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ABSTRACT

A humanistic approach to debate coaching enhances the ideal of free thought by opposing any censorship of ideas, promoting a wide variety of perspectives on human experience, and encouraging independent, critical thinking and problem solving. This is opposed to traditional authoritarian models in which the teacher is the powerful decision-maker and dispenser of truth while the student is passive. The coach who approaches responsibilities from a humanistic perspective can offer the student far more than just a knowledge of the skills involved. A person-centered atmosphere can be created to draw on the vast resources that the individual brings to the activity, emphasizing process-oriented learning where much of the responsibility for success lies with the participants and the direction is self-initiated. (DF)

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COACHING: A HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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It is not surprising that whenever coaches get together, a major topic of conversation is the problems and joys experienced with their students. Much of the coach's time and energy is spent interacting with squad members. Few areas of current education are characterized by the same levels of commitment and intensity experienced in the quest for competitive excellence. While many of those involved are legitimate armchair philosophers, there has been little formal attention given to analysis of coach-student interaction. It is as if this aspect of coaching -- the process level -- takes care of itself. The major texts on coaching have concentrated on the teaching of specific content and how one deals with administrative detail.¹ Advice as to the human elements have been allotted only a few vague paragraphs. Only with the recent addition of Directing Forensics by Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes has an extended discussion of relational issues been considered.² They advise that "forensics activities should be the product of a clear philosophy of some kind."³ While the literature on forensics has not directly discussed an educational philosophy, the underlying justifications for the activity are indebted to the classical concepts of the "whole man."⁵ This humanistic foundation, although implicit in much of the discussion of specific debate "practices", has not been applied to the relational

aspects of a program. An attempt will be made here to delineate the components of this humanistic viewpoint and explore the implications for the coach as he goes about a major portion of his work.

What is Humanism

It is probably somewhat presumptuous to try to suggest a "Humanistic" approach to coaching. Such a task runs the risk of only repeating the obvious. Surely most of those involved in this activity already approach their interactions with others in a humanistic way.

While it is probably true that as coaches we treat our students and colleagues in a pleasant manner, it is less clear that we maximize the potentials of those

we encounter. What, then, does it mean to be humanistic

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in our approach? This is not an easy question to answer because the term is used in many different ways. It is one of those words that risks having no meaning because it has so many meanings. There will be no attempt here to establish a "fixed" meaning, instead, the general assumptions on which this analysis is based will be suggested. For our purposes here, Humanism can be viewed as a "direction of action" rather than a specific act; prescriptive in directing our behaviors rather than descriptive of those behaviors. We are acting humanistically for example, when we enhance the ideal of free thought. From this perspective, Humanism stands

in opposition to any censorship of ideas and seeks to promote viewing the human experience in the widest possible variety of perspectives.⁷ Whatever encourages independent and critical thought enhances the freedom of the individual. Problem solving that is characterized by toleration, dialogue, and negotiation, as opposed to dicta and paternalism, would best preserve the dignity of the individual.

The assumptions operating in this paper as to what constitutes a humanistic approach is best summarized by philosopher Paul Kurtz,

Intrinsic to Humanist morality is the desire to allow individuals as free agents to create and guide their own destinies as they see fit. Humanism is related to a doctrine of liberation and emancipation. It values the autonomy of free agents, not only in their intellectual beliefs, but in their aesthetic experience... All men, as free persons, should be accorded some measure of respect, some dignity and value as individuals.

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Toward a More Humanistic Approach

We would be hard pressed to find a coach who does not subscribe to general humanistic goals in his work. Most coaches would not have gone into education or have expended the considerable time and effort the activity requires without the sense that their students would become better people as a result. Teachers hope that students will leave forensics with the heightened critical faculties necessary to produce a greater sense of free speech and thought.

A measure of this achievement can be found in the considerable research that has been done on the value of forensics participation.⁹ However, individual examination of our own students and their progress through the forensics experience may provide the most persuasive proof that humanistic goals are promoted. Coaches must be cautioned that although most coaching practices enhance this progress, it may be that students move in this direction in spite of the roadblocks placed in their way.

Application of humanistic standards to the forensic situation often equates the coach with the traditional teacher role. Indeed, just as the teacher is the possessor of knowledge and the student the recipient, the "coach" is, in the same sense, the possessor of "truth" and the debater the fortunate recipient of the information. Similarly, the coach is the possessor of power and the student the one who obeys. Some argue that such an authoritarian system is necessary to the functioning of a program. Although such a system may be necessary to the "smooth operation" of a program, its price may be the sacrifice of the humanistic values offered as justification for the program.

We concern ourselves with training the "skills" to make the students free and capable of decisions. Yet, little emphasis is given to practical application of student decision-making skills, although most

would agree that people learn from such valuable experience.¹⁰ There is a significant difference between experience as something that happens to a student in full, as opposed to something that is artificially censored by the coach's approach. We expect, for example, to see the emergence of students capable of making rational decisions, but we rarely call on them to make such decisions while in school. The humanistic perspective which concerns itself with the freedom of the individual argues persuasively for a shift of responsibility to each individual. Such decentralization of decision-making heightens the student's "experience" with freedom and best preserves the individual integrity.

