# Wading into the Stream of Forensics Research: The View from the Editoralial Office

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When Kevin Dean approached me to provide the perspective of a sitting editor for a special issue of this journal devoted to the state of research in forensics, I agreed reluctantly but out of a sense of responsibility. Over the last two decades I have served on the editorial boards of several forensics journals and I currently edit Argumentation and Advocacy. There is a danger in a sitting editor accepting assignments such as this: authors for whom I have had the unfortunate relationship of rejecting their work can slowly burn as they filter my criticism of past research through a lens in which they see their article exemplified in each comment, and my comments can too easily be read as prescriptions for what our journal currently seeks to publish. My response to the request comes less out of my current role, however, than out of those two decades on editorial boards. I consider a position on an editorial board as a position of trust which entails certain obligations and those obligations motivate this essay.

Editors and editorial boards carry the responsibility for bringing coherence to the body of a discipline's work. They stand between the tradition of research which defines the accululated study of subject matter and the individual author who contributes to that study. To authors, editorial boards are

viewed differently, as accepters or rejecters of their work. To be sure, the board is charged with maintaining some sense of traditional "quality" which defines a standard of acceptability for research and leads to accepatance and rejection decisions. But such judgement is a theshold judgement and the secret of editorial work -- in both senses of the term "secret" -- is that the work is not really the sort of prescriptive judgement of success or failure that is characteristic of teaching and forensics coaching. Rather, as a member of an editorial board you watch submissions go by and try to assist authors in capturing the evolving ideas of the research tradition by weaving their individual submissions into a journal. You have the power to nudge authors in this or that direction a bit to locate the idea into a developing context, but it is the power to help locate ideas rather than the power to control or initiate them. The irony of the power of the editor and the editorial board is that you are totally dependent on authors. Because there are always other journals, and because authors are a stubborn lot, the greatest power is the power to reconcile an individual effort with the coherent evolution of a tradition of research.

I accepted the invitation to write this essay, therefore, as an undocumented editorial voice, to provide a report on what has floated by in the stream of research over the last two decades. Not only will my claims be undocumented, but I have intentionally avoided citing examples so the essay can be read without an effort to identify particular essays -- the reader's or someone

elses. I wish to give a sense for the flow of essays rather than the distinctiveness of particular essays.

The opportunity is actually quite rare. It allows an overt expression of one voice not normally given to and editorial board member. If I succeed I will provide you just a glimpse of the difficulties in bringing coherence to these two decades, and in the process enter a dialogue more overtly and publicly than editorial boards normally do. I offer also a subtle voice of prescription, but with the guide's sense of "That's a better bet" rather than the teacher's sense of "You will be tested next week." I plan to mix comments on the places where research fails to meet publication with suggestions for successful strategies for research too little taken. In the process I will comment on styles that I see failing to reach publication, the vision of research which seems to shape the publication, and the vision of the researcher that I believe shapes those who successfully publish research in forensics.

## The Style of Forensics Research

What is the difference between forensics activities and research? The question borders on the nonsensical because the differences are so obviously dramatic. But my experience is that the difficulties that forensics researchers encounter in publication often stem from inappropriately locating the relationship of the two.

Let me begin by explaining the strengths of forensics activities as I perceive them. First and foremost, forensics has maintained the central role of the personal relationship of teacher and pupil. Forensics retains the importance of prescriptive instruction in one-on-one situations. Forensics is thus an arena in which teaching is still an art based on the authority of the coach-instructor. Second, forensics has a built-in system of accountability unlike other forms of education. The tournament structure provides a short-term reward system that has many features which make it superior to mere grading systems: it is public rather than private; it is built on competition with its escalating layers of standard; it is repetitive rather than one shot and over. This system of feedback makes it an exceedlingly successful contributor to student development. The importance of competition in our society creates the tremendous power of forensics to motivate students. Finally, I believe that the stability of forensics is one of its strengths. Forensics not only has an accountability system but it has succeeded in defining that system internally. Forensics directors run forensics tournaments. Forensics judges are tightly knit into a system of evaluation and feedback which influences their assignment to rounds and their respect in the community. There are national tournaments which exert a control over any threatening deviations in tournament procedure or structure. The extent of social control provided by such an internal dynamic results in a very stable system that evolves

over the years at a nearly imperceptible pace. Regardless of the cost of such a closed system, the positive result is that expectations can be more easily taught.

I mentioned the importance of understanding the relationship of these strengths to research because the most common stylistic problems which I find blocking success in publication seem to me natural accompaniments to these characteristics of forensics activities. For example, far too many essays suffer from pontification. The authority of the coach in working with the student is not the authority base which a healthy system of research relies upon. Rather the system of authority based in the concept of "peer" review assumes a more democratic authority structure. Most review of research is blind review which deprivileges the hierarchical authority which characterizes forensics instruction. As a result, carrying the force of claims in research requires that the author imbed the claims in a rich texture of proof rather than asserted authority.

