

SPEAK!

I can't count how many times I bark this command from the back row of desks as a forensics student procrastinates in front of me: my attempt to anchor flighty chitchat and bring us back to the task at hand. The students mean well. They like to share their lives with me, to tell me interesting stories they've heard (and lots of good gossip), to do anything but, well, practice for their coach. Sometimes I even call them "Richard" in honor of a past king of delayed rehearsals; I have to be the heavy and remind them it's time to get to work.

Eventually, they start speaking, and I listen, take notes, interrupt them to offer suggestions, and let them be – all part of the coaching process, be it public speaking or place kicking. And we do it again the next time – usually with the same delayed start, but with the same rehearsal time and offered advice as the outcome. I'm blessed – I have great kids with whom to work, and our successes in speech contests are due in large part to who they are when they walk in the door. The forensics kids are good students, work hard, and come from homes where they are expected to bear and take responsibility. They're ready to learn when I coach and teach them, and they absorb even more with our extensive "road work" of a regular season before the big March tournaments and then Nationals. Year after year, we have some of the state's top speakers because great kids do good work to get ready to compete. And then they compete, learn from it, work some more, and compete again.

The cliché states that time waits for no one. This may be true, but time also helps no one who doesn't give to it first. My kids succeed in large part due to how much time they put into rehearsals with and without coaches in front of them. They talk to their little siblings, to bathroom mirrors, to their dogs and their showers – odd habits, but effective ones nonetheless. As I write this, it's nearly time to go to Boston for Nationals, and I can recite nearly every word of each speech the kids are taking to competition. They've put in the time being coached, and I've put in the time helping them. We gave to time, and time gives back to us with polished performances and nuances of phrasing that would be impossible without invested hours.

I've noticed that as a drama director, the opening night of my plays is generally the best night. On that night, the performances have students' full concentration. In the shows after, the performances usually fall off a bit once the "can I do this?" question has been answered -- the adrenaline rush drops. Yet I must urge them always to go back to that opening night intensity; pushing each kid to his or her best is my most important job as the director. As we prepare for the national speech tournaments, I know that my forensics kids are ready to present a version of their speeches that's "acceptable" at any time. The hard part is to do the BEST version over and over and over, round after round. The kids who can do that ace the contests. The ones who can't give consistently strong performances yet get mixed results.

In my ten years in the Danville Schools, I've been happy to see my comrades living these lessons throughout the District. The Danville Schools are full of staff and students who give their best performances in and out of the classroom, never forgetting the human side of the work and that it's part of getting down to business. And believe me, they get down to business. Then they do it again. Then they do it again. And then they do it again. From speeches repeated beyond belief to multiplication tables, football drills, and even English students who write six drafts of their letters to the reviewer, the work goes on – growth and growth and growth.

Whatever the command – SPEAK! CALCULATE! REVISE! MEASURE! RUN! THINK! BLEND! -- the anchor grows heavier with each repetition. It's what keeps the excellence in place.