The political implication of such shifts to a "person-centered education" are disturbing to many. This perspective argues that "the student retains his own power and the control over himself; he shares¹¹ in the responsible choices and decisions." Aversion to such an approach was indicated this season with one coach's comment, "I tried democracy last year and I'll never make that mistake again." Such a position focuses on the authority role, demonstrating little faith or respect for the freedom of the individual to decide. Is it so unrealistic to assume student ability to evaluate the merits of the activity for himself? Is it risky to allow a student to select his own strate-

gic position in a debate round? Is it so unreasonable to believe that the student can think for himself? The humanistic perspective, assuming a fundamental faith in the individual, argues to maximize these abilities. Implicit in such a perspective is the acknowledgement of the actualizing tendency of each individual. This movement toward fulfillment and self-enhancement would in the most natural sense move the program in a positive direction. When there is a "freedom to learn" human beings seem to move toward wholeness, toward actual-
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ization of potentialities.

Operationally, in the heat of a tournament or daily interaction, the repression of ideas is sometimes easier than encouragement of creativity. Although the line is a fine one, there is a difference between saying "run this argument" or "ask this question" and discussion of ideas with the debaters. Mutual interchange should aid students growth, but the ultimate responsibility should remain with the speaker. This independence of choice might even demand that on occasion mistakes might be made and rounds lost, but whose capacity for original thought is the activity trying to encourage? If a debater cannot respond without blocks or write an affirmative case, the activity has failed in a fundamental humanistic pledge to the individual. Are we to wait until graduation

to expect the miracle of "critical thinking" to take place? This ability to "experience" thinking and choice seems fundamentally tied to the locus of everyday decision-making in a squad.

Decentralizing the decision-making process offers a number of advantages to a forensics program, as well as to the individuals involved. We need only to look at the research and literature in Communications to find further implications of this shift in locus of decision-making. The forensics squad is an ongoing small group. Fisher, among others, points out the processes involved in this situation.¹³ Only the 'most secure' coach would suggest that he holds a corner on relevant information concerning decisions. While it is probably true that the "buck must stop somewhere," it certainly does not follow that the buck has to start at the top. The decisions that are made directly affect the lives and happiness of the squad members. Since each person adds a unique perspective of the "outcomes" of any decision, their input is additive. Although the input of any given person may be rejected, the final product is probably different as a result of that input, however slightly. Since a squad is ongoing and has relatively small time constraints, moving toward a consensus decision offers certain benefits, not

least of which may be better decisions. With people increasingly responsible for their own fate, one would also expect a much higher commitment to whatever decisions^{are} reached. Cohesion should be enhanced, interchange expended, and ideas tested.

It could be argued that approaching coaching from this humanistic perspective is an abdication of the director's responsibilities (Certainly decisions on pairings, travel schedule, etc., must ultimately center on the coach!!?!). The approach, rather than being passive, would tend to stir up more creativity, innovation, and change. Diffusing responsibility does not suggest less involvement. Quite the opposite is the case. The focus on the individual and the individual's development as the measure of success and value should prompt even greater efforts on the part of the coach. Working actively with arguments, informing and consulting in decision-making, directing the acquisition of new skills all seem consistent as long as the "learning-PROCESS" is augmented. Whenever coach activism does not circumvent the ideal of free thought and choice, it would seem justified. Conversely, inactivity based on such justifications as "suggesting arguments and approaches is unethical" seems to limit rather than expand the growth process.

Interpersonal Implications

Fundamental to a humanistic perspective is the centrality of the individual. The relationship between the coach and each individual is just that, a separate and unique relationship. When the people become interchangeable, i.e., it doesn't matter which debater fills the slot as long as the school is represented, then the focus is non-humanistic. Like any 'object' which can be substituted one for another, responding to a debater in this manner ignores the very essence of uniqueness which gives meaning to each individual.¹⁴ Each person constructs his own reality and assigns meaning to his experiences. A sensitive relationship between the coach and student would recognize this essential individual construct. By acknowledging that each person has his own needs, motives, feelings, etc., we affirm his "personness." They are treated as ends in themselves. How often do we make the assumption that what was good for John will be good for Joe, that measurement of success is an external tournament result, or even go so far as to make our personal regard conditional? These viewpoints do not humanize the individual.

Focusing on the individual suggests additional approaches the coach might employ. For example, educational responsibilities would not stop at the edge

of campus. Assisting participants from either his or an opponent's university would be equally justified. Suppressing information, be it cases, ideas, or evidence would act to limit or censor human intelligence.

It also suggests that the coach encourage "fairness" from himself and the squad when dealing with the opposition. Although the activity is highly competitive, the use of "tricks" artificially diminish the capacity of others. When such maneuvers leave us at the level of "trading ignorance," they fail to promote the exchange, thus diminishing both parties. A humanistic approach offers a standard of judgement which does not automatically condemn speed, narrow interpretations, or theoretical experimentation as undermining educational objectives, as many have claimed. ¹⁵ Rather the judgement is made in terms whether it enhances or diminishes the utility of exchange for those individuals involved.

Conclusion

The coach who approaches responsibilities from a humanistic perspective can offer the student far more than just a knowledge of the skills involved. An atmosphere can be created which is person-centered, drawing on the vast resources that every individual brings to the activity. The emphasis can be a process-oriented learning where much of the responsibility for its success lies with the participants. The

program can be one where the direction is self-initiated, and the whole person is invested in the process. ^{The} ~~sixteenth~~ century philosopher, Montaigne summarized the central problem when he observed,

"I should like to see any man teach us to manage a horse, or a pike, or a lute, or our voice, without practicing them; as these men pretend to teach to speak well and form a good judgement, without exercising us in speaking or forming a judgement."

Hopefully adopting a humanistic perspective offers a direction to forensic's coaches in their attempts to provide the maximum educational experience.

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