common interests. We now return to our main argument that competitive forensics constituted a form of play that democratized citizenship by altering the playing field for socioeconomically and otherwise disadvantaged individuals who used their training in forensics to advance personal and social goals. And this game-based activity led to the development of the discipline of speech communication as a distinct field of study and served as an exemplar of game theory.

Social Empowerment

From the beginning of competitive speech in the late nineteenth century, enthusiasts valued debate for the training in citizenship it offered (Halloran 1982). In a survey of Nebraska alumni who participated in forensics from 1895 to 1945, over 78 percent of the [163] people who returned the questionnaires thought that debate enabled them to take a greater position of leadership on the campus and in civic life (Olson 1948). Students could easily imagine themselves in the halls of Congress or arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Two of the honor societies formed at the beginning of the twentieth century—Delta Sigma Rho and Tau Kappa Alpha—explicitly linked their competitions with academic success and with contributions to society. A third, Pi Kappa Delta, adopted the motto "The Art of Persuasion, Beautiful and Just" to suggest that its activities carried moral value. Successful debaters enjoyed something like the status of today's local rock stars on their campuses, and small towns anxiously followed the competitions of their debaters. Any number of debaters and speakers went on to use their skills in their careers—U.S. presidents like Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, leaders of industry like Joseph Albritton, actors like Spencer Tracy and Brad Pitt, and a long list of other notables in virtually every field. Many successful people, even those who did not become famous, anecdotally attribute some of their success to forensics and often remark on the fun they had as competitors. As Olson (1948) reported, "I'd love to gather up the old gang of 1942–1944 and go on another debate trip to Denver or the Missouri Valley Tournament. Gee, we had a good time" (67).

Competitors broadened their understanding of important social issues and came to understand the role that principled argument played in building a better society. As Progressivism began to emphasize the role of government in checking the power of unfettered capitalism and in ensuring fairness, debate

training became a particularly potent tool for contextualizing technical issues. In academic debate, students trained in critical thinking and public speaking more comfortably faced the era's complex economic and political problems (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

In addition to preparing students for citizenship, forensics widened the social network for them, and they began to understand that the United States was not homogenous but was made up of many different groups, each with their own viewpoints. Some competitors took their first train ride to attend a tournament; some enjoyed their first restaurant meal; some made life-long friendships. They found that the shared experience of forensics gave them something in common with a vast network of people of different generations, including college and high school coaches, as well as college and high school students from different institutions who interacted regularly in summer debate institutes, such as those held on the campuses of Georgetown, Dartmouth, Wake Forest, and Northwestern.

The empowerment of minorities and women through their involvement in debate proved an important impact of competitive forensics. Both groups sought entry to an activity dominated by white men. African Americans debaters, always separated from white students and schools, could observe mainstream debate only from a distance, and they retained the more formal orotund oratorical style of debate longer than their white contemporaries. Forensics remain segregated until at least 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court—and later, Congress (pushed by a vigorous Civil Rights movement)—began to break down the barriers (Bartanen 2013). But long before, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) exhibited a vigorous interest in the debate. These HBCUs formed leagues and began to debate against white universities around 1930. As we mentioned, the movie *The Great Debaters* (Washington 2007) depicts the African American experience in debate and its impact on students. When such HBCUs as Wiley College and LeMoyne College regularly toured to debate other institutions, they transmitted the unmistakable message that, in the debate chamber, no difference whatsoever existed in the quality of argument and reasoning of one race or another.

In more recent times, debate became a powerful tool in raising the educational achievement of minority students. The Urban Debate League (UDL) formed an association of debater conferences across the United States that held a national tournament each spring (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014). The UDL originally was designed to create a noncompetitive environment where students could learn debate fundamentals that would increase their ability to compete as

they moved on to the more competitive high school and collegiate debates. Some viewed the UDL format for policy debate as a way to reintroduce traditional debate into urban schools with ethnically and socially diverse student populations. Preston (2006) noted that participants in UDLs benefitted from their involvement, citing enhanced critical-thinking skills, reading skills, vocabularies, and improved grade point averages.

