Evaluator vs. Critic: Judging Intercollegiate Forensics
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Abstract

This essay is an examination of the difference between evaluating forensics performances and critiquing them. Definitions for "evaluating" and "critiquing" are provided. The creation of the "evaluator" judge is addressed. In addition, characteristics of the "evaluator" judge are discussed and examples of each of these characteristics are presented. An appeal is made for judges to act as critics and not evaluators.

Each fall, I teach the Communication Theory Course. Each fall, the Rhetorical Criticism Course is also offered and taught by a colleague. And each fall, we have approximately six students who take both courses concurrently and experience such dissonance by this dual participation. I decided to remedy the situation this year by discussing this problem with my colleague. I wanted to find out exactly what he was teaching in his course; how the students could confuse content from both courses; and how the students managed to transpose the final projects for both courses. From my conversation with my colleague I was finally enlightened. Very simply put, the students are taught in the Communication Theory Course how to evaluate and the students are taught in the Rhetorical Criticism Course how to critique. The problem arises when we teach the students for most of their college experience to evaluate (to give their opinion, to measure the value of an item) and then in their last year we ask them to critique only (to apply a formula and decide if something is or is not, but not if something is good or bad). This concept of evaluation vs. criticism was why so many of our crossover students were having such difficulty taking both the Theory and Criticism Classes concurrently.

As I am prone to do, I thought about the application of this problem to the field of Collegiate Forensics. It would appear that the very nature of this activity lends itself toward evaluation. Don't we measure the value of students' performances and isn't this evaluation presented in the form of a ballot? We assume that this measurement is based on some sort of standard and not just our opinion. However, there are quite a few occasions in which the ballots that our students receive are based purely on opinion. And so the question becomes apparent, "Are judges supposed to be evaluating students or critiquing them?" Keep in mind the definitions of both evaluation and criticism established previously. I would contend that many times as judges we evaluate performances instead of critiquing them. I would also contend that the judges who are most guilty of this confusion are those who have just recently completed their years of competition. As coaches, we have taught our students to evaluate their own performances, to make statements, to stand up for what they believe; and we do this for all of the years that they are competitors. Then they either graduate or run out of eligibility and we have them judge for us. These "experienced competitors-first time
judges" evaluate performances instead of critiquing them. As directors, we have created a monster and it's called the fifth year student judge or the first year graduate student. Please understand that not all students who judge for the first time are "evaluator judges" and not every "experience" judge is necessarily a "critic judge. To better understand this concept of an "evaluator" judge vs. a critic, I will define an evaluator judge and then give several characteristics of this type of judge in hopes that we can all become a little more effective in our critiquing.

**Defining an Evaluator**

Obviously the very nature of forensics is subjective. As judges we make decisions about who should receive which rank in the round. However the justification for this decision is the distinction between an evaluator and a critic. The judge that is new to this activity (the lay judge) is sometimes the fairest judge because they measure the performances based on the standards put forth in the event rules. Absent are the hidden agendas and most often the politics of the activity. "Unwritten rules" are not applied because the inexperienced judge is unaware of these rules and will not use them as the standard. The type of judge that will fall into the evaluating category is the judge who has some type of vested interest in the activity. Either they have a "name" to defend; a point to make; a lesson to teach or something very personable to say. The unfortunate fact is that many of the evaluators do not realize that they have become this type of judge. I urge us to look at some of the characteristics of this type of judge and continually check to make sure that we remain critics and not evaluators.

**Characteristics of an Evaluator**

Although there are many different types of evaluators in forensics (differing ages and experience) the mindset of the evaluator is basically the same. The evaluator puts themselves first! Although the students performing in the round should be the focus of the event, the evaluator's mindset belies the attitude that their ballot is key. This mindset of putting self first manifests itself in the actual writing of the ballot. By reading the evaluator's ballot, it is evident what type of judge has ranked this round. The comments written by the evaluator usually fall into the following three categories:

*Here's how this event should be done*

The judge who evaluates the performance will usually let the performer know not only what they are doing wrong but what they *should* be doing. This evaluation is based on the judge's opinion. Comments pertaining to "unwritten" rules or regional preferences belie this attitude. Usually the evaluator *informs* the performer (and the performer's coach) of the "rules" of the event. If these "rules" were indeed a part of the event description then the evaluator would be critiquing, but since these preferences are presented by the judge as rules, then the judge
becomes an evaluator presenting their own opinion. In addition, the evaluator will present these preferences as "reasons for rank" and often penalize the student for not having a teaser or not using problem/cause/solution format or not using a 2 by 2 format, etc. It is when the evaluator presents their personal preference as fact that the judge is no longer a critic.

Hey Buddy!

Another type of comment that you will find on an evaluator's ballot is the familiarizing comment. The judge that comments on personal relationships via the ballot has fallen into the category of the evaluator. No longer is the ballot an objective measure of the student's performance but mention of the relationship has brought to light facts that have no place in the ranking process. Remember that the true evaluator's mindset is one in which they put themselves (or their relationships) first. With this mindset the familiarizing comment usually includes statements such as "Hey (insert nickname here)" "You should know better" "Tell so and so hi" "I liked your piece from last year better" "What were you thinking?" "Why are you doing this crap?" etc. Such personal comments are obviously opinion and categorize the judge as an evaluator and not a critic.

I know the history of forensics

Most would agree that the round should be judged according to the pieces actually in the round. Which piece in the round was performed 2 years ago or 10 years ago matters very little to most judges. However, the evaluator has a vested interest in letting the participant know that they are a judge who knows their forensics history. The evaluator judge will write comments on the ballot such as "My teammate did this last year" "This piece was in a national out round last year" "One of my students is doing this piece this year" or "I did this piece before." The evaluator feels the need to inform the participant about the performance history of that piece. The assumption here is that the performer does not know the history of the piece and if he/she did then they would certainly change it. The assumption is also that other judges make decisions based on the performance history. Either way, the evaluator's choice to voice their opinion of the piece being "overdone" keeps them from becoming a critic.

I realize that at some point all judges are guilty of being evaluators, but my hope is that we can remember to critic the performance from a more objective point of view. If the mindset of the judge is to put the performer first then the mindset is more in line of that of a critic. It is when the judge feels the need to make a statement or call attention to their credentials that they become an evaluator. Just as my students have difficulty switching from the evaluative mindset in the Communication Theory course to the critical mindset of the Rhetorical Criticism Course, so do our forensics competitors when they coach for the first time. As Directors of Forensics, coaches and judges this is a pitfall we should watch out for ourselves and caution those we are mentoring to avoid. Forensics
is, of course, a subjective activity. But that subjectivity does not have to include the personal agenda of the judge. When the focus is on the performer and not on the judge, only then can we call ourselves critics.