SPECIAL TOPIC

Pragmatic Concerns
on Questions in I.E. Rounds

Larry Schnoor and Bryant Alexander*

The Developmental Conferences on Individual Event in 1988 and 1990 dealt with a variety of concerns related to the status of individual events as currently practiced. One of those concerns centered on experimentation within the context of the events as a means to strengthen the pedagogical nature of forensics. As an outgrowth of this concern, the 1991 Cornhusker Forensic tournament at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, experimented with judges asking questions of the contestants in each round of the competition.

The use of questions by judges in forensic competition may be based on the premise that the questioning within the context of rounds seeks to validate the research and analytical process that students go through in order to encode their messages, as well as the adaptive performance skills/techniques used to project meaning. In asking questions of a contestant, the forensic judge becomes an interviewer and the contestant, the interviewee. Bloom (1956) indicated that questions are basically divided into two areas: cognitive domain and affective domain. The questions which deal with the cognitive domain are those which serve to discover objective information. According to Bloom, there are six different types of objective questions: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. It is Bloom's contention that, in order to use this type of questioning correctly, one must begin with questions related to knowledge and then go through the cycle, finally ending with evaluation. Questions which deal with the affective domain are


LARRY SCHNOOR is Associate Professor at Concordia College, Concordia, MN. BRYANT ALEXANDER is Instructor at Moorhead State University, Fargo, ND.
those which serve to discover subjective information. Subjective questions, those dealing with the affective domain, deal with feelings, attitudes and values. Thus, as an interviewer, the judge must be aware that he/she is dealing with both the cognitive and the affective domains at the same time, since it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between the information in the cognitive and affective domains.

In our observations and reactions, we will put forth both advantages and disadvantages of asking questions. Our observations and reactions will focus on the utility of questioning as it applies to "Public Address" and "Interpretation" events separately. In each division, we will approach the topic from the areas of research and analysis.

**Public Speaking Events**

In the public speaking categories, we believe questioning of the contestants by the judges has the potential to accomplish the following:

**Research:**

1. Questions would allow judges to determine the thoroughness of the student's preparation, research and knowledge as related to the topic of the presentation.

   **Cognitive**

2. Since the time limitations imposed by tournament regulations do not allow for extensive development of a topic, the use of questions could allow for students to expound on aspects of the topic which were abbreviated or condensed due to the time constraints and for prioritization.

   **Cognitive**

3. There may be times when a judge may not have heard something clearly. The use of questions could give the adjudicator the opportunity to clarify his/her understanding of the content and structure of the presentation.

   **Cognitive**

4. There are occasions when the data used within the development of a presentation may need to be examined, the use of questions could give the judge the opportunity to
find out why the student chose to use/not use certain support material.

*Cognitive*

**Analysis:**
1. There are numerous times when a judge may be curious as to the motivations behind topic selection. The use of questions could give the opportunity to find out whether or not a student can justify the topic for the particular speaking situation in terms of importance/significance.

*Affective*
2. The use of questions could serve the purpose of revealing whether or not audience analysis had taken place. Was a "motivational link" clear in the student's mind in the development of the topic?

*Cognitive/Affective*
3. The developmental process used by the student in preparing the message is often of interest to the adjudicator. The use of a question could serve to discover the analytical process that a student went through in order to reach the final product.

*Cognitive*

**Interpretation Events**

Whereas questions have been used at forensic tournaments in public speaking events, they have not been used as often in the interpretation events. However, if one accepts the premise that questions are beneficial in the public address area, one should realize that the premise extends to the area of interpretation just as effectively.

We believe that the use of questions in the interpretation events has the potential to accomplish the following:

**Research:**
1. Almost every description of oral interpretation as a contest event will contain some reference to the "author's intent." The use of a question by the judge would allow the verification of whether a student has a firm understanding of the intent of the author.

*Cognitive/Affective*
2. The use of a question could serve in determining whether the student has an understanding of the historical milieu of the literature. This could include both the "time frame" and/or the "life experience" of the writer.

*Cognitive*

**Analysis:**

1. Numerous ballots give evidence to support that a criterion used by many judges is the student's understanding of the literature being performed. The use of a question would allow a judge to verify whether or not a student has completed a thorough breakdown of the literature in order to gain insight and, thus, incorporation of that knowledge into the presentation.

*Cognitive/Affective*

2. The questions could allow a judge to examine what method of analysis was employed by the student in the development of the interpretation. The question might address whether it was the basic "dramatistic" analysis of who, what, when, where, why and how; whether it was a basic "modal" analysis in which the student examined the relationship between the writer and speakers within the literature; or whether a "structural and transactional analysis" has occurred. In such a case, the psychological orientations and the communication strategies of characters are examined and, thus, employed in the interpretation of the selection.