Unlike African American men, who theoretically, at least, gained the right to vote before the start of competitive interscholastic debate, white women participated as speakers and debaters even before they achieved suffrage. But they often competed in separate divisions and had to overcome the stereotypes that they were not capable of reasoning and too weak physically for the rigors of competition. To be successful, women were forced to adopt the characteristics and practices of their male counterparts. The constant questioning of their capacity took its toll on some women, but for those who stuck it out—and over time assumed leadership roles—forensics provided a means to demonstrate their ability for critical thinking and skill at public speaking. Particularly after World War II, the barriers for women began to dissolve even if they did not disappear entirely. In the twentieth century, only one woman was elected president of the National Forensic League and fewer than ten served as president of Pi Kappa Delta.

The Formation of the Communication Discipline

As forensics developed, it contributed to the creation of the communication discipline. Prior to the twentieth century, communication (known by earlier names such as speech, rhetoric, oratory, elocution, public speaking, and speech communication) was taught in English departments or at independent schools. As student interest in argumentation and oratory grew in the twentieth century, the subjects were grouped with English because of their shared rhetorical roots. However, English departments tended to focus on literature and literary criticism rather than the construction and delivery of speeches. By the time the organization now known as the National Communication Association (NCA) was founded one hundred years ago, fissures existed within English departments about whether the study of literature or rhetoric (written or spoken) was their proper mission. The rise of competitive speech and debate programs provided a reason for separating speech as an academic discipline from English.

In addition, because students initiated competitive debate programs without the direct input from faculty, debaters made connections with faculty from

a wide range of disciplines who become their coaches and helped them sharpen their skills. Sometimes the colleges recognized and supported the faculty coaches with a salary stipends, other times they did not. It quickly became apparent that debaters who had the benefit of coaches were more successful than those without such support. By the early 1900s, debaters were lobbying colleges to offer regular courses in speech and debate and to hire faculty whose responsibilities included debate coaching. Thus, the result of increased student interest in competitive speech and debate contributed to the rise of the speech discipline in the academy.

Forensics and Game Theory

Another result of considering forensics as play is that it becomes an exemplar of game theory. Game theory suggests that in a competition, players or agents participate in interactions using communicative strategies to produce outcomes or decisions whereby one player gains a relative advantage in a zero-sum, rational world (Ross 2010). Seeing forensics as play invites the use of game theory to guide the debater's strategy and performance. For example, if a debater on the affirmative side fails to address every argument the opponent makes in the first affirmative rebuttal, the final negative speaker could use the rule of fairness to claim that it is too late to answer the argument in the final affirmative speech if there were no opportunity to respond. Similarly, the strategic practice of turning an argument back on the originating team by showing how the intended negative action might have an opposite and beneficial effect is an example of how debate reflected the underlying tenets of game theory. The point of game theory was to identify a reason to win and make that the basis for deciding the victor.

As we have noted elsewhere (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014), "Game theory created the likelihood of competitors testing the rules and norms of the game" (233). As debate became more technical, debaters embraced the rules to maximize their ability to win. When a debater did not cover an argument, it was considered "dropped." If a claim was made without a warrant, it was "dismissed." To increase the likelihood of debaters dropping arguments, opponents established specialized practices (e.g., the first negative speaker presenting the entire negative offense in the initial speech with the expectation that the following affirmative speaker must cover every argument; then, the second negative speaker and the first negative speaker each extend part of the negative offense in greater depth expecting that the following affirmative speaker in a shorter amount of time must cover every argument).

In a debate where the winner was determined on the basis of which team

did the best job of orally presenting arguments to persuade the listeners to agree with its overall position, the technicalities inherent in knowing the rules of the game would be less compelling. However, when debate adopted the tournament format, and the nature of the audience changed from public observers to trained judges, debaters introduced alternative decision rules specific to particular strategic practices. They came to prefer those judges who were receptive to their alternative rules and practices of the game.

