Is it Time for a Change
in Impromptu Speaking?

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"We are all no doubt agreed that students should be given training in the expression of their convictions and in the reasoned defense of their thought positions. But the question may arise as to whether discussion and debate as at present conducted provide socially-significant experiences" (Thonssen, 1939, p. 113).

Although the nature of debate has changed, and the range of events have broadened, Thonssen's concern for whether we provide forensics students with socially-significant experiences is still relevant. This concern is particularly relevant for the present conception of impromptu speaking. This essay will focus initially on various problems and limitations of the impromptu speaking event. The essay will then offer reasoned response as an alternative to impromptu speaking.

Problems and Limitations

Impromptu speaking is one of the most frequently entered events in forensics competition. Student reactions to the event reveal that impromptu speaking is considered fun, thrilling, challenging and open to creativity. More than most events, impromptu speaking requires novice students to devote many hours of practice toward the goal of becoming competent. Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes' (1976) suggestion is still valid in that impromptu speaking is most appropriate for quick-witted students with previous experience in forensics.

However, as Preston (1990) points out, impromptu speaking provides more than an exciting form of competition for students. He suggests that "since a great percentage of our daily speaking occurs in extemporaneous or impromptu forms, these events offer important

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practical experiences to prepare students to communicate intelligently on the spur of the moment beyond the classroom into society" (p. 14). Bytwerk (1985) also indicates that although impromptu is possibly the most frequently used form of speech in daily interactions, it is the one most neglected by public speaking text book writers (p. 148).

Few, if any, would argue against the belief that impromptu speaking can offer students both a unique and enjoyable forensics activity and valuable training in critical thinking, analysis, organization and delivery for situations outside of competition. Evidence for the importance placed on proper training for impromptu speakers is found in the number of essays devoted to that purpose (Boone, 1987; Bytwerk, 1985; Dean, 1987, 1988; Preston, 1983, 1990a, 1990b; Reynolds & Fay, 1982; Sellnow, 1989, 1991).

While significant inroads have been made into understanding how impromptu rounds should be operated and how coaches can better train their students, this research has also uncovered some limitations and problems with the present conception of the event. These concerns include both microscopic problems with the functioning of the event and macroscopic issues with the conception of competitive impromptu speaking.

Sellnow (1989, 1991) has raised two issues of concern with the functioning of impromptu. In one essay, (Sellnow, 1989) he addressed the question: "From what areas do competitors draw their supportive examples in competitive impromptu speaking?" In an analysis of 1987 and 1988 NFA nationals final round impromptu speeches, Sellnow found that speakers used the following categories of examples: current events (16 examples), history (11), philosophy (11), literature (7), hypothetical (3), and personal (2).

From this study Sellnow noted that:

... successful impromptu speakers make use of topics which are commonplace in their subject area. The majority of examples from history, philosophy, and literature made reference to popular individuals. Most of these individuals are discuss frequently in college introductory courses of the appropriate subjects (p. 12).

Although Sellnow did not discuss his findings as a limitation of the event, we suggest that they do indicate a problem with the use of generic examples in impromptu speeches. After participating in, judg-
ing, or witnessing several rounds of impromptu speeches one is likely to recognize more than the recurring example categories discovered by Sellnow. Many of the same current events, historical figures and philosophical thoughts are used as generic evidence. The consistent use, and overuse, of Adolph Hitler and the actions of Nazi Germany is the predominant example of this problem. The problem with generic examples is that they limit the student's use of analysis and invention and focus more on attempts at developing links between familiar examples and the meaning of a quotation. The inadequacy of generic examples are far less likely to appear in the final round of national tournaments. However, a review of just the NFA 1987 final round of impromptu revealed several cases of application of well-known and frequently used historical and philosophical figures (Plato, Jefferson, Shakespeare, Columbus, Marx) including Adolph Hitler. A greater concern is held for the novice speakers who become concerned with developing content for impromptu speeches at the sacrifice of developing analytical and argumentative skills.

