

THE INTEGRATION OF ACADEMIC COMPETITION SKILLS INTO THE COMMUNICATION ARTS CURRICULUM

by Barbara A. Miller

Perhaps the most under utilized resource in many schools is the academic competition program. Competition in speech and debate, moot court, and mock trial all promote the kind of critical thinking and communication skills that are embedded in most school districts' educational goals. However, since most of these activities are thought of as extracurricular rather than as an integral part of the general curriculum, their usefulness is limited to those students who are enrolled in high school forensics courses or who choose to participate on an extracurricular level. It is important that the methodology involved in teaching research, reasoning, organizational, and communication skills that are such an essential part of forensics and other activities involving academic competition be made available to all teachers.

In our school district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, speech and debate has been almost exclusively limited to high school programs. These programs offer special training in debate events, speech events, oral interpretation events, and special events (like mock trial).

In looking at the developmental characteristics and instructional implications contained in the *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Performance Standards* for communication arts, it appears that at least some of the forensics activities are appropriate for each grade level from grades three through grade twelve.

A few of the high schools have experimented with cross-level activities. For example, Providence High School foren-

sics students have tutored speech and debate students at South Charlotte Middle School students. South Mecklenburg students have done the same with students at both Carmel Middle School and Pineville Elementary. The middle school students were very responsive; the elementary school students were wildly enthusiastic.

Most of the elementary students were second and third graders. The format used by South Meck was storytelling. The children were attentive and discussed the stories after each performance. In one of the classes, however, students asked if they could try the activity. Each of the student volunteers chose a character, and an impromptu character analysis by the student preceded the interpretive reading. In retrospect, it is significant to note that this activity included the following instructional implications:

- * Praise and encouragement from adults to increase motivation.
- * Wise guidance and channeling of interests and enthusiasms.
- * Enrichment opportunities.
- * Emphasis on analyzing and explaining data, including cause/effect relationships.
- * Opportunities to explain thoughts.
- * Classroom environment planned to promote time on task.
- * Active learning experiences.
- * Student choice within teacher controlled parameters.

The developmental characteristic of intermediate students, however, suggest that other forensics, activities could be incorporated into the cre-

ative intermediate classroom. Impromptu speaking, for example, if practiced in a supportive environment, provides students with a effective way to explain their thoughts.

On the middle and high school levels, all of the forensics activities can be used in English classes, as well as in science and social studies. For example, policy resolutions include a number of socio-political and economic issues. Simple modifications to any of the debate formats would make each of them valuable as enrichment activities.

At South Meck, English and African-American studies students have used student congress to examine issues peculiar to a particular period of time. Values debate has also been used to examine the philosophical/pragmatic implications in such widely diverse works as Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and Hawthorne's moral stance in *The Scarlet Letter*.

While programs that feature academic competition have much to offer in the way of curriculum enrichment, coaches are sometimes considered interlopers who take students away from the "real learning" that occurs in the classroom. In making both educators and students aware that these activities are complements to the learning that takes place in the classroom and that such activities can benefit all students, not just those students whose talents and interests are best served by competition, we can provide increased enrichment of our students while promoting real understanding among colleagues.

(Barbara A. Miller coaches at South Mecklenburg (NC) HS.)