Understanding Public Address Events
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Abstract

The process of invention is central to coaching the public address events. Teaching invention means that students do not imagine that they are learning a prescribed formula for effective public speaking. Instead, students self-consciously engage in reading the forensic community’s norms, and they craft a strategic response to an evolving rhetorical situation. Effective coaches foster an engaged rhetorical sensitivity. Practical suggestions include encouraging students to expand their critical vocabulary, negotiate an event’s conventions, make difficult choices, and continually revise personal goals for competition. Coaching that emphasizing the process of invention over the final product secures the value of a rhetorical education.

The rules for the four public address events are simple. Each speech must be delivered from memory and last less than 10 minutes. The National Forensic Association describes the categories as follows:

PERSUASION: A speech to convince, to move to action, or to inspire on a significant issue.

INFORMATIVE: The contestant will deliver an original factual speech on a realistic subject to fulfill a general information need of the audience. Visual aids that supplement / reinforce the message are permitted.

AFTER DINNER: Each contestant will present an original speech whose purpose is to make a serious point through the use of humor. The speech should reflect the development of a humorous comedic effort, not a stand up comedy routine.

RHETORICAL CRITICISM: Contestants will deliver an original critical analysis of any significant rhetorical artifact. The speaker should limit the quotation of, paraphrasing of, or summary of, the analyzed artifact to a minimum. Any legitimate critical methodology is permissible as long as it serves to open up the artifact for the audience.

The aims of Persuasive Speaking and Informative Speaking are self-evident. The After Dinner speech may be informative or persuasive in purpose, but it must also try to make the audience laugh. The injunction against performing a stand up routine merely underscores that this event requires a coherent speech that develops a particular topic. Finally, the event Rhetorical Criticism is modeled after academic rhetorical criticism. Students adopt a critical methodology - such as examining the role of metaphors - in order to analyze a rhetorical artifact - such as a President's speech. That's it. No other rules, save ethical guidelines, limit the speaker's invention.
Of course, the much ballyhooed unwritten rules of forensic competition impose an ambiguous tangle of additional expectations. In the halls of a speech and debate tournament, you are likely to overhear a lot of spurious advice traded in absolute maxims. Speeches labeled a "Persuasion" must have three main points: problems, causes, and solutions. Successful topics in Informative Speaking always concern new developments in science and technology. An After-Dinner speech just can't win without big, physical humor - and your entry in Rhetorical Criticism should never analyze a text as dry and dull as a President's speech. Seasoned coaches remember well the exceptions to all of these rules, teach that the unwritten expectations for an event change, and encourage students to resist reducing their creative choices to a prescribed formula for success. The conventional wisdom of the day or the region is no more than that: a set of discursive constraints that each speaker must discern and navigate, meeting the audience's expectations in some ways and exceeding those expectations in other ways. One key to understanding the public address events is to focus on the process of invention. Students read the (sub)cultural norms that shape expectations for their speech; and then, they make choices about how their rhetorical act may most effectively enter the forensic scene. By focusing on invention, coaches can transcend teaching the formulaic tricks that (they hope) score points and help students develop an engaged rhetorical sensitivity. Whether or not you are already familiar with the conventions that constitute these events on the college circuit, coaching the process of invention promotes rhetorical education.

The first of the five classical cannons of rhetoric, invention need