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CRAFT ARTICLE

The Grid: A Long-Form Exercise in Forensic Peer Coaching**C. Austin McDonald II, Ph.D.***Assistant Professor**cmcdonald@hastings.edu**Department of Communication Studies**Hastings College**Hastings, Nebraska***Andrew T. Boge***Doctoral Student**andrew-boge@uiowa.edu**Department of Communication Studies**University of Iowa**Iowa City, Iowa***Abstract**

As directors of forensics grapple with thoughts of burnout or exiting the activity (Carmack & Holm, 2013), peer coaching practices may offer ways of relieving the well-documented coaching burden (Gill, 1990; Keefe, 1991; McDonald, 2001; Rogers & Rennels, 2008). We offer a long-form individual events team exercise called “The Grid” which aims to foster a culture of peer coaching, to reduce the need for coaches, and to encourage students to take ownership of their forensic event development.

The authors give full credit of The Grid's core ideas to the Gustavus Adolphus College forensics teams under the direction of Cadi Kadlecek and Kris Kracht.

Justification

Forensics positions and intensive coaching are seemingly inseparable. In their analysis of 97 survey responses, Williams and Gantt (2005) found coaching to be “the most frequently noted responsibility” of directors of forensics (p. 60). The coaching workload, in particular, the coaching workload is highly variable considering that the larger the team, the greater amount of coaching hours. In a study of 111 forensic educators, nearly half (n=54) offered at least 11 or more coaching hours *per week* (Carmack & Holm, 2013). Forensic coaches “. . . are willing to work 60-80 hours a week and then get in a van and travel all weekend” (Holm, 2015, p. 11). It is no wonder directors of forensics typically deal with thoughts of burnout or exiting the activity.

Burnout remains a common thread of discussion in forensics scholarship. As Richardson (2005) put it, “Discussions of burnout among forensic educators are as much a legacy of the activity as transitional walks and affected page-turns” (p. 109). Several scholars point to the burden of coaching related to burnout and turnover (Gill, 1990; Keefe, 1991; McDonald, 2001; Rogers & Rennels, 2008). While Klosa (2005) offered a solution of “Finding Coaching Help” externally with high schools, such help could also exist within one’s collegiate team.

Practices of forensic peer coaching may offer ways to reduce reliance on coaches and distribute labor across the group. As Tyma (2008) noted, “. . . peer coaching often becomes a means by which a team grows even though it’s [sic] coaching staff does not” (p. 106). Coaches

cannot do it all--even if they want to. Often their commitments extend beyond running a team. Bistodeau (2015) warned first-year coaches: "What you need to consider is what you can handle as a coach between balancing coaching, teaching, and research" (p. 89). The Grid is a way of providing that balance.

The Grid is a long-form exercise (10-14 days) in which students perform their individual events for every member of the team before leaving for a significant tournament. (For our squad, these are the first tournament of the season, the state tournament, and the national tournament.) A student performs their event, the viewer(s) offer(s) 1-3 pieces of feedback, and then each viewer signs initials in their corresponding squares with the time and date of the performance. Participants log the team's progress on a large, printed spreadsheet in the shape of a grid (see Appendix) that is posted in a shared space, often the squad room.

This individual events team exercise serves as a mechanism to instill a culture of peer collaboration and to reduce the need for traditional coaching. While the design of The Grid is largely organized by the Director of Forensics, implementation and accountability rest in student team members' hands. As Bistodeau (2015) reminds us all: "You are not in this coaching endeavor alone" (p. 81). The following are benefits The Grid may offer.

To Build Consistent Performances

A process of repetition builds consistent performances. Since The Grid requires multiple iterations of their events, students are encouraged to reflect on the *process* of how their events develop (in terms of time, depth, and complexity). A large printed spreadsheet with logged runtimes for all of the team to see could be interpreted as a form of public shaming. Yet, if the framing of the experience provides students the opportunity to make mistakes, document them, and learn together about their tendencies to perform beyond the time limits (holding onto a pause too long, for instance), the experience is generative and grounded in evidence. The Grid prompts a process of data collection and quantitative analysis of how performances evolve in preparation for a tournament. As students complete The Grid, they may observe how their performance times change across the exercise. Thus, students have the agency to assess their *own* progress and the *process* of developing individual events. Meanwhile, coaches may reallocate a substantial amount of coaching time to administrative, pedagogical, or professional development tasks.

