Forensics Participation as Gifted and Talented Education

Clear Evident Success Rate

By
Robert C. Carroll

Any person who has ever had contact with or participated in forensics, either as a contestant, a coach, or a judge, has noticed that the activity tends to attract students very different from those in the regular classroom. As both a regular classroom teacher, a former contestant for eight years, a coach for seven, and a current judge and writer, I would best describe those students with an aptitude for or an interest in forensics as exceptional. In the literature of education in general, and specifically in the literature of exceptional students, forensics participants could best be characterized as students with gifts or talents. Indeed, forensics itself could possibly be categorized as a component of gifted and talented education (GATE). This paper seeks to describe forensics as an activity for adolescent children with exceptionalities through an examination of each of the three major components of GATE.

The major components of GATE vary from author to author, just as the rules and standards of forensic events vary from state to state, but three components are common to all the literature reviewed. These common components are acceleration, enrichment, and mentorship. Each of these components will be examined in turn to gain a better understanding of its role in educating the gifted and talented. All authors, however, agree upon and note the difference between gifted (superior intellect) and talented (unusual ability) and argue that well-designed GATE programs must address both, and not one or the other (Karnes & Collins, 1981). It is useful to note that forensics is a program for both the intellectually gifted, who usually, but not always, gravitate towards the debate and limited preparation public address events, and the creatively talented, who are more prominent in interpretation and prepared public address events. Forensics, therefore, is a well-designed activity, because it addresses both aspects of GATE.

Forensics itself can best be described as competitive debate, public speaking, and the oral interpretation of literature. Forensics is an outgrowth of those societies, which came into existence during the Renaissance, but reached their full fruition in the Enlightenment, such as the salons of Voltaire, and were dedicated to the pursuit of better public discourse about politics, science, arts, and literature. Although the activity is European in origin, and although debating and speaking organizations currently exist in every developed democracy, parliamentary or congressional, around the globe, forensics has evolved into a truly and uniquely American activity, offered at high schools and colleges across the country at both the secondary and postsecondary level.

Acceleration

Acceleration is generally defined as allowing a student to progress through the regular curriculum at an increased rate, often moving as fast as he or she desires. One method to achieve acceleration is what Karnes and Collins (1980) term "independent study," because it allows a gifted student to move at his or her own pace, a crucial step in the intellectual development of his or her vast potential. Other authors noted the need for a gifted student to be occasionally challenged by a more rapid pace, lest he or she become bored, and even disruptive, in the regular classroom (Delisle, 1992; Eby & Smutny, 1990; Feldhusen, 1991; Greenlaw & McIntosh, 1988; and Laycock, 1979). Another method to obtain acceleration is through "compression," where several students are allowed to study interrelated subjects together at an extremely quickened pace (Greenlaw & McIntosh, 1988; Tuttle et al, 1988). Regardless of the rationale or method, most authors agree that accelerated learning is the first functional requisite for a successful GATE program.

Acceleration is achieved in forensics through both independent study and compression. For independent study, a coach often gives a student a stack of articles on solar energy or several pieces of literature and asks him or her to read through them and offer an opinion, with the intent of writing a policy debate case or cutting an interpretation manuscripts. The student is then given as much or as little time as needed to complete the task, with an eye on finishing sooner rather than later. Thus, a gifted and talented student is allowed to pace him or herself; developing a personal timetable. For compression, a coach often brings several students together to either examine the philosophical assumptions of the contract theorists of Hobbs, Locke and Rousseau and the response of Hume, Kant and Hegel, or to discuss the motivation of the principle characters in the dramas of Behan, Friehl and O'Connor, often covering an entire gamut of topics in one day. Hence, students are allowed, even encouraged, to move as quickly as possible, both individually and with their peers, mastering several tasks in rapid sequence and often multiple tasks simultaneously.

