Formulaic Forensics: When Competitive Success Stifles Creativity

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Ask any director of forensics what their program promotes and I imagine the first and most often utilized phrase would be "the education of students." While a proponent for such grounding, I contend that forensics, in its current state, promotes competition over education by the nature of conventions; either governed by written event "rules," or unwritten formulas established by coaches, judges and students. Indeed the nature of our activity is competitive, and having the competitive factor established from the beginning might help to explain why formulas emerge as "ways of winning." In this essay, I will explore why formulas may exist and propose ways in which we can promote creativity over cookie-cutter stylisms for our competitive events.

The notion of formulaic events is not new and has been discussed for years. While the formulas can and do change over time, you can ask any student who is competitively successful, and they will provide you with a list of conventions and mechanical devices that will "ensure" competitive success. For example, competitive public address events always have 3 main points. Why? Most of us who teach public speaking teach our students that the length of the speech and the topic should guide the number of main points for a presentation and have them learn a variety of ways to organize a speech including two to five main points. Why, then, do we demand a 3-point speech in competition? Additionally, in interpretation, there are many formulas that exist. Poetry doesn't rhyme anymore. Many students no longer examine their selections for poetic forms such as alliteration and metaphor. Those types of poetry "just don't win." Prose can only be in first person. Students wouldn't dare try a third person or second person narrative. Somewhere along the way we have boxed our events and ignored the creativity that can and sometimes does permeate our activity.

An appropriate question, then, is why and how do formulaic events evolve? First, it's because as people, we have a tendency to WANT everything to be in a little box. It's how we process and remember information. We utilize what we know, attaching things to those notions, and develop our brains accordingly. Think of it as stereotyping. We all have the innate tendency to observe stereotypes and utilize them to create prediction and control for our lives so that we can be seen by others as part of the "norm." It stands to reason then that people involved in
competitive forensics might also want some prediction and control over the outcomes of their performances. The written guidelines leave too much "gray area," the rules are too vague for our liking. So, in order to create that prediction and control, we develop a set of guidelines that are outside of the written rules, and rely on them to make us feel better about how we construct our performance pieces. Students, coaches and judges alike don't want so much subjectivity in predicting the outcomes of a competitive outing.

Second, we are also responsible for creating and perpetuating the formulaic event because of our competitive nature. At tournaments, especially national competitions, students, coaches, and judges watch out-rounds and attempt to discern why the people advancing did so. They watch these rounds and attempt to emulate what they have seen, or be able to provide "reasons" to their own students as to why they did not advance. What ultimately happens, is that a creative idea or mode of presentation (which is possibly new and innovative) is observed, seen as different from a student's own performance, and the assumption is made that they did not advance based on the fact that they did not emulate a formula and were not rewarded accordingly. The next year, students and coaches who wish to be competitive will do everything in their power to create a performance that mirrors what was competitively successful the previous season. Is this educational? I suggest that while students still reap benefits from formulaic competition, we are stifling creativity and teaching them to ignore free thought and expression.

I believe that we as a community and especially as judges and coaches need to re-examine what we reward at tournaments and what we do not. I have seen and read countless ballots that discuss the formulaic: the number of sources used, the fact that a third person prose is not as effective as first person, that students don't move enough in duo, that a teaser wasn't used in a DI. Students will only give us what we reward them for, and coaches and judges can only reward what we are given.

Students: go out on a limb. Let those creative juices flow. Make each performance your own in terms of style and creativity. Rather than attempting to put yourself into someone else's formulaic box, create your own path. Try that third person prose that is a "great piece, but won't win," use only two main points in your persuasive speech, write an informative that is neither medical or technological in nature. Above all, remember that this is your activity it is designed for you.

Don't buy into the argument that you must do your events a certain way in order to be competitive. If we tout education as the focus of our activity, then allow yourself to experience the education that exists in a system where you do have some creative control and the freedom to express yourself.

Coaches and judges: Get out of the rut we have created by rewarding non-formulaic styles for both interpretation and public address. We all know we work in a subjective activity. Stop attempting to simplify the coaching and judging process by adding formulaic rules to a creative and expressive activity. Think of the judging process as a means by which we would suggest ways for each student individually to enhance or improve their performance, not to "fit in" with the rest of the crowd. When we talk education, we must not forget that creativity and open
expression of ideas are the foundations of what creates new and innovative theory and advances our disciplines. I realize that not following formulaic ideas makes our judging and coaching assignments even more difficult. However, there is not a coach/judge among us who would argue that this activity could be even more educational if we only take the time to develop an open mind when it comes to the events we coach/judge. Think back to when movement was not seen as "acceptable" for interpretation events. It has now become a formulaic expectation. Be open to diverse styles and tastes. Just because it’s "not the way I did it," or the "way I coach my students to do it," does not make it "less than." Finally, encourage your students to break out of the formulaic and develop their own unique styles. Help them create new and innovative ways of communicating their message. Doing so will only advance our activity and our discipline.

Forensics is a highly beneficial activity for every person it touches. I am in no way condemning the activity as totally uneducational. I do, however, advocate that we attempt in every way possible to develop a more diverse notion of what the activity is and what each individual event can be. When we stifle creativity in the name of competitive success, we do create an activity where students become presentational robots and let freedom of creation and expression go by the wayside.