

## INDIVIDUAL EVENTS RESEARCH: A REVIEW AND CRITICISM

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Because research and scholarship are the foundation from which all specific areas within a field evolve, and because they establish the basis for interrelationships among the areas, a field of study is both as strong and as weak as its research and scholarship.

James McBath, 1975

Periodically, it is a wise idea to examine what a field has been producing in terms of its research and scholarship. Forensic scholars have on occasion undertaken extensive reviews of research and theorizing in forensics (Andersen, 1966; Logue & Shea, 1989; McBath, Bartanen, & Gossett, 1977; McGlone, 1969; Thomas, 1979 & 1983; Walwick, 1969). For the most part these reviews have emphasized debate writings, since scholarship in individual events was relatively scarce until the 1980s. Thomas (1983) concluded in his section on individual events, that "the published research in individual events shows considerable progress in both quality and amount in the past five years" (p. 16). Besides the continuance of individual events articles in the *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, Thomas noted two other occurrences contributing to the increased quality and quantity of individual events research: (1) the emergence of the *National Forensic Journal* with its premier issue in 1983 under the editorship of Michael Kelley and (2) the appearance of individual events papers at the Second and Third Summer Conference on Argumentation, Alta, Utah, in 1981 and 1983, respectively.

Following Thomas' work, Logue and Shea (1989) critiqued forensic research in general from 1984-1988. They reviewed six forensic publications: *JAF*, *The National Forensic Association Journal*, the *CEDA Yearbook*, *The Forensic, Speaker and Gavel*, and the Proceedings of the Summer Argumentation Conferences.

This article will focus upon and expand the criticism of individual events research summarized by Logue and Shea (1989), and suggest a research agenda for the 1990s.

### Methodology

Just as criticism is an important part of the modern scientist's activity (Knutson, 1979), criticism of individual events scholarship should

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serve similar functions: “to appraise the quality and value of our knowledge claims, the accuracy of the procedures and methods employed to arrive at those claims, as well as the underlying merit of the endeavor itself” (Knutson, p. 2). Logue (1988) argued that a critical review of forensics scholarship should be founded upon valid criteria. She described three criteria for research criticism: examination of the core issues of the discipline, generalizability of the research, and internal validity or methodological concerns.

Thomas (1979, 1983) supports the notion of grounding research in the core issues of a discipline. Logue and Shea (1989) argued these core issues should be found in the definitional base of the field, as described by the two forensic developmental conferences.

1. Forensics should function as an educational laboratory.
2. The aim of the laboratory should be the improvement of student abilities in areas such as research, analysis, and oral communication.
3. The cornerstone of the forensic laboratory should be the argumentative perspective.

Each of the core issues was further operationalized by the following definitions: (1) The educational laboratory would be concerned with pedagogical matters such as “how to” coach particular events or skills, “how to” judge events in the community, or “how to” structure tournaments or specific events. (2) The core concept of improving abilities in research, analysis and oral communication was conceptualized as dealing with benefits or forensic participation, measurement of skill improvement, or criticism of skill development. (3) The argumentative perspective on communication, as McBath (1984) described, “involves the study of reason given by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values” (p.5).<sup>1</sup>

Generalizability, the second criterion, is the social utility or application of research beyond the subjects studied or described. Tucker, Weaver, and Berryman-Fink (1981) wrote that:

the goal of research is to provide sets of findings that can contribute to theories and that provide a basis for generalization beyond the confines of the study itself. A study whose findings relate only to the specific persons, entities, or elements contained in that study is of minimal value. Some degree of generalization is the goal. (p. 233)

Logue & Shea (1989) categorized each individual events article as to its generalizability or social utility. They questioned whether the article applied to the entire forensic community, to individual events in general, or to a specific individual event. Social utility of the research beyond

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<sup>1</sup>These core concepts are not without controversy (see Thomas, 1983) on the argumentative perspective.

forensics was also identified. Did the scholarship make contributions to argumentation theory, to communication theory, etc?

The third and final criterion for evaluation was that of internal validity or methodology—what is the method of scholarship, is it appropriate, and is there sufficiency of data analysis? Whereas this criterion appears to be most relevant to quantitative studies, methodological processes can be either quantitative or qualitative in nature. For this evaluation, each article was categorized *qualitative*, *quantitative*, or *informative*. Those labeled as *qualitative* were primarily constructed in an argumentative manner, whereby the author(s) argued a particular position. The *quantitative* articles were concerned with survey data or number gathering in the broadest sense. *Informative* articles merely described a situation or program, without arguing a position.