Enrichment

Enrichment is usually defined as allowing a student to move beyond the regular curriculum to specialized study, often undertaking whatever he or she wishes. One method to achieve enrichment is what

Karnes and Collins (1980) label "advanced study," because it allows the gifted and talented student to select his or her own path, rather than follow the paths selected by others, a necessary step in refining decision-making skills. Another, more controversial method, is what Greenlaw and McIntosh (1988) term "grouping," where a small class of exceptional students examines several different topics that are "deliberately interwoven" in an integrated fashion, not studied "piecemeal or fragmented", because gifted children are "especially adept at seeing relationships" (185). Such a method also forces the gifted child to confront the "smartest kid in the class" syndrome, a situation where he or she is accustomed to always being the quickest learner in the room and suddenly must deal with the fact that there are other children equally as able, if not even more skilled (Greenlaw and McIntosh, 1988: 186). Such a scenario, while potentially unpleasant, is mandatory for the social development of the child, as he or she must learn to relate to and work with peers. Thus, enrichment is the second functional requisite for a credible GATE program.

Enrichment is achieved in forensics through both advanced study and grouping. For advanced study, students are often able to access information unavailable in the conventional classroom. Walters and LoGiudice (1985) note that gifted and talented students require a unfettered access to literature to create a foundation for an excellent education in the humanities, a point echoed by Sheeley (1989b). This examination of literature is something that is strongly encouraged in forensics, especially in the interpretation events. Stanley (1989) notes that gifted and talented students require an introduction to formal logic and argumentation to build critical thinking skills, something that many receive only in forensics, especially in debate and public address events. For grouping, a coach may hold a workshop with several students on a weekly basis and introduce several topics simultaneously, as opposed to sequentially, such as common themes in the Beat literature or logical fallacies and their consequences, encouraging students to share ideas and opinions and cooperate for mutual self-improvement, thereby improving recognition, retention, critical thinking, and problem solving skills.

Mentorship

A mentor is defined as a "person of high competency who takes a special interest" in the development and achievements of a gifted or talented child (Coleman, 1985: 293). A mentor is also a "person the child admires who provides a role model in some area of human endeavor and who stimulates and respects the child" (Sheeley, 1989a: 294). As Berger (1989: 58) explains, "One of the most valuable experiences a gifted student can have is exposure to a mentor who is willing to share personal values, a particular interest, time, talents, and skills. When the experience is properly structured, and the mentor is a good match for the student, the relationship can provide both mentor and student with encouragement, inspiration, new insights, and other personal rewards." A mentor exerts a far greater influence on his or her protégés than even he or she might realize (NSSEGT, 1979).

Due to expertise in a particular field of study, allowing direction of instruction or studies as rapidly or as in depth as the student desires, and because he or she is often the first person a gifted and talented child encounters whose knowledge and skills surpass his or her own, a mentor is more valuable to the gifted and talented child than for other children. Gould (1979) argues that for a gifted and talented student, the greater variety of mentors available to assist the protégée, the better; thus, while a teacher could function as a mentor, a mentor need not be a teacher. Because of a frequent lack of positive role models, a mentor has an even greater influence on minority children (Bernal, 1979; Cooke & Baldwin, 1979) and young women (Callahan, 1979; and Van Tassel-Baska, 1989). Therefore, mentorship is the third and final functional requisite for an effective GATE program.

Although forensics delivers both acceleration and enrichment, perhaps its greatest success is providing a mentor-protégé relationship for young minds. Unlike the classroom teacher, who, at the secondary level, works with a gifted and talented student only one hour per day, five days a week, for an academic year, the forensic coach works with the same student for up to three hours per day, for as many as five days per week, for the duration of that student's academic career. Because of his or her experience in forensics, a coach qualifies as someone with a high degree of competency and a special interest, hence meeting the definition of mentor set forth by Coleman. Likewise, because he or she works with the student in more situations than those usually found inside the classroom, he or she also serves as a role model to that student, thus meeting the definition of mentor set forth by Sheeley. In the structured environment of forensics, with a rigorous practice and competitive schedule, it is also possible to meet Berger's definition, as the coach and student most certainly share values, interests, time, talent, and skills and a mutual respect and admiration. While many forensic coaches are teachers, and most Director of Forensics are required to be, many assistant coaches are lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, and community leaders, which greatly expands the variety of mentors available, fulfilling Gould's requirement. These people are involved simply because they wish to contribute something back to the activity that helped develop their own intellect and talents and to guide young people who remind them of themselves when they were that age (Kay, 1992).