Tied closely to pontification is the use of the anecdote as proof. In forensics instruction the anecdote builds the authority of the instructor in working with students. But in the research context, where the relationship of reader to author is less personal, the anecdote is torn from the full context of personal experience and loses its power to persuade. Good research requires that the researcher enter a peer relationship with fellow researchers. Respect for that system means that claims are weighted by their cogency, their imbededness in the

research of others, their conceptual consistency with common tasks and established viewpoints on common problems. Researchers who are able to make this transition in the pattern of expected proof succeed where others who cannot make the transition fail.

A second stylistic problem which I note frequently in forensics research is the failure to adapt oral to written style. By and large, forensics instructors are among the best presenters of ideas in convention settings. There the oral style encourages simply-focused purpose with deep illustration and extensive repetition; the author's assistance to the listener rather than to the reader is the proper frame. The skill with which forensics instructors present papers in such settings is a tribute to their ability to fulfill the prescriptive advice that they present to students. Too often, however, when I have reviewed forensics research I find the papers presented orally submitted for review for publication without attention to adaptation -- often with convention title page intact. Only for a desparate editor will such a submission strategy be successful. In fact, reviewers with whom I have discussed this problem generally concede that the lack of effort by the author to accomplish these stylistic changes probably diminishes the assistance that they provide to the author in preparing for publication since the most obvious problem with the manuscript has so little to do with the ideas presented. Time spent in converting the manuscript to written style -- reducing the repetition to sound principles of written transition, amplifying

intricacies of reasoning that would not be appropriate in the oral medium, converting personal references to an expected and particular audience to the more generalized audience of readers, fleshing out sections which orally may be expanded based on audience response into sections which stand on their own in the absence of such immediate feedback -- is time well spent in accelerating the review of manuscripts.

I believe the greatest frustration for a research referee is seeing the kernel of an excellent idea stylistically stifled. I review research for non-forensics journals as well. In general, those writing for forensics journals display the stronger command of the basic skills of proof and expression which are the first requirements of good research, but have greater difficulty in adapting work across presentational arenas. Having the pride, taking the tme, and contemplating the differences among the arenas in which research is presented will pay more dramatic dividends for authors than any other effort.

## The Vision of Forensics Research

During the period that I have been reviewing forensics essays for publication three types of research have dominated the material I have received: (1) reports of descriptive survey research on attitudes and structural characteristics of forensics programs; (2) "how to" essays on particular forensics activities, usually innovative in character; and (3) theoretical essays which provide a vocabulary and structure for teaching particular

forensics skills. In this section, I will describe the characteristics of the essays of each type which succeed, and then suggest a vision of forensics research that I would encourage as a potentially fruitful direction for research.

The administrative forensics survey is probably the most frequent type of submission. Not only can journal reviewers testify to this, but so can forensics directors who are asked to complete the surveys. Typically, the surveys request and report information on budgets; participant demographics; administrative support for programs; and opinions of participants, alumni, and instructors on the power of forensics on participants' lives. The descriptive statistics employed are generally quite simple and the claims fairly straightforward. Such research reports are generally of time-bound value, since based on snapshots in time. They are also primarily useful in forensics administration. Ultimately, the test of such research is its credibility with the administrators nationwide who are the ultimate audience. The research is, however, plagued by design and instrument return problems. Few examples of such research achieve the sample structure which contribute to their strength. Often a full population mailing list is used with consequently low return. Seldom does design contain state-of-the-art methods for return. Sampling procedures are most often designed for simplicity of data collection rather than for maximum credibility of results. In general, the surveys are also designed to be rather blunt instruments for describing national forensics populations.

Administrators who might try to locate their forensics programs with particular objectives or target their programs for particular students would find such overgeneralization limiting. Obviously, the most successful of these reports are those which provide the texture of credibility and the most sophistication of design. Perhaps the frequency of such research demonstrates the failing of national forensics organizations which are in the best position to commission and finance solid research of this type. My impression after reviewing this work is that many who conduct the research do not realize the difficulty which solid research of this type presents, and later find themselves submitting reports for research they know suffers problems of credibility simply because of the time they already have invested. Tragically, the time devoted to writing the report is tossing good time after bad.

