

## Forensics education promotes synergy in the curriculum, teaches civic habits, and lifts the overall level of discourse in a school.

**F**orensics is, at its core, a discipline rooted in cross-curriculum study. Those engaged in the activity analyze, dissect, and interpret various forms of literature from multiple disciplines as they work against and *with* their competitors to advance their knowledge of content and to develop their communications skills. It is one way to address the problem that

engaged citizens do not materialize out of thin air. They do not naturally grasp such knotty principles as tolerance, impartial justice, the separation of church and state, the needs for limits on majority power, or the difference between liberty and license. (Parker, 2006, p. 49)

Put another way, simply presenting ideas to students and having them recite information from memory does little to instill understanding. Instead, students must explore the concepts to see how they developed, the circumstances from which they sprang, and how they affect people in the real world. To gain perspective on the issues, students must also be exposed to multiple viewpoints and surrounded by people from different backgrounds.

Regrettably, the educational system is a bureaucracy that inherently imposes rigid structures on teachers and students alike. As a result, the reality of "most formal education in the United States...[is that it] emphasizes dichotomous thinking" (Martin & Nakayama, 2004, p. 63). Too often, students learn to think in rigid—and often false—dichotomies, such as black and white, good

and evil, male and female, hot and cold, and right and wrong. This thought process is even reflected in the overt curriculum as content is isolated into distinct subjects that rarely overlap in the classroom.

Thinking in this way can be both misleading and dangerous. Subjects are not unrelated fields; they almost always overlap and build on one another. Students who think in absolutes or stereotypes are hindered in their ability to truly grasp an idea or know and respect those who appear to be different from them. Rather than thinking in rigid absolutes, students should be encouraged to embrace the truth within multiple views, discovering how they combine and work together to elicit a clearer perception of reality.

Likewise, teachers should help students develop the tools they will use to develop well-thought out arguments that support their views. If students receive the freedom to think issues through, they are much more likely to truly grasp the underlying theories and implications. Further, they will be empowered to develop their own novel solutions to societal problems. Meanwhile, teachers are responsible for helping students build frameworks for understanding those issues. One way to achieve those aims in a socially responsible manner is to frame them within the bounds of a civic education.

### Rhetorical Competence and Literacy

Cocurricular forensics programs consist of three types of competitive events—interpretative, competitive, and dialectical—all of which have their own unique and often overlapping benefits. The first is commonly

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referred to as *interpretation of literature*. Competitors in these events recreate the characters in a published story, making them seem living and real to the audience. Ultimately, the audience should feel as though they are watching the story unfold in real life. Because the event is devoid of costumes and props, students must employ a number of rhetorical devices and purposeful body language to effectively get their point across to the audience. Further, competitors often take on the persona of multiple characters within a single performance, so the development of these communications skills becomes even more pronounced. Aside from public speaking skills, there are other, more direct, connections to the standard curriculum.

First, interpretative competitors immerse themselves in literature. That is, one aspect of interpretation that makes it unique is that each student is responsible for choosing his or her piece. Because interpretative competitors may select any published literature, they pour over countless titles, including novels, short stories, plays, graphic novels, and poems. A typical semester in forensics might expose students to more literature—in terms of both quantity and variety—than a typical English class (McCrary, 2004). This increases students' literacy skills as they immerse themselves in the literature and also enhances the students' cultural literacy as they become increasingly familiar with classical and contemporary writings.

Second, interpretation extends beyond mere performance. Students are not judged solely on their ability to act or perform. In fact, one of the key elements looked for by most judges is the literary merit and social significance of the chosen piece. In other words, a student performing humorous interpretation may experience some success if the piece is funny and the delivery captures that humor, but the student is considerably more likely to receive high marks if he or she effectively demonstrates what the piece has to say about the importance of interpersonal relationships, the marginalization of teens in contemporary

society, or the effects of extreme polarization in the United States. This typically takes place on two levels: through the performance itself and in an introduction to the piece during which the student explains why he or she chose a particular piece of literature and what it means to him or her.