The ability of forensic coaches to serve as mentors for minority youth and young women is clearly evident in the success rate for female and minority contestants at the National Forensic League National Speech and Debate Tournament since 1994 (Table 1).

Table 1- Minority and Female National Champions at the National Forensic League National Speech and Debate Tournament Since 1992.

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Minority	5	3	3	3	5	3	3	4	3	5
Female	3	5	5	7	7	5	4	2	7	9

Note: From 1992 to 1995, the NFL awarded championships in 14 events, including top debate speaker, with policy debate counting twice (one for each debater), for a total of 16 champions. From 1996 to 1999, the NFL awarded championships in 15 events, with duo interpretation now also counting twice (one for each interper), for a total of 18 champions. Since 2000, the NFL has awarded championships in 16 events for a grand total of 19 champions.

Including forensic activity and success on a college application can ease the process for those gifted and talented students whom, for whatever reasons, underachieved in the classroom. Forensics, as any co-curricular activity, demonstrates "depth of commitment, personal initiative, originality, leadership ability, and evidence of a social conscience" (Berger, 1989: 94). Personal initiative cannot be emphasized enough, as many authors recognize that at some point in their maturation, gifted and talented students must assume responsibility for actualizing their own potential, a procedure Karnes and Collins (1981) refer to as "self-nomination." According to Gallagher (1985), who himself quoted a recognized expert mentor in the fine and performing arts, "True happiness comes from the development of a person's potential; my students are here not because they are forced to be here, but because they want to be here" (259). For the first time in their lives, these students are allowed to chose what they want to learn, albeit within extensive parameters, rather than that which has been chosen for them.

In conclusion, forensics can most definitely be considered gifted and talented education. In a recent take on the changes surrounding GATE, Hertzog (1998) noted three trends: (1), that the gifted education specialist is more of an advocate *for* the gifted than an instructor *of* the gifted; (2), that the gifted and talented are now perceived as students whose needs are not being met by the general curriculum; and (3), that gifted education is now defined as programs and services and not students. These trends would seem to bode well for forensics. First, forensic coaches have long been advocates for their programs and the most successful are often the best cheerleaders. Second, many students whose needs are not met by the general curriculum have "self-nominated" themselves for forensics since 1925 and many more will continue into the future. Third, gifted and talented has long been the term used to describe the activity of forensics rather than the participants within that activity. With the need to find an affordable alternative to separate programs continuing to increase, forensics appears to be a viable form of gifted and talented education for the foreseeable future.

REFERENCES

Berger, S.L. (1989). *College planning for gifted students*. Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.

Bernal, E.M. (1979). The education of the culturally different gifted. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Callahan, C.M. (1979). The gifted and talented woman. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Clark, G., & Zimmerman, E. (1984). *Educating artistically talented students*. Syracuse, NY: ARTS Publishing.

Coleman, L.J. (1985). *Schooling the gifted*. Menlo Park, NJ: Addison-Wesley.

Cooke, G.J., & Baldwin, A.Y. (1979). Unique needs of a special population. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Cooper, C.R. (1996). Integrating gifted education into the total school curriculum. *School Administrator, 52*(4), 8-15.

Delisle, J.R. (1992). *Guiding the social and emotional development of gifted youth: a practical guide for educators and counselors*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing.

Dixon, B., Meyer, J., & Hardy, A. (1986). *Reaching the gifted: a resource book for affective development*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Student Education Press.

Eby, J.W. & Smutny, J.F. (1990). *A thoughtful overview of gifted education*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing.

Feldhusen, J.F. (1989). Thinking skills for the gifted. In J.F. Feldhusen, K. Sheeley, & J. Van Tassel-Baska (Eds.), *Excellence in educating the gifted*. Denver, CO: Love.