The essays which describe techniques for instruction, the "how to" descriptions, come from the laudable urge to spread successful instruction as widely as possible. Certainly workshops and "trading posts" for exercises and instructional materials are an important asset to forensics instructors. Training sessions and chances to meet master teachers are particularly important for new forensics instructors. Quality research in this vein, however, should have objectives more lasting than the simple exchange of information or beginning training. The difference is most evident in the richness of appreciation for the complexity of the successful teacher-student

interaction in forensics. Certainly forensics instructors are among the most successful of teachers in motivating student effort and accomplishment. Explanations for such success are rich and interesting subjects for research. Just as certainly, these explanations will carry beyond technique into a range of characteristics of the activity and the people involved in the teacher-student relationship. Forensics instructors writing about their techniques are usually guilty of projecting the success of the technique on the technique itself. Those who have attempted to successfully use these techniques in their own classroom know the realistic assessment of the success requires much more than mere description of the technique. The successful authors of this type of research describe instruction with a degree of complexity which other submissions lack. They place their subject matter in a context of objectives and student situations which recognize the sensitivity of forensics instructors to these variations. They identify the instructional skills necessary for the technique to succeed. If they are attempting to generalize their claims about the success of the technique they employ the social scientific methods which have been developed to support such generalizations. Thus, the research achieves an analytical depth which carries it beyond anecdote.

The third type of submission is most often called the "theoretical essay." This type of research involves the development of vocabulary and posited structure for explaining

phenomena and the situating of that developed theory in practice. Those interested in debate have been more successful in developing this type of research than have those interested in various individual events. Typically this research builds from the relationship between the speaking activity and its content. The elaboration of vocabulary, and strategies for its use, enables speakers in working with the content, but the impact if such theory goes beyond expanding our knowledge of the speaker's art toward contributing to our knowledge of the subject matter of the content. In fact, the best research of this type is well-set in two different contexts: the contextualizing knowledge of the speaker's invention and the contextualizing knowledge of the subject matter. Successful research of this type goes well beyond expressing the author's "opinion" about approaching the subject matter toward carefully developed and intricately reasoned analysis that provides strong relationships to contextualizing vocabulary and structure.

Why has debate research been more successful in generating this type of research? I believe the answer is that the restriction of debate activities to annual or semiannual topics has created the time and necessity for the depth of concentrated effort required for this type of work. The focus on questions of policy, and more recently value, and the extended periods of time working with particular topics demand insight into the potential strategies for invention. The need to elaborate the vocabulary

and structure in order to elaborate argument leads to this type of development.

I believe that there are similar strategies for research, however, in all forensics events. Over the past decade there has been a renewed interest in situated argument by forensics directors or former forensics directors. This includes increasing attention to political debates, debates on such public issues as nuclear power, and other essays which examine contemporary and historically situated argument. Despite the emergence of this research in forensics journals I believe that the full power of this research for the forensics community has not been tapped. The reason is because this research and forensics issues develop independently. Yet, merging the two lines of inquiry could contribute greatly to diminishing the isolation of forensics. Forensics participants are giving speeches on real-world topics, reading the work of others in the public arena, and inventing persuasive and descriptive strategies and techniques. The value of these activities to the participant and the public multiplies, however, as the critical refinements that are a part of forensics activities are supplemented with work into the non-competitive context. Forensics instructors who conduct ongoing programs of research into the inventional strategies of those in the public arena and bring that research into their students' inventional process deepen the experience of the student.

I also believe there is an important contribution which forensics researchers can make to the understanding of this phenomena. Since I also read a large volume of material in historical/critical studies I am well aware that one of the dominant problems in this literature is the difficulty of remaining focused on the strategic rhetorical process. The temptation is to treat invention in terms of the content of the subject matter. The research in the historical/critical tradition which succeeds is research that can project the practical power of the inventional and stylistic process. Forensics instructors are involved in teaching this power to students constantly, and their sensitivity to the power yields a natural advantage. Of course, involvement by forensics instructors as consumers of public persuasion is a requisite for their jobs. But I am calling for more. I am suggesting that concentrated powers of analysis honed by careful research work with public discourse will bring the connections between forensics skills and public life more overtly to the surface of both our research and our forensics contests.

The vision I am suggesting may, in fact, return us to an earlier era when the linkages between the contest activity and the thorough understanding of non-contest contexts were more natural. Many of the memorable rhetorical critics from the speech discipline came to their power of observation from their pedagogical interest in forensics. I am not so much calling for a return to the old tradition of criticism, however, as I am for

a renewal of the vision which saw inquiry into argument and speech-making in the public arena as a necessary supplement to prepare students of forensics for their activity and the skills taught by their activity. This part of forensics education carried many of our students into public life. For the readers of our journals this research would enliven their teaching with insights into the inventional and stylistic process which would make their students better speakers. An interest in the power of the word to construct public life would renew interest in forensics as well.