Finally, as the name of the event implies, a key element of this activity is that the students' performance is dictated by his or her interpretation of the literature. Rather than mimicking the performance of famous actors or relying solely on the author's original meaning, students are encouraged to interpret the words on the basis of their own academic, cultural, and life experiences. This is not to say that prior performances or the author's intent are ignored. The literature could not truly be interpreted by the student without taking those factors into account. During interpretative events, students critically analyze literature on multiple levels, taking into account the author's meaning; the historical context of the selection; the evolving meaning of the literature through generations of revisiting it in alternative media forms; the context of the literature in contemporary society; and the student's own unique, thoughtful, and personal insights on the material.

### **Critical Thought**

Like interpretation, competitive speech offers a number of educational benefits through two broad types of speech events: platform and extemporaneous speaking. Platform speaking events require students to conduct extensive research on a controversial issue of their choice and generally attempt to persuade the audience in some way. Extemporaneous speaking events, on the other hand, require students to be familiar with a wide range of issues significant to the United States or the international community. Here, students are given a very specific question on a current event and receive 30 minutes to prepare and organize a 7-minute speech.

The most obvious educational benefit of competitive speech is the development of

public speaking and writing skills. First and foremost, the structure of a well-thought-out speech becomes ingrained in students' thought process as they organize countless speeches throughout the season: attention-getting device, clear thesis statement, preview, three main points, summary, and transition out of the speech. While preparing, they experiment with a number of organizational patterns, learning through personal experience how organizational structure influences the audiences' perception and understanding. Further, they learn how to use words and rhetorical devices to persuade and inform their audience effectively. Again, over the course of a forensics season, they have more opportunities to perfect their skills than a course in public speaking could ever hope to afford.

Citizens in a democratic society are often called upon to persuade others of the best course of action, whether as political leaders, citizens engaged in discussions with peers in informal settings, or in a typical business setting. One forensics educator asserted that "perhaps even more important for the average person—who admittedly may never stand up to address large numbers of people—is the ability to recognize what is being done when other people stand up to do so" (Crawford, 2003, p. 2). By learning how to employ words in an effective and ethical manner, students are inoculated against misleading tactics that public speakers use in other situations.

Speech competitors also gain knowledge about a plethora of controversial topics. In platform events, such as original oratory, students are encouraged to select persuasive topics that alert the audience to a potential danger or strengthen devotion to a cause. Recent topics

addressed by students at national competitive events have included tolerance and the sound byte culture. In extemporaneous speaking, students tackle such current and controversial questions as, Should civil lawsuits against former Bush administration officials who are accused of excesses in the "War on Terror" be allowed to proceed? Has the federal government gone too far in bailing out failed U.S. businesses? and What can the Mexican government do to secure an edge in the war against drug lords? To succeed in these events, students must have an in-depth understanding of social and political issues. Further, they develop critical thinking skills through their exploration of these issues.

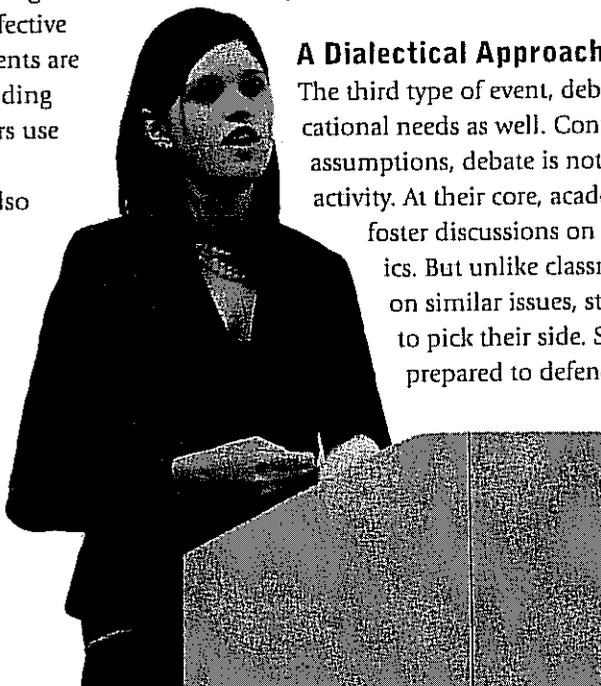
Before competing, students must conduct research on a wide range of topics and compare sources, dissect the quality of the material, and synthesize information from multiple resources. In 1999, a team of collegiate forensics coaches conducted a meta-analysis study of public speaking classes, argumentation classes, and competitive forensics programs that confirmed this analysis. Their research indicated that "all methods of communication skill training improvement generate gains in critical thinking. The largest effect, however, was observed for competitive forensic participation" (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999).