To achieve our goal of assessing individual events research, the data for this examination is limited to works published in the *NFA Journal*. Such a move is valid, for the previously mentioned Logue/Shea study found that the vast majority of individual events articles were published in the *Mvl Journal*, thus the assumption that the seven years of that journal would be representative of individual events research. In this paper we will apply the three criteria developed above—core issues, generalizability, and methodology. Finally, suggestions are made for a research agenda into the 1990s.

### Results

Over the seven year existence of the *NFA Journal*, close to 100 articles have been published. Sixty-five of the articles were longer research papers and twenty-eight were shorter, opinion commentaries which we refer to as “forum” pieces (See Table 1).

**Table 1**  
Number of Articles by Year

Type of Articles	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	Totals
a. articles	7	7	12	10	10	11	8	<b>65</b>
b. forum piece	4	7	5	4	1	3	4	<b>28</b>

The significant number of articles in the *NFA Journal* focus upon the core issue of forensics as an educational laboratory (See Table 2). Only three articles dealt with skill improvement or skill acquisition: In 1983, Greenstreet recommended PBS and NPR as research sources for topics; in 1988, Colbert described the speaking rates found in CEDA final rounds; and in 1989 Wood and Rowland-Morin looked at skills acquisition as motivational reasons for students debating. Thus, two of the three skills articles were about debate exclusively, and not individu-

al events. Articles which upheld the argumentative perspective occurred relatively infrequently in *NFA Journal's* seven-year history. Verlinden (1987) discussed the argumentative perspective in oral interpretation. In that same year, Gloria Boone wrote about coaching impromptu; a subplot to that article concerned the creation of arguments in impromptu.

Table 2

Core Issues by Year								
Core Issue	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	Totals
a. Ed laboratory	9	12	17	12	10	10	8	78
b. Skills	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3
c. Arg Persp	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
d. Other <sup>2</sup>	1	2	0	2	0	2	3	10

With regard to the second evaluative criterion, the method used in presenting the material, more than 50 percent of the articles were descriptive or informational in nature and did not utilize any quantification (See Table 3). Approximately one-quarter of the articles were developed using numerical quantification, but even these works incorporated few statistical procedures. For instance, this research typically involved percentages or frequency counts such as in Clobert's (1988) counting of words per minute across speaker positions through three years of CEDA finals. No statistical significance comparisons were made of the rate increases. There are exceptions however. In a 1989 article, Gotcher and Honeycutt used a discriminant analysis to identify differences between debate and individual events.

The final one-quarter of the articles attempted to construe positions by developing arguments. For example, John Murphy's (1988) commentary on communication analysis argues for more emphasis on textual analysis rather than on methodology. In that same issue, Aden and Kay argue for an argumentative phrasing of extemporaneous topics.

Table 3  
Research Method by Year

Method	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	Totals
a Qualitative Argumentative	2	2	5	5	1	5	3	23
b Quantitative	2	2	4	4	3	4	4	23
c Descriptive Informational	7	10	8	5	7	5	5	47

<sup>2</sup>The articles that dealt with specific organizational matters (e.g., the history of the NFA) were categorized outside the three designated core issues.

The final criterion used in this criticism is that of generalizability or social utility (See Table 4). Approximately 70 percent of the *NFA Journal* articles are useful for individual events in general or specifically.

**Table 4**

**Generalizability by Year**

Social Utility	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	Totals
a. debate	2	1	1	3	0	2	1	10
b. general ie	6	2	1	4	1	1	3	18
c. specific ie	3	7	13	6	6	9	3	47
d. general forensics	0	2	2	1	2	0	1	8
e. comm theory	0	0	4*	0	0	0	0	4*
f. organization administrative	0	2	0	0	2	2	4	10

\*Rhetorical criticism articles could be useful to the communication field in general, initially categorized under specific ie.

Approximately 9 percent of these articles are about debate and thus are generalizable only to that form of forensics. Even fewer articles (8.6%) are useful to forensics in general, both debate and individual events. The remaining space in this journal (9.6%) is devoted to administrative or organizational articles (e.g., history of NFA, fundraising, National Development Conference thoughts). Only in 1985 did the issue on rhetorical criticism produce works that had potential utility to the field of communication in general.