Would the product of this research differ much from research now appearing? I think so. It would borrow the objective of elaborating and developing a vocabulary and structure for invention from the theoretical work in debate, but would expand the focus far beyond the narrow confines of debate. I would borrow the interests of the public arena from historical/critical work, but would provide a more vivid appreciation for the central power and responsibility of the speaker's inventional and stylistic choices in shaping the public arena. More overt expression of this vision would reopen a literature to our students which, incredibly, many do not encounter today as they learn their forensics skills.

## A Vision of the Researcher

There have been many successful forensics directors who have also been successful authors of published research. Having

admired these people and reviewed their work for some time, I have developed a theory about their characteristics. Above all, I believe these people manifest three abilities: the ability to integrate their experience, the ability to write regularly, and the ability to carry forensics' dedication to excellence into their research.

Integration of experience is an ability that works quite broadly to benefit the researcher. Perhaps most important is the ability to integrate their pedagogical commitment with their research commitment into a commitment to the forensics community. Forensics instructors are obviously heavily committed to teaching. Too often the relationship between teaching and research is seen as a forced choice. Although it is a cliche by now, it is a cliche in which many, including I, believe: both teaching and research are enhanced if they are integrated into a teacher's commitments. I believe this is particularly true of forensics. The instructor who sacrifices his/her research program for time in teaching must continually fight the sterilization of his/her teaching in competition. Notice the argument here is not for a "balance" between research and teaching, but an "integration." An instructor actively working with a research program develops the triangle of tension between the student performance, the competitive arena, and the public context for the performance. The astute instructor who works through his/her research problems with his/her students foremost in his/her mind brings fresh and insightful approaches to his/her

teaching. The instructor who sacrifices his/her teaching to carve out a separate program of research must find separate resources for refurbishing the insights that come from analyzing the performative dimension of argumentative subject matter. The astute instructor who sharpens his/her analytical sense for the performative dimension in his/her teaching will naturally take that sense to his research work and thus improve the research work.

In addition, those who succeed as forensics scholars understand the common fabric of invention that unites their writing with their instruction in speaking. Their careful work with the written medium provides sensitivities to powers in langauge which integrates into their teaching forensics students. Their instructional work with students calls for a sensitivity to audience and inventional situations that carries into their writing to improve its quality.

The near-schizophrenia which many forensics directors feel between their research life and their teaching life does not characterize these models of integration. Theirs is an approach in which the best qualities of each role inform and nurish the quality in the other. Thus the integration is achieved that makes them better scholars.

The second ability which these scholars have is the ability to write regularly. They are able to carve the time from their schedule to put pen to paper. The most successful do so as a part of their daily, or at least weekly, routine. Making this

room is more a matter of believing in the importance of the writing task than it is a mechanical problem. They are able to articulate to students and co-workers their commitment to an integrated approach. Of course, prior to that they are able to achieve the distance from the everyday short-term demands of their position, including the short-term demands of students, to recognize that the time spent with students is more fruitful if the instructor's inquiring mind is fine tuned by the dedication to research. When this is accomplished, writing becomes a part of the normal routine, the guilt of time spent away from the demanding student disappears and the research program becomes a solid contribution to forensics and the instructor's forensics student.

The third ability which characterizes these scholars is their commitment to quality in their work. If there is an advantage which forensics directors have over other scholars it is their continual connection with accountability and their continual striving for excellence that is a part of their everyday activities. The sharp edge which teases quality out of hard work is never far from a forensics instructor's life. Too often, however, when research is viewed as separate from rather than integral to their forensics experience, research becomes something that is dashed off on the plane on the way to a convention or the article that is "hammered out" over a weekend, or the convention paper that has the title page changed and mailed off for review. The result is the stylistic problems I

discussed above, or worse, the substantive arguments which show the lack of advanced criticism and refinement that the same instructor would insist that his forensics students achieve. The successful scholars invariably carry the commitments to excellence which are the fabric of the forensics community into their work. The result is some of the best research being produced in the discipline.

I have called these "abilities" but they obviously are more likely to be developed habits of behavior than innate characteristics. Of course, some native abilities of insight and writing are necessary for success in publishing research, but these are also the marks of a good forensics instructor. Thus, the vision of the author working diligently to contibute to the body of written work in forensics is a vision in which all forensics instructors should see themselves.

## Conclusion

My response to the request to provide an editor's perspective on research in forensics has been part reality and part vision. Time in the review of other people's work inevitably provides someone with this mixture. The body of forensics work is a discourse for which the community can take pride. Yet, my judgement is that generally the quality of our teaching in forensics exceeds the quality of our research; at least the breadth of teaching quality exceeds the breadth of those in the community who are contributing activily to our

journals. Where ten years ago the outlets for our written work were restricted, today there are a plethora of outlets for our work. If used wisely, with both authors and editors dedicated to quality, these outlets can fill with work of the quality which reflects the quality of forensics teaching and the forensics community will be stronger and better as a result.