One prominent example of such a test came in the form of rapid delivery as debaters sought to increase the amount of information presented in a debate. Originally, the introduction of rapid delivery occurred on the national circuit and was the result of college debaters and coaches interacting with the high school debate community. Quite simply, by increasing their rate of delivery, debaters could introduce more information into a round. If the judges based their decisions on which team provided the greatest number of compelling arguments with supporting information, the team speaking the fastest stood a greater chance of winning the round.

Some regarded this change in debate from communication centeredness to information centeredness as detrimental because it considered the inherent tension between style and invention as the dominant rhetorical canon. Those preferring the communicative style supported a slower, more oratorical delivery. Those who favored the information style considered the creation, development, and number of arguments supported with evidence more important. Those who advocated the desirability of rapid speech were associated with the national circuit, and those preferring the more oratorical style of debate were associated with local or regional debating. We concluded that as debaters considered their judges and the zero-sum environment of winning or losing round by round, they stood a greater chance of winning by adopting the information-centered format.

As the rate of speaking increased to almost unintelligible presentations, the preference of judges for or against rapid delivery influenced debaters to consider adapting their style round-by-round, based upon the preferences of the particular judge assigned to determine the winner of their round. Because judges played an essential role in competitive debate, debaters engaged in the game learned to adapt their arguments and style to those who were making the decisions. This removed the audience's influence as the more experienced debaters using game theory strategically sought to set the decision rules (e.g., a team cannot extend an argument in the final speeches if it was not introduced in one of the constructive speeches) and win based upon their adherence to these rules.

Forensics and Epistemological Play

Another reason to consider forensics as a legitimate pedagogical practice stems from our contention that forensics, in and of itself, is epistemic or knowledge creating. Engaging in the act of debate is a learning experience by its very nature because every participant must simultaneously think critically; engage in multiple tasks such as taking notes, listening, and locating supporting evidence; and present and defend arguments orally (Glaser 1941). Littlefield (2006) placed debate and forensics into this epistemic category: "The experience of forensics provides knowledge that is unique to the nature of the activities involved; and from forensic activities comes truth, or certainty, about the nature of the experience for the individuals involved" (7). In the case of forensics, as the activity evolved, the participants experienced firsthand knowledge through their participation. Even bad practices such as falsifying evidence, intimidating inexperienced debaters, and rendering a questionable decision provided participants with firsthand knowledge about such experiences they could not have otherwise received.

Elsewhere, we have provided several ways that participants benefited from participating in forensics. Forensics is creative, created in context, based on certainty, involves coping and strategizing, and is processual, argument driven, and culturally adaptive. Participants are creative in their invention of arguments, capable of coping with the dynamics of a competitive environment, certain in their understanding that winning or losing is based upon the decision of a judge, strategic in their use of communication in an unpredictable environment, resilient in their resolve to return to competition time and time again, capable of making a choice about how to construct arguments, and culturally adaptive and knowledgeable of the norms and practices of debate constructed by the forensics community. Forensics participants are provided knowledge that could not be duplicated in any other academic environment. For this reason, forensics as a form of play providing epistemic understanding has value for participants (Bartanen and Littlefield 2014).

Conclusion

The introduction of competitive speech and debate as a form of academic play affected the evolution of higher education in the United States. Students embraced forensics as a fun alternative to the rigid classroom environments of

the nineteenth century. Through their pursuit of competitive environments in which to demonstrate their critical-thinking and public-speaking skills, they influenced faculty and institutions to offer courses and programs to assist them in their personal and professional growth and potential as citizens.

We argue that forensics altered the playing field by providing speaking and critical-thinking skills for all participants, but especially for diverse socioeconomically and otherwise disadvantaged students, that it led to the development of the academic discipline of communication, and that it served to impart knowledge gained in competitive settings the participants could not have otherwise attained. In short, forensics as a form of high-level, intellectual play provided an enjoyable way for students to demonstrate their abilities while simultaneously providing them with intellectual, social, and personal benefits.

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