To Create Peer-driven Accountability

With The Grid accessible to everyone in the program, the exercise structurally asks all team members to take initiative and ownership of their creative processes. As Tyma argues (2008), "Peer coaching allows for all members of the team to have *voice* and *agency*" (p. 106, emphasis in original). Since every team member helps by performing and/or watching performances, the team must find ways to coordinate together to complete The Grid. Some students may become impatient with teammates for not completing the long-form exercise in a timely manner, only watching performances, or only performing. This will, undoubtedly, reveal points of tension on the team. Yet, within those productive moments of conflict, team members may configure ways to encourage their individual peers to invest in the *collective* goal. After all, every team member is implicated if The Grid is not completed. Through the exercise, students gain awareness of their team's cohesion as they head into larger, more competitive tournaments.

To Embrace a Climate of Problem Orientation

Feedback transmission may promote defensive or supportive interpersonal climates. Gibb's (1961) foundational work defines the defensive climate, control, as an attempt to change another's behavior. The supportive climate, problem orientation, "communicates a desire to collaborate . . . and allows the receiver to set his [sic] own goals, make his [sic] own decisions, and evaluate his [sic] own progress" (Gibb, 1961, p. 145). The Grid requires students to perform multiple times for multiple viewers. Each time, the viewer(s) may offer up to three concrete suggestions. Through theme analysis, students may quickly identify issues within their performances. Performance modifications are then based on data from a *variety* of sources rather than from a singular authority, such as a coach. Receiving a wealth of feedback in a short time may encourage students to implement suggestions, especially if they encounter the same themes.

The cycle of performing (or watching), receiving (or giving) criticism, and implementing changes based on feedback, prompts students to think in *collaborative* terms with their peers. When students receive feedback from only a coach, who may or may not be rather heavy-handed in their feedback, their experiences breed a climate of control. (Students may feel beholden to a coach's wishes and make adjustments because the "coach told me to.") The Grid breaks up these power structures and asks each student to make informed, authorial decisions on their work based on a collection of feedback from multiple sources. In our view, this process relieves coaches of time commitments (and impulses to control) and promotes supportive climates (toward problem orientation) across the team.

To Share a Localized, Collective Experience

Undeniably, the race to beat the clock is a thrilling experience, and the locale of the shared experience is just as important. As Carmack and Holm (2005) note: "The forensics squadroom plays a role in the transmission and development of roles, skills and norms. It serves as a communication hub for the team. The *socializing* that goes on in the squadroom is intrinsically linked to the *socialization* process" (p. 37). As The Grid is featured in a shared team space and performances often occur in that space, the experiences contribute to the socialization process. Such socialization is crucial for higher stakes tournaments. For nationals preparation, we often refer to The Grid as our "March Madness"--a nod to the NCAA basketball tournament. Because student schedules can vary widely, The Grid provides remarkable flexibility while still facilitating a collective learning experience for the team. When the team completes The Grid, an inevitable feeling of satisfaction overwhelms team members--a stark contrast to the apprehension felt when The Grid is first posted and mostly blank. The shifts from discomfort to ownership to relief contributes to a memorable team experience. Thus, The Grid fosters team cohesion through a collective feat rather than working competitively, in isolation from one another, or in reaction to another team's efforts.

To Build Team Culture

Through The Grid, team culture develops in a rhizomatic fashion (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), rather than hierarchical. Students are no longer in isolated coaching sessions. They have the excuse (and the requirement) to witness every team member's process. In our experiences, students have often commented on the amount of pride they feel in their teammates and their

work. By solving a problem *together*, team members learn about their teammates and their strengths and weaknesses. The small time window, in this way, exposes the inner workings of a team and prompts students to contemplate what worked well and what did not. The Grid provides a tangible experience to consider how a team can build a culture of consistency, accountability, problem orientation, and memorable experiences.