More than half of the articles are applicable to the specific event discussed (See Table 5). In examining these specific subject areas for the journal, the number of selections were evenly divided between the areas of judging/critiquing and coaching of events. The events most often discussed in the writings were oral interpretation and rhetorical criticism. The emphasis in the interpretation articles appeared to deal with judging; while the primary issue of rhetorical criticism scholarship concerned speech construction (e.g., analysis and methodology). The event of persuasion or oratory placed a distant third in frequency of articles generated.

Table 5  
Subject Areas by Year

Subject Area	83	84	85	86	87	88	89
a. Evaluating							
Judging events	1	2	0	0	1	0	0
-ADS	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
-RC	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
-Imp/Extemp	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
-nersuasion	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
b. Coaching events							
-persuasion	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
-impromptu	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
-ads	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
-extemp	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
-RC	0	0	6	0	0	1	1
-interp	0	0	2	1	1	3	1
-duo	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
-research	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
c. Tournament							
-administration	1	1	0	1	0	1	1
-formats/events	0	4	0	2	0	1	1
-dress	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
-re questioning	0	0	5	0	0	0	1
d. Forensic activity							
-funding	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
-evaluating st	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
-employment	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
-research	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
-recruitment	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
-curricular	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
f. Organizational							
-history	0	1	0	0	2	0	0
-NDCF	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
g. Debate	1	0	0	0	0	2	1
-ethics	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
-cross-exam	0	0	1	3	0	0	0
h. Students	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
i. Ethics	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

### Discussion

The average number of articles published per year over the last seven years by the *NFA Journal* (11.3 per year) equates with the numbers that Logue and Shea (1989) reported for both *JAFJA* (11.4 per year) and the *CEDA Yearbook* (11 per year). In their five-year critique of forensic research in general, Logue and Shea found that between 1984-88, the *NFA Journal* had a slightly higher publication rate (average of 14 articles per year). The addition of 1983 and 1989 to this five-year review brings the *NFA Journal* in line with the other two journals noted.

The core issue of the educational laboratory dominated the *NFA Journal* as well as *The Forensic* and *The Speaker and the Gavel* (Logue and

Shea, 1989). For *JAFSA* and *The CEDA Yearbook*, the argumentative perspective core issue shared equal space with the educational laboratory. Even so, this body of “educational laboratory” literature typically discusses only strategies for tournament practices. In other words, while the forensic field may define itself as “an educational laboratory” the writings ultimately depict it as a field of “tournament activities and competitive strategies.”

Ballinger and Brand (1987) raised this concern in their analysis of persuasive speaking. They complained that the laboratory which implied experimentation and refinement of ideas was actually stifling and reinforcing only one type of organizational pattern. The exclusive concept of tournaments as laboratory inhibits truly experimental events such as festivals, workshops, and student forensic conferences. These latter forms are not explored in any individual events research.

Closely associated with the idea of forensics as an “educational laboratory” is the core issue of “skill improvement.” This concept, however is rarely addressed in individual events research. This was also a “problematic area” for the other forensic journals investigated by Logue & Shea (1989). They write that “it is as though the forensic field assumes skill improvement. Intuitively and anecdotely this may be the case, but for a discipline entrenched in documentation and analysis, the evidence on skill development is sorely lacking” (p. 453). If a field is defined by what is written in its journals, then perhaps the core issue of skill development, as promulgated by the Developmental Conferences, is not viewed as a central concern.

This lack of skill research may be indicative of recent trends in the broader discipline of speech communication. Lee and Lee (1987) described skill and technique training as low-level matters of academic concern. They note that the communication field is shifting its emphasis to understanding process rather than mastering skills and thus admonish that “if forensic educators continue to retain their outdated role as academic Dale Carnegies, then serious problems of scholarly legitimacy will persist” (p. 356).

The core issue of the argumentative perspective predominates debate research (Logue & Shea, 1989). Relatively few individual events articles develop this concept, with the exceptions of: Aden and Kay’s (1988) article on wording extemporaneous topics to enhance argumentative development; Boone’s advocacy of the use of metaphorical topoi in impromptu training; Verlinden’s (1987) argument for an interpreter “to present critical claims about the literature and use the performance to support those claims” (p. 66); and Murphy’s (1989) claim as to the unequal treatment of women in public address events.