Sellnow (1991) identified a second microscopic problem with the writing of inadequate impromptu quotations. Specifically, problematic quotations are which are excessively vague, semantically difficult, or unmanageable. Vague quotations are those which do not "offer a clear and debatable premise. Rather, it is an inconclusive comment aimed at entertaining an audience" (p. 2). Semantically difficult quotation can confuse less experienced speakers and lead to rounds which are primarily won by those who happen to know the definition of a difficult word. Unmanageable quotations are difficult to develop a concise thesis for because they are excessively long and difficult.

Aside from these more specific concerns with the event, problems of a more general nature have also been identified. The first concern, that impromptu is treated as mini-extemp, has been expressed by many during tournament conversation and more formally by Preston (1983, 1990b). In a 1983 paper, Preston conducted an analysis of impromptu and extemp ballots to determine if judges were evaluating speakers on similar criteria for both events. From his analysis of 152 ballots and a total of 1,048 comments, Preston concluded "The results indicate that judges are giving the students similar if not nearly identical feedback for extemp and impromptu speaking." In 1990 Preston reported on later studies, including his own, which indicate that judges still evalu-
ate the two events on similar merits (e.g. Harris, 1986; Preston, 1990a). Preston (1990b) added that although literature has marked a distinction between the two events, that distinction has not been assimilated by coaches and employed in their coaching and judging (p. 18).

In 1990 Greenstreet addressed the need to increase the educational value of forensics competition. Greenstreet focused on limitations which arise because of event rules and descriptions, the types of speeches presented in tournaments, and how those speeches are evaluated. The primary concern for impromptu arose in the limitations of the event rules and descriptions. "The rules for impromptu, rhetorical criticism/communication analysis, and after dinner speaking are inadequate because they are unclear, incomplete, or inaccurate" (p. 2). This inaccuracy has lead to the development of expectations among judges which are not expressly stated in the event rules. Greenstreet cites, for example, that the rules of impromptu speaking do not indicate that a student should not prepare for more than three minutes. However, judges become uncomfortable when a student does spend that much time in preparation.

Finally, Bartanen (1981) offered a straight-forward observation of forensics practices which over a decade later still have relevance to the forensics community and impromptu speaking in particular. Bartanen took the view of forensics as a laboratory experience in argumentation. He demonstrated that from the beginnings of intercollegiate forensics (e.g. Baird, 1924) the activity has had a foundation in the liberal arts with an emphasis on the use of argument in communication and problem solving.

To help maintain that focus, Bartanen specified three goals which should guide individual events competition: 1) Individual events should teach effective rhetorical skills; 2) Individual events should teach audience adaptation as a particular rhetorical skill; 3) Individual events should teach the appreciation and use of a variety of forms of evidence and argument In explaining this third goal, Bartanen stated that:

Rather than relying almost exclusively on authoritative and factual claims as are typically found in debate, the individual events speaker is expected to provide the listener with a greater variety of devices, such as motivational proofs and personal experiences
which are presumably similar to the types of proofs required in 'real life' communicative circumstances.

With specific reference to impromptu, Bartanen claimed that the practice of argumentation is de-emphasized in favor of stylistic concerns. Bartanen echoed McGucklin's (1970) concern that: "Extemp and impromptu frequently seem to stress the glib over the thoughtful..." (p. 408). Finally, Bartanen suggested that the educational focus of many individual events could be improved if they allowed for refutation or some other type of feedback. Immediate feedback is one of the "unique characteristics of argumentation." However, the structure of individual events generally does not allow for this to take place.

Among other possible concerns, researchers have identified inadequate topics, evidence, and argumentation training as limits to competitive impromptu speaking. Likewise, the fact that impromptu rules and judging are not always clear and consistent has been a concern among members of the forensic community. With these concerns in mind, it would be worthwhile to consider a modified version of the event which emphasizes analysis and commentary on more "socially-significant" issues and provides the judge with a greater opportunity to do what he or she is trained to do — teach communication skills to students. The following will describe an event which can tentatively be called reasoned response. ¹ Reasoned response will offer a means to incorporate these educational goals in an event that should still be considered fun, thrilling, and challenging to students.

**Reasoned Response**

This event can be conducted with the same general procedures and time limits of impromptu speaking. Students would receive a slip of paper with all the information they need and they would have seven minutes to work with including the preparation and delivery of the speech. However, the contents of the preparation slip (prep slip) would be much different thereby changing the nature of the event.