Description of the Activity

The Grid is a large, printed spreadsheet posted in the squad room or public space for all team members to access easily. All tournament-ready events are listed on the left-hand side of The Grid, moving from top to bottom. All active team members' names are listed on the top-hand side of The Grid, proceeding from left to right. Every team member must view every event. The Grid does offer the flexibility to scale up or down depending upon the needs of the team. For example, before the first tournament of the year, one may have students in pairs on the top-hand listing; thus, each student sees only half of the team's events. The types of performances may also be modified, such as a regular performance (an in-time "tournament ready" run of the event), or a grid column could be dedicated to performances in a large space or with distractions from peers. Columns may be added for coaches. The Grid can be adapted to fit the particular needs of a given part of the season.

Executing the Activity

1. The Director of Forensics (or designated leadership) must first design The Grid with consideration for:
 - a. Scale - students x events = number of grid slots
 - b. Time - how long participants have to complete the task
 - c. While there is no perfect formula, these suggestions could serve as helpful starting points:
 - i. 500 slots = 14 days
 - ii. 350 slots = 10 days
 - iii. 250 slots = 7 days
2. Every team member watches every event within the allotted time.
 - a. For each corresponding square (or slot), the viewer(s) write(s) the performance runtime, the date it was performed, and sign one's initials for veracity.
3. Live face-to-face performances are strongly preferred, but circumstances (such as social distancing during a pandemic or inclement weather) may require virtual alternatives.
 - a. Live synchronous online performances may accommodate participants who are geographically distant from the rest of the team while still performing for viewers who can offer immediate feedback.
 - b. Asynchronous video recordings may be allowed as a last resort. A unique performance recording must be sent each time to fill The Grid via video recording. (This method is not recommended as it slows down the feedback process.)
4. When providing feedback, participants must:
 - a. Limit feedback to three comments (usually sandwiched in a "strength - something to work on - strength" fashion).

- b. Use “I-suggest” language to remind each other feedback is not a command but a suggestion the performer may or may not choose to implement.
 - c. Focus on small performance changes (often referred to as “tweaks”) rather than textual or conceptual revamp. (The point of the exercise is to build consistency.)
5. Up to two viewers may log the time and date of the same live performance. This particular condition impacts how long The Grid may take. If there is a shorter timeline, we suggest one performance may count for multiple (3-4) viewer slots to decrease the commitment needed from all participants.
6. The team does not depart for the tournament until all spaces are filled (or the team leaves whoever failed to do their part in completing The Grid).
 - a. We suggest a deadline of at least 24 hours before departure time to remedy any logistical issues.

Variations

1. If the team has a large number of events, consider designating two participants per column. For example, this would reduce a workload from 40 events down to 20 events that one must watch in a given time period.
2. A “Wild Card” column may be added that can be fulfilled by any other human--even those unaffiliated with the program, like family members and friends beyond the forensics community. As Grace (2015) argues, nontraditional judges are a valuable part of the scaffolding process in learning to process feedback.
3. The Grid may also include conditions requiring students to perform in a wide variety of contexts--just as they would at a tournament--to learn how to adjust to unique acoustics and distractions in each space.
 - a. Students could perform in a large space, a small space, with distractions, outside, in a public place, after a long walk on campus, et cetera. Such options encourage students to break up the monotony of practicing in classrooms and understand how their performances require different adjustments across various contexts.

Debrief & Assessment

A program’s execution of this exercise will quickly indicate participants’ ability to work together. The Grid is a daunting task. Through trial and error on our teams and careful consideration of its pedagogical goals, we argue The Grid can serve as a powerful tool for building important skills. The exercise also reallocates a substantial amount of coaching hours from the coaches to the students.

To celebrate the exercise’s completion, roll up the physical copy of The Grid, and take it with the team on the tournament trip. Let it be a symbol and a reminder of the team’s work. When the competition gets tough, redirect attention to the work they have already done--and trust in that.

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Appendix

Events	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Coach A	Wild Card
Student A - ADS	X					
Student A - Prose	X					
Student B - DI		X				
Student B - POI		X				
Student C - EXT			X			
Student C - IMP			X			
Students D & C - Duo			X	X		
Student D - PER				X		