Competitors' Perceptions of Questions in Individual Events Rounds

Daniel Mills and Ann Burnett Pettus

The practice of judges asking competitors questions at the conclusion of their speeches is an area of interest in the arena of individual events competition. The practice has been most notably used in past years in rhetorical criticism at the National Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament (NFA-NIET). The practice has undergone scrutiny a number of times. A 1984 survey of coaches found support to abolish the practice at the NFA-NIET. A ground swell of support from the student ranks, who were in favor of the question period, saved the practice. Coaches again brought the issue before the NFA-NIET at the 1989 meeting held at Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey. The coaches voted once again to drop the questioning period; the students, once again, expressed a desire for it to remain as part of the event. This time the coaches' position carried the day. Judges' questions in rhetorical criticism were officially abolished at the NFA business meeting held at the 1989 Speech Communication Association convention in San Francisco. The students raised their concerns for the third time at the 1990 NFA-NIET, expressing a desire for the questioning process to return to rhetorical criticism. The coaches discussed the issue and decided questioning would remain in the past; the issue was not addressed at all at the 1990 SCA convention in Chicago.

A point which deserves attention is the opinion of the student competitor. The student voice was heard and considered in one instance (1984), circumvented the next time (1989) and virtually ig-


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nored the third (1990). The student voice is an integral factor which
should be considered when addressing whether the question period
should be part of individual events competition.

Our purpose is to provide a systematic and detailed evaluation of
competitors' opinions on the question period. Rather than just focus-
ing on rhetorical criticism, we address all of the individual events—
from public address to limited preparation to oral interpretation
events—commonly offered during the intercollegiate forensics invita-
tional tournament season.

Method

Data were collected at a 30-school individual events invitational
tournament held in the midwest, attracting schools from across the
country. Judges had the option of asking questions during the final
rounds of all events. Judges questioned each competitor after they
finished their speech/performance. Surveys were distributed to the
finalists at the completion of the round in order to determine percep-
tions of the questioning process. Students in multiple public address
finals completed only one questionnaire. Students in both oral inter-
pretation and public address finals were asked to complete a question-
naire for both finals. Basic issues addressed included opinions on
questions in preliminary rounds and final rounds, and the continua-
tion of the practice at invitational and national tournaments. These
responses were close-ended and were easily tabulated based on yes/no
responses.

Competitors were also asked about what they considered to be
the advantages and disadvantages of the practice. Content analysis
was used to establish the categorization of advantages and disadvan-
tages. Rather than use pre-set categories, we allowed the categories
to generate themselves from the data. Each comment was deter-
mined to be one unit of analysis. Comments were divided into public
address and oral interpretation in case the combination of one large
grouping of "individual events" proved counterproductive to the analy-
sis (i.e., some categories are inherently applicable to public address
and yet not applicable in oral interpretation, and vice-versa).

A preliminary classification placed the comments into as many
categories as necessary in accordance with the Berelson's (1952) per-

proximately 40 categories. These categories were then collapsed, resulting in a final taxonomy of 11 categories in public speaking and 10 in oral interpretation.

Two researchers independently coded the comments. An initial overall agreement of 83.6 percent was achieved. Cohen's Kappa was computed in order to take into account chance probability. Results ranged from good to excellent (advantages in public address .71; disadvantages in public address .79; disadvantages in oral interpretation .84; advantages in oral interpretation .85). After computing initial levels of agreement, the coders met and resolved disagreements to the satisfaction of both individuals.

Results

A total of 52 surveys provided usable data. The data show nearly all of the contestants were questioned by at least one judge in finals (see Table 1). Judges were less likely in interpretation events to ask questions of the competitors, while the practice was more common in public address events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public Address</th>
<th>Oral Interp.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Judges</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Judges</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contestants then responded to the question, "should judges be allowed to ask questions of competitors in preliminary rounds and/or final rounds?" As Table 2 indicates, competitors believe questions were not appropriate in preliminary rounds, but they liked the notion of having question periods in final rounds.

Chi square analysis demonstrates the overall significance of these findings, showing students are against questioning in preliminary rounds, $\chi^2 (2, n = 52) = 13.69, p < .05$, and an overall significance
showing students are in favor of judge questioning in final rounds, \( x^2 (2, n = 52) = 13.31, p < .05 \).