As opposed to providing students with a quotation, proverb, or single word, the prep slip will include specific information on the location, speaker's role, and situation which the student should incorporate in the speech. Although this event is still going to be limited to laboratory training (Bartanen, 1981), the training will be of a much less artificial nature. Forensic students in this event would be better
trained because they will have more information to apply in the analysis and adaptation process. The remainder of this essay will describe the contents of the prep slip, and suggest the educational advantages of reasoned response.

Contents of the Prep Slip

The prep slip will include three categories of information: location, speaker's role, and situation. Location will describe either a real or hypothetical place in which the speaker is to assume he or she is at the time of the speech. For example, the location may place the student in a particular region of the country (deep south) or in a specific city (Tacoma, Washington). Another possibility for the location would be to place the student in an even more specific place such as a lawyer's office, a courtroom, or a friend's birthday party.

Regardless of which type of location is used, the speaker will be able (along with other information on the prep slip) to envision who might be in attendance at their presentation, the beliefs they hold, and the concerns they have at that time. This information should be used by the student to help determine the appropriate content of the speech and tone of delivery. The location designated for the student may be of particular importance during the tournament. For example, if a tournament had offered this event in the Spring of 1992 and Los Angeles was designated as a location, the student might have to take into consideration that the people who would attend the presentation would be knowledgeable of and concerned about the Rodney King trial and the riots following the decision.

The second item on the prep slip will be the speaker's role. This item will designate a particular role or persona which should be assumed in the speech. Students will be asked to take the role of either (1) a particular person, or (2) someone with a particular orientation toward the situation. For example, a speaker might be given the role of a famous athlete, a corporate CEO or a citizen who is angry about what was described in the situation part of the prep slip. Tournament directors, or whomever writes the prep slips, will need to make certain that the role clearly corresponds with the situation. The speaker's role should also be gender neutral. For example, a male student could not assume the role of the leader of the National Organization for Women.

Finally, the prep slip will describe the situation in which the speaker
will be speaking. The situation will provide the final information regarding why the speech is taking place. For example, the location might be a formal board meeting room and the speaker's role might include that the student is to assume the role of a junior executive. The situation would be needed to explain that the junior executive is going to advocate to senior executives making changes in production procedures in a way that will use less natural resources but increase the cost of production. The situation will help to specify the members of the audience if this has not already been done previously in the prep slip.

**Educational Advantages**

This essay previously addressed the problems and limitations of impromptu speaking which can be summarized as: the use of generic examples, poor quotations, impromptu is treated as mini-extemp, poor rules and descriptions, and the lack of training in argumentation. The use of reasoned response would avoid many of these concerns.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop generic examples with reasoned response. The speech would have to be tailored to the information on each prep slip. It would be less likely that a figure like Hitler, or an issue like the Holocaust, could be tied to the information on the prep slip. This event would probably see the same number of examples used, but there would be a greater variety in types of examples used and they would be more specific to the context of the speech.

Reasoned response would be less likely than impromptu to be viewed and judged as mini-extemp. The introduction of an audience (beyond the judge and other competitors) would give the judge a clear criteria for evaluation (audience analysis) which is not present in extemp or impromptu. The speaker must be able to adapt the content and style of delivery to the audience as well as fulfilling the purpose of the speech set out in the prep slip.

Bartanen's (1981) concerns about the teaching of argumentation skill in forensics would also be addressed with this event. With a different set of requirements and speech purposes in each round of practice and competition, students will develop stronger rhetorical skills while being coached to use a variety of types of evidence and argumentation techniques.
The use of poor prep slips could be a problem very similar to the use of poor quotations. However, specific guidelines can be offered to assist coaches and tournament directors in the development of prep slips.

1. The audience should be specified in the prep slip. The description should provide enough detail that the competitor and judge will envision a similar audience.

2. The location should also be easily envisioned by both the contestant and judge. Therefore, obscure places or locations which would possibly be unknown (i.e. a small town in India) should be avoided.

3. If the speaker's role is going to involve a specific person, generic titles should be used instead of the names of real public figures. The use of "Bill Clinton" in the speaker's role would lead the student to try to imitate or do an impression of Clinton. The use of the generic title "President of the United States" would be better.