### A Dialectical Approach

The third type of event, debate, meets educational needs as well. Contrary to many assumptions, debate is not a win-at-all-costs activity. At their core, academic debates

foster discussions on controversial topics. But unlike classroom discussions on similar issues, students do not get to pick their side. Students must be prepared to defend multiple sides

of the topics. In any given competition, they will fill the affirmative (proposition)



*At Left:  
A student from Chugiak  
(AK) High School,  
competes in the 2008  
Northern Lights Debate  
Tournament held at the  
University of Alaska  
Anchorage.*

## RESOURCES

The National Forensic League ([www.nflonline.org](http://www.nflonline.org)) and the National Debate Coaches Association ([www.thendca.org](http://www.thendca.org)) provide information on building successful forensics programs.

and negative (opposition) side of the issue an equal number of times in four, six, or eight preliminary round tournaments. This practice is often referred to as switch-sides debate because competitors are regularly moving from pro to con and back again during each successive round. Their involvement in this activity truly incorporates a dialectical approach to civic education.

Most noticeably, debaters take what they learned and share those ideas in the classroom when they return to school following a tournament. Many of my students have expressed that their interest in a government, philosophy, or science class was sparked at a debate tournament. They have shared their ideas, and those of their competitors, with their classmates in units on constitutional law, the civil rights movement, and the greenhouse effect. As a result, other faculty members and administrators frequently told me how lucky I was to have such bright and talented students on my team. Although my students are bright and talented, I believe these statements oversimplified the reality. The truth is, *all* students are bright. Their teachers just may not have reached them yet.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that debaters are much more likely to take a meaningful role in the community as well. Through debate, they learn the importance of ordinary citizens taking an active role in the society in which they live and gain a greater understanding of cultures and governmental systems, thereby increasing their ability to play a meaningful role within those contexts. The discourse that occurs on a debate team between tournaments and at forensics competitions gives debaters a greater understanding of those who are different from themselves, a sense of interconnectedness, and knowledge of how to work more effectively with others. Translating these ideas to the business world, "a number of CEOs and company presidents who have formal debating experience" credited much of their success to the logical thinking and interpersonal skills they developed at debate competitions (Jones, 2004, p. 3B).

Of equal significance, debate fosters discussion among competitors and forces them to consider multiple sides of an issue. In addition, they examine each issue from nonpartisan angles because they must invariably debate both sides of the topic. More importantly, students examine the issues in context, rather than as separate and unrelated topics. They see for themselves that policy discussions in the real world do not occur in a vacuum.

Further, debaters gain the opportunity to examine the interplay of actual policy ideas and alternatives as they apply their research and arguments in an academic laboratory at debate competitions. There, they share their ideas with others in both formal and informal discussions, gain additional insight on the topics from their competitors, and often engage their judges in postround analysis of the subjects and arguments that were debated. Thus, they add yet another layer of depth to their understanding.

Finally, debaters' discussions empower them to develop meaningful arguments through the process of making claims, supporting those claims with facts and evidence, and contributing their own thoughtful analysis. Debaters choose their arguments after synthesizing information from multiple resources, including popular media, history's great philosophers, and government studies and the research of independent think tanks. They necessarily must learn to analyze the quality and credibility of their sources before they create their own arguments and analysis. In fact, a recent study indicated that in urban school settings, academic debate programs have had a positive impact on students' critical reading ability (Collier, 2007). Ultimately, this not only aids their ability to learn in all areas of the curriculum, but it also grows thoughtful and informed citizens.

## Conclusion

Forensics—interpretation, speech, and debate—can and should be a meaningful part of

every school's curriculum. To put it simply, the course of study, alongside cocurricular competition, promotes civic education and enhances the standard curriculum by helping students explore myriad topics from multiple angles and find the truth in each, fostering civic participation, advocating civic engagement, promoting authentic discussions on issues of real importance, and emphasizing the principles that are essential to a liberal democracy. PL

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