Next, contestants were asked if judge questioning periods ought to occur at invitational meets and/or national tournaments. Contestants supported the idea of question periods at both types of contests (see Table 3).

### Table 2
Competitors’ Opinions of Appropriateness of Questions in Preliminary and Final Rounds by Speech Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public Address</th>
<th>Oral Interp.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preliminary Rounds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( x^2 )</td>
<td>4.31*</td>
<td>11.17*</td>
<td>13.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Rounds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( x^2 )</td>
<td>7.07*</td>
<td>6.30*</td>
<td>13.31*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the .05 level.

Chi square analysis demonstrates the overall significance of these findings showing students would like questioning at invitationals, \( x^2 (2, n = 52) = 8.96, p < .05 \), and that students would like questioning by judges at national tournaments, \( x^2 (2, n = 52) = 8.38, p < .05 \). Two
issues did not achieve an .05 level of significance. Judge questioning of oral interpretation events, while receiving majority support, was not significant at the invitational or national level.

Students were then given the opportunity to discuss all advantages and disadvantages associated with judge questioning. In

\[ \begin{array}{c|c|c|c|}
 & Public Address & Oral Interp. & Total \\
\hline
\text{Invitational Tournaments} & & & \\
Yes & 20 & 14 & 34 \\
No & 6 & 7 & 13 \\
No Response & 3 & 2 & 5 \\
Total & 29 & 23 & 52 \\
x^2 & 7.52* & 2.17 & 8.96* \\
\text{National Tournaments} & & & \\
Yes & 21 & 12 & 33 \\
No & 5 & 8 & 13 \\
No Response & 3 & 3 & 6 \\
Total & 29 & 23 & 52 \\
x^2 & 9.84* & 1.08 & 8.38* \\
\end{array} \]

* Significant at the .05 level.

terms of advantages of oral interpretation, comments were placed in five categories:

1. Demonstrates competitor's knowledge, dedication, and preparation. These responses focused on the use of questions to
prove how much a competitor knows about the pieces he/she selected, and the level of dedication and hard work put into the interpretation. Examples of comments from this category include: "it helps the judges to see if the speaker really know[s] what he/she is trying to accomplish," and "you can tell if the person researched the topic and material, or just had it handed to them."

2. Allows for clarification of material. Responses in this category dealt with the role questions play in terms of making the interpretation or selection of pieces more clear to the judges. For example, "it clarifies things for judges."

3. Improves speaking skills. In this category, contestants argued that question periods help sharpen their skills of speaking in an impromptu situation. For example, "it also shows the articulation skills of the contestant."

4. Demonstrates depth of interpretation. This category comprises responses regarding competitors' abilities to interpret the literature. Examples of comments from this category include: "it can show who has really thought about their piece/character/etc, and who is just good at bringing tears up," and "finding out if comp[etitor] really knows piece, characters, etc."

5. Makes competitor work hard. The competitors also suggested that knowing that they will be questioned by judges makes them work harder and be more prepared. For example, "if competitors know that they will be asked questions, it makes them more aware of literature they choose and research it more in depth."

The advantages expressed by those in public address followed much the same pattern.

1. Allows for clarification of material. Competitors argued that the questioning period allows them the chance to explain complex issues. Examples from this category include: "clarification of topic significance," and "it's possible to clarify points and to make sure everyone understood the presentation."

2. Opportunity to defend decisions made in speech. Responses in this category revolved around the notion that strategies and topic selections could be supported during the question pe-
Examples include: "gives the speaker a chance to show some of their inner thoughts that went into their performance," and "being able to defend decision"

3. Helps judge make rank/rate decisions. This category includes comments regarding the use of questioning to aid the role of the judge. For example, "it allows further possibility for distinction between competitors in close rounds thus making ranking easier and more fair."

4. Stress areas in need of improvement. Students argued that questions aid the speaker in finding weaknesses in their speeches. Examples from this category include: "makes speaker ... think about what is their speech," and "you recognize faults in your speech."

5. Improves speaking skills. Comments in this category, like that of oral interpretation, focused on the fact that questioning helps the speaker improve upon impromptu speaking skills. For example, "for non-limited preparation—a teaching additional communication skills."