Feldhusen, J.F. (1991). Effects of programs for the gifted: a search for evidence. In W.T. Southern & E.D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Fox, L.H. (1979). Programs for the gifted and talented: an overview. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Fulton, D. (1992). *The challenge of the able child*. London, UK: David George Press.

Gallagher, J.J. (1985). *Teaching the gifted child*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Getzels, J.W. (1979). From art student to fine artist: potential, problem finding and performance. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Greenlaw, M.J. & McIntosh, M.E. (1988). *Educating the gifted: a sourcebook*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association Press.

Gould, M.J. (1979). Teachers and mentors. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Hertzog, N.B. (1998). The changing role of the gifted educator. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 30*(3), 39-43.

Karnes, F.A., & Collins, E.C. (1980). *Handbook of instructional resources and references for teaching the gifted*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Karnes, F.A., & Collins, E.C. (1981). *Assessment in gifted education*. Springfield, MA: Charles C. Thomas Publishing.

Kay, J. (1992). *The value of forensics*. Kansas City, MO: National Federation of Interscholastic Speech and Debate Associations.

Keating, D.P. (1979). Secondary school programs. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Kegley, S. (1984). REAL: a philosophy of gifted/talented education to live by. *Roeper Review, 6*(4), 230-231.

Kerr, B. (1991). *The handbook for counseling the gifted and talented*. Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling and Development.

Laycock, F. (1979). *Gifted children*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Company.

National Student Symposium on the Education of the Gifted and Talented. (1978). *On being gifted*. New York, NY: Walker & Company.

Renzulli, J.S., & Purcell, J.H. (1996). Gifted education: a look around and a look ahead. *Roeper Review, 18*(3), 173-178.

Sanborn, M.P. (1979). Counseling and guidance needs of the gifted and talented. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Schack, G.D. (1996). All aboard or standing on the shore? Gifted education and the education reform movement. *Roeper Review, 18*(3), 190-197.

Sheeley, K. (1989a). Facilitators for the gifted. In J.F. Feldhusen, K. Sheeley, & J. Van Tassel-Baska (Eds.), *Excellence in educating the gifted*. Denver, CO: Love.

Sheeley, K. (1989b). Arts and humanities for the gifted. In J.F. Feldhusen, K. Sheeley, & J. Van Tassel-Baska (Eds.), *Excellence in educating the gifted*. Denver, CO: Love.

Stanley, M. (1989). *Introduction to logical analysis: principles of clear thinking for gifted high school and junior college students*. Manassas, VA: Gifted Education Press.

Torrance, E.P. (1979). Unique needs of the creative child and adult. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: their education and development*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

Tuttle, F.B., Becker, L.A., & Sousa, J.A. (1988). *Program design and development for gifted and talented students*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Vail, P.L. (1979). *The world of the gifted child*. New York, NY: Walker & Company.

Van Tassel-Baska, J. (1989). Gifted girls. In J.F. Feldhusen, K. Sheeley, & J. Van Tassel-Baska (Eds.), *Excellence in educating the gifted*. Denver, CO: Love.

Van Tassel-Baska, J. (1994). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Walters, M.E. & LoGiuduce, J. (1985). *Foundations of humanities education in gifted students: differential curriculum for educational excellence*. Manassas, VA: Gifted Education Press.

Wheatley, G.H. (1989). Instructional methods for the gifted. In J.F. Feldhusen, K. Sheeley, & J. Van Tassel-Baska (Eds.), *Excellence in educating the gifted*. Denver, CO: Love.

*(**Robert C. Carroll** is a former contestant for and graduate of Homewood-Flossmoor (IL) High School and Bradley University. He has earned masters degrees in both public administration (University of Kentucky) and education (Saint Xavier University) and has coached with Homewood-Flossmoor and Merrillville (IN) high schools.)*

Website Up and Running

The 2007 National Tournament Host Committee website is up and running. Check it out!

www.kansasnationals2007.com