4. If the speaker's role is to use an orientation, it should clearly specify the emotional and/or logical direction the speech should take. For example, a speaker's orientation which indicates that the speaker has philosophical differences with the situation that is being described would be difficult for the student and the judge to work with. It would be better to say that the speaker is angry with the situation or the speaker has prepared a formal response to argue against the situation.

A good prep slip should have interdependent elements in the location, speaker's role, and situation. The prep slip should together create a unique set of circumstances for the student and judge. A useful test is to substitute one of the elements of the prep slip with a new item. If the meaning of the prep slip is not changed then the whole thing may need to be changed. For example, assume that a prep slip listed the location as Alabama, speaker's role as a store owner, situation as trying to sell oranges. The situation could be changed to selling apples or the location could be Boise, Idaho and the nature of the prep slip would remain unchanged.

The final concern with impromptu that researchers have mentioned is the poor rules and descriptions of the events. Reasoned response would be as susceptible to that problem as any other event.
However, Dean's (1988) suggestion for a pre-tournament workshop would help to alleviate this problem. Providing judges with written descriptions of reasoned response as well as the other events would be particularly beneficial.

Aside from avoiding many of the problems with impromptu speaking, reasoned response would also offer the benefits of teaching perspective taking, adapting to audience and situational constraints, making forensics more of a socially-significant activity and allowing for responses to judges questions. Frequently, students will be placed in a situation where they have to think about a topic in a different way than they normally would. They will also be placed in the position to speak in a role with which they are not familiar. These challenges will help the student develop stronger abilities in perspective taking. This ability will help students understand alternative points of view and adapt to foreign or difficult speaking situations. Likewise, students will become better at adapting to situational constraints. Haught (1989) described the problems of audience adaptation in forensics:

[T]he individual events audience is always a nebulous amalgam of all those who judge individual events. There is value in having students learn the high standards of form, substance, and delivery which will satisfy that audience. Still, their sense of audience analysis and adaptation must become rather myopic (p. 38).

The need to adapt to the situation is absent in impromptu speaking, but reasoned response will help students learn to analyze more than the quotation when preparing the speech. Students will get better practice at coping with constraints presented by the location. Although they will not have to deal with a room that is too large or cope with bitter cold weather during a speech given outside, the students will have to adapt to the level of formality, prevalent attitudes, and probable demographics of the audience as well as other concerns depicted by the prep slip.

This event can also help to make forensics more of a socially significant activity. Prep slips can be written to involve students in present day issues and concerns. Students can be placed in situations where they are to respond to recent election results, prevalent social concerns, or whatever is currently of importance to society in general. However, prep slips should not be written in such a way that a student
must take a polarized view of a controversial or volatile issue. For example, a student should not be expected to give either a pro- or anti-abortion speech. It is one thing to challenge students yet another to ask them to speak about an important issue in a way that is contrary to their true belief.

Finally, reasoned response can include a brief question and answer session between the speaker and judge. Bartanen (1981) has noted that "one of the major factors which undermines the laboratory value of individual events is the absence of opportunities for refutation or other forms of feedback from other competitors or the judge-critic" (p. 408). This event would include the opportunity for the judge to ask one question of the student following their presentation. The question can be directed toward further clarification of the position taken by the student or to challenge their viewpoint or rational. In either case, the question should follow within 30 seconds of the conclusion of the speech and the response should not exceed one minute. Therefore, the speech, question and response can be concluded within 8 minutes and 30 seconds and will not disrupt the tournament schedule.

If desired, the person who writes the prep slip can also prepare a question (or questions) in advance and include it in an envelope with the prep slip. These prepared questions would have to be more general in nature in order to apply to all of the speakers in the round. Most judges would probably prefer to ask their own questions, but less-experienced judges may appreciate the opportunity to use prepared questions.

Reasoned response has been offered as a possible forensics event which would alleviate some of the concerns with impromptu speaking. The event has been developed in such a way that students could still enjoy the unique challenge and excitement of the impromptu speaking situation. This essay has attempted to be specific in outlining the event. It has been "tested" in a different form as a classroom exercise and proven to be a useful learning tool. However, if the event were adopted it would probably have to endure some modification by the forensics community.
Notes


References