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### Table 4

**Advantages in Oral Interpretation and Public Address**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Oral Interp</th>
<th>Public Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Demonstrates competitor's knowledge, dedication, and preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Allows for clarification of material</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Improves speaking skills</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Demonstrates depth of interpretation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Makes competitor work hard</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Opportunity to defend decisions made in speech</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Helps judge make rank/rate decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Stress areas in need of improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Requires competitors know subject area</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Requires that competitors know subject area. Com-
petitors also claimed that questioning exposed those who were not familiar with the topic and encouraged speakers to be fully prepared. Examples of comments from this category include: "being forced to have thorough knowledge of event and content," "splits those who actually understand their points and those who are attempting to sound sophisticated," and "to find out that the student did the research and compiled the research themselves."

Competitors also found several disadvantages with judge questioning. In oral interpretation, the disadvantages were placed in five categories:

1. Increases anxiety and stress. Comments in this category indicated that students felt pressured by judge questioning, and that such pressure created a great deal of stress. For example, "if we are nervous, some very good competitors could be hurt," "puts the already nervous and paranoid speakers in a serious bind," and others simply stated, "too much stress," and "it's very nerve racking."

2. Time. Students also believe a problem was the time involved; rounds would last longer and the tournament would run longer as well. Students simply commented, "takes up a lot of time," and "time consuming."

3. Question problems. A variety of comments centered around the idea that questions could be too complex, not very good, or that not all competitors were asked the same type or level of question. For example, "not all judges ask questions which are really good for providing insight into how well-prepared the interper is," "some questions didn't pertain to [the] story and it was frustrating to try and answer them when I didn't see the relevance," "not all are asked the same questions," and "some competitors are given easier questions and thus an advantage."

4. Not needed for oral interpretation. Comments in this category dealt with the belief that questioning was not appropriate for oral interpretation events: "forensics is the competition of acting. How good you are—not how you can deeply deciphir [sic] a piece," "shouldn't ask them in duo or prose or DI [dramatic interpretation] but in events where students wrote
Impromptu, people tend to use examples with which they are only marginally familiar—the threat of questions may discourage them from using that evidence therefore limiting the types of evidence used. Being able to draw on knowledge seems to be one of the most important skills—limiting that pool of knowledge seems to be a problem."

Conclusions

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this study is that students believe judges ought to be allowed to ask questions of final round competitors. We suggest the questioning experience ought to be offered at more individual event tournaments in order to further explore its potential and ought to encompass both oral interpretation and public address events. Invitational tournament directors could experiment with questions in preliminary and/or final rounds and in public address and/or oral interpretation events. The implementation of questions at invitational tournaments would allow for procedural issues to be refined before advancing the use of questions to the national level.

A more striking conclusion is that the forensics community ought to listen to its most important members—the students. Forensic activity exists to provide an environment for students to learn and gain experience in the art of communication. Since the activity exists for students, we should listen to ways they believe their experience could be strengthened. Although coaches/forensic educators may have a stronger voice and, for whatever reasons, may not like the idea of judge questioning, students—as the principle reason for the activity—ought to have input in the decision-making process.

The disadvantages, however, of judge questioning need to be addressed. A set of standards and guidelines would make it possible to diminish the "question problems" and "judge superiority" problems articulated by the students. These standards and guidelines could be developed through the same invitational tournaments mentioned above. Tournaments will need to build in more time for questions during final rounds, and tournaments may go longer as a result; however, we found questioning took no more than half an hour of additional time. Finally, once students get accustomed to the process, the anxiety and stress may diminish or be used to their advantage.
While this study provides evidence that students approve of judge questioning, one limitation should be noted. The sample size was small, given the experiment was only tested at one invitational tournament. We hope this study will provide an impetus for others to experiment with and survey additional students, which will then confirm or deny the results of this study. One possible avenue of research could focus on all competitors in a tournament to determine if a difference in perception exists between those who make the final round and those who do not advance.

A student in this study remarked, "There are questions on ballots I never get to answer." Our study allowed this student to express an opinion and to have it shared with members of the forensic community. Rarely have student competitors been given this chance. We listen to students in rounds, now it is time to start listening to them outside the rounds.

Notes

1This issue was addressed in the National Forensic Journal.
2David Levasseur and Kevin Dean address the implications of this decision on the need for questioning in rhetorical criticism in the fall 1989 National Forensic Journal.
3The development of the categories in this study followed Berelson's (1952) definition of "what is said," specifically a subject-matter orientation.
4Results of Cohen's Kappa is based on the guidelines provided by J. R. Landis and G. G. Koch.

References