*Cognitive*

3. If a student uses a post-structuralist or non-traditional interpretation of a particular selection, questioning has the potential to reveal his/her approach to the literature and his/her justification of interpretation/perception.

*Cognitive/Affective*

**Performance Skills**

If one accepts the basic premise that questioning within the context of rounds seeks to validate the research and analytical processes as well as the adaptive performance skills used to project meaning, then the use of questions should be considered in relation
to all of the events in forensic competition. We feel that in the area of performance skills shared by both public speaking and interpretation, the use of questions has the potential to:

1. Force students to support and clarify why certain presentation/performance techniques were used, such as placement, focal points, movement.
2. Force students to clarify the use of material selected, the use of visual aids, the content development and form of the presentation.

As we noted above, there are numerous positive advantages to advocate the useful pedagogical function of questions in forensic competition. However, there are numerous possible disadvantages of the practice that are based on a pedagogical foundation. Questions in the round have the potential to create the following disadvantages:

1. Questions could diminish the effort of the performer by evaluating and measuring the student’s performance/presentation with an unrealistic theoretical yardstick.
2. The use of questions could create future animosity (tension) between the performer and the judge, and possibly between judge and coach, or even between all three.
3. The use of questions could place the student in a defensive position in which the student is defending not only his/her presentation based on research, analysis, or execution, but also his/her moral, ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and values.
4. The use of questions could place the student in a second defensive position in which the student is defending not only his/her own presentation, but also the methods employed by the respective coaches with which the student worked in the preparation of the event.
5. The use of questions could also become exhaustive, if done every round — exhaustive in terms of causing undue stress on the presenter and, possibly, the judge (since coming up with solid, effective and justified questions is not a simple task).
6. The use of questions could diminish the credibility of performers, based upon their inability to articulate ideas on the spur of the moment: the impromptu speaking dilemma.
If the questions were to be used as an evaluative criterion, a decision-making factor, they could have the potential to:

7. lessen (lower) a performer's rank based upon the student's ability or inability to respond to a question, thereby shifting the focus from the prepared speaking/interpretation event to that of a minimal preparation event.

8. increase the already-subjective nature of the activity by providing the adjudicator with yet another unseen, unidentified standard by which the judge would evaluate the presentation.

9. increase the length of rounds, thereby making it necessary to alter tournament schedules to allow sufficient time for questions and answers, which could affect the length of the tournament.

In the final assessment, the use of questions and answers as part of the forensic competition in individual events has its pluses and minuses, its advantages and disadvantages. Questions may serve to reinforce the educational aspect of the activity by requiring students to "own" and justify content, form and delivery. Using Bloom's Taxonomy of questions, this can only happen if judges formulate questions in the cognitive domain. However, if questions are formulated in the affective domain, they may serve to create dissension and conflict, as well as adding yet another (subjective) evaluative criterion which may not be clear and has the potential to diminish credibility and attack individual belief systems.

We recognize that the use of questions in the context of a competitive forensic round has potential for strengthening the pedagogical nature of the activity. However, we also recognize that the use of questions could create numerous problems as well. If questions are deemed to have more advantages than disadvantages, and if a system is devised in which questions would be used, we believe that a great deal of thought needs to be put into the procedural implementation of such a plan. The following concerns should be addressed:

1. When should the questioning take place? Every round? or just in finals? After each speech or after all speeches in a round have been completed?

2. Who will ask the question(s)? The judge? Just one judge or
all of the judges in a final round? Audience members? The other competitors?

3. Why are the questions being asked? What will be the focus of the questions? A clear definition as to the purpose of the questions should be considered. The authors of this paper offer the aforementioned definition: "The use of questions by judges in forensic competition should be based on the premise that questioning within the context of the rounds seeks to validate the research and analytical process that students go through in order to encode their messages, as well as the adaptive performance skills/techniques used to project meaning."

4. How will the information received from the question and answer session be used? Will it be used as part of the evaluative criteria? Will it be used as a decision-making factor? To what degree should the answers impact the final ranking of a speaker?

5. How should questions be standardized? Will judges be encouraged to ask questions equally of all contestants? Should questions deal only with the information cited—or will a judge be allowed to delve into a speaker's motivations?

Our review of the issue of questions in forensic competition has been relatively objective in its approach. We have sought to examine both advantages and disadvantages of this pedagogical method as it applies to "Public Address" and "Interpretation." The Developmental conferences on Individual Events in 1988 and 1990 have spawned a number of issues and concerns facing the educational goals and objectives of forensics. The use of questions is not a new idea, but it is an idea worth examining in an attempt to provide positive educational experiences for all involved in the activity: competitors, coaches and judges alike. We encourage further use and experimentation, but we also encourage a greater sensitivity to the varying perceptions that exist on the issue of using questions in a competitive round of forensics.