In examining the evaluative criterion of research method, the *NFA Journal* dominated all other forensic journals in articles developed with quantification. Even though these articles may not employ complex or escape flawed statistical procedures, the attempt to use such quantification is worth noting. In all probability most forensic writers do not possess a strong background in quantitative methods and thus the scholarship usually incorporates descriptive or argumentative methods. Individual events coaches, on the other hand, are emerging without a graduate school experience with argumentation theory and may therefore, lean towards alternative methodological procedures.

In 1983, David Thomas suggested that future research into forensics should emanate from ethnomethodological bases such as field studies, case studies, and discourse analysis. Thomas's suggestion seems to have gone unnoticed by individual events writers.

The final criterion of generalizability or social utility is perhaps even more problematic than the lack of quantitative or ethnographic methods. Our findings in this final criterion raises the question of whether the forensic laboratory is worthy of its own body of research. Rieke and Brock (1975) speculated that forensics may be defended on the grounds that students were provided a popular activity. In addition, they suggested that introspective research about forensics was justified because it examined the activity and offered suggestions for refinement. This position describes the direction of the vast majority of forensic research—researchers examine what is being done and attempt to make refinements. Rieke and Brock rebuke this “persistence in defining forensics as the engaging in a particular set of activities” for this tendency “deeply influences the character of scholarship in the field” (p. 137). Cox (1975) similarly noted that “the daily concerns of an active forensics program affects the saliency of research questions” (p. 137). To argue that the forensic “laboratory” is an acceptable field of study has a hollow ring to it.

The anecdotal evidence abounds where forensic research would not suffice for tenure purposes or for graduate theses or dissertations. Many speech communication departments have disbanded their forensic programs. If the forensic researchers were contributing knowledge to the larger body of communication research, this repudiation by the field might not be so vigorous. Even within the forensic community, what CEDA writers chose to elaborate on has little value for individual events coaches and vice versa.

Logue and Shea (1989) describe the movement of *JFA* (now *Argumentation and Advocacy*) and the Summer Argumentation Conferences towards researching argumentation as the writing on the wall for forensic scholars. Because of its generalizability and the rich rhetorical

tradition of our discipline, the legitimacy of argumentation research is more readily granted. Those undertaking research projects that address questions of a qualitative nature may be well advised to consider an argumentative approach.

A recent individual events study in an international journal (Yoshihisa Itaba, 1990) points out that such research might be generalized beyond oratorical speaking. Using comparative criteria, the researcher examined American oratories with those of Japanese students. The current issue of cultural diversity emerges as a defining characteristic out of these speaking styles. Such research contributes to our intercultural understanding, a much broader research accomplishment than the mere description of a tournament practice or a suggestion for improving such a practice. This type of scholarship would not deserve Zarefsky's (1980) charge that the myopic focus of forensic research makes it trivial in scope and limited to participants in the contest activities described.

The individual events research of the 1990s can continue to be limited in scope or can heed the serious charges made here and elsewhere (Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986). A true individual events laboratory could discover the validity of numerous speech communication questions: does organization matter to audience members; to what extent do source citations need to be complete for believability; what levels of memorization in delivery adds or detracts from message generation; is the podium a barrier to be avoided; what role does clothing have on credibility?

The gender research spawned by Friedley and Manchester has substantial potential for the communication field. Such research attempts to address such vital, and generalizable questions as: why do women avoid certain events; and are there other, more feminine, forms of communication that should be promoted in the forensic laboratory?

In keeping with the core issues, we recommend that researchers might address the following in future studies: what skills are learned in individual events competition; should students be learning to communicate more via mediated channels; how much practice is necessary to get competency in speaking to a given standard; how are research skills enhanced in individual events training and what do former competitors claim about their speech training as it applies to their current vocation?

In the area of evaluation of speeches, we know very little about the decision making of critics. Whether lay critics emphasize some aspects of the performance over others; do expert judges have judging paradigms by which they approach individual events; and what are the deciding factors between higher ranks over others?

Research about the students engaged in this activity, the effectiveness of form beyond the competitive realm, and the decision-making processes of critics should be the broad areas of individual events scholarship for the 1990s.

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