

Build Leadership Training through Service Learning and Action

by Adam Jacobi



In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy challenged how Americans thought about their role as active citizens, telling them, “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Nearly half a century later, President Barack Obama has made service and volunteerism a top priority as a means of economic recovery and enhancing quality of life in communities.

In terms of using communication as a springboard for service, Roman orator Quintilian’s urging to be a good person speaking well is an appropriate place to start. A former extemper and debater of mine, Kevin Bailey, once captured the essence of this notion so well when remarked about how helpless he felt about the suffering going on across the world, and how merely speaking about it in the insulated world of forensic competition was not enough: he wanted to act.

Generative Topics & Objectives

Some institutions understand the benefits of service learning as providing invaluable, practical skills, and building an awareness of the community and world beyond the four walls of a classroom. The award winning and research-based International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum incorporates required hours of creativity, action and service (CAS) as part of its Diploma program, building leadership skills much the way speech and debate activities do. IB founder Alec Peterson quoted German education theorist Kurt Hahn, highlighting the importance of taking action based on knowledge: “If you believe in something, you must not just think or talk or write, but must act.”

As an honorary society, the National Forensic League has always supported the concept of service speaking—that is, engaging community groups or broadcasting to an audience. As the League has evolved with the discipline of communication in the 21st century, we understand that the nature of human interaction continues to change with new media, and providing opportunities for students to apply communication skills gained in speech and debate through other channels is invaluable.

Authentic, Ongoing Assessment

To that end, a number of partnership programs are available that offer tools for teachers in creating **authentic instruction through experiential learning**. These

contest programs have amazing incentives tied to them to **motivate student participation**, while making it worth teachers’ efforts.

Since 2004, the NFL has worked with the United Nations Foundation by asking our students to engage communities on raising awareness of issues central to the UN mission and Millennium Development Goals. This year, the NFL is expanding the scope of this initiative to include as part of the Global Debates the ability for a school to hold a **performance showcase**, so if students more oriented toward interpretive or platform speaking events wanted to engage this fall’s topic of **poverty and climate change**, they could perform literary works.

NFL schools who have built this project into their curriculum often **start with a traditional approach**: holding an in-class debate or building a persuasive speech on

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the issue. The teacher then selects the most polished/prepared students to give an encore performance/debate for a public audience, either an assembly or after school showcase, or with a civic organization in town.

The People Speak takes this a step further by asking students to volunteer in their communities to experience these issues on a more personal basis and test workable solutions. For example, a school could partner with a local soup kitchen and

We can make the education students gain from forensics more meaningful and longer lasting through offering opportunities beyond routine tournaments.



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October 14 is the IPPF deadline.

determine ways to make the facility more energy efficient. The name of the game is to be innovative and interact with people outside of the school. Creating video public service announcements, blogging and discussing the issues with elected officials are all ways of **extending learning through outreach**. NFL schools who did this not only found the students were left with a sense of lasting accomplishment beyond the brief pride a superficial trophy might provide, but it raised the stature of forensics in the school and community beyond through press coverage and general good will.

What's in it for the school and teacher beyond good will? Well, not only can schools who are most active earn an all-expenses paid opportunity to participate

in the International Debate Education Association (IDEA) youth forum in the Netherlands next summer, but they can earn NFL chapter monetary incentives and student NFL merit points above and beyond the 1,500-point recording cap.

The NFL also is partnered with New York University/Bickel and Brewer Foundation's International Public Policy Forum (IPPF). The IPPF asks students to construct a debate essay and be prepared to draft a written response (rebuttal) to opposing viewpoints. This unique approach transfers skills debaters are used exercising through oral communication, and apply them to a written medium, which requires a different approach and strategy.

Teachers who have built this into their curriculum have had their students write such essays either individually, as pairs, or in small groups, and then selected the strongest essay as the school's entry to the competition. It's that easy! Where forensics is purely extra/co-curricular, coaches have assigned select students this task, considering it great additional practice and training. **The task should not be thought of an extra responsibility, but rather an additional opportunity to extend students' skills, and at no additional cost!** The NFL also gives up to five students from a school whose essay is submitted to the IPPF contest **six NFL merit points** for each level the students participate in: Qualifying (entering the paper in the contest), Top 32, Sweet 16, Elite Eight, Final Four and Championship

rounds. Like points for The People Speak, these are **above and beyond the 1,500-point recording cap**.

The educational benefits of experiential are innumerable. Fostering a lifelong love for service and action cannot be quantified. We can make the education students gain from forensics more meaningful and longer lasting through offering opportunities beyond routine tournaments.

So, what *can* you and your students do for your country?

About the Author

Adam Jacobi is the NFL's Coordinator of Programs and Coach Education. A former two-diamond coach of three NFL champions and an NCFL champion, he has taught courses in speech communication and International Baccalaureate theatre.

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HANDY LINKS

www.nflonline.org/StudentResources/ServiceProjects

www.nflonline.org/Partners/ThePeopleSpeak

www.bickelbrewer.com/debate

www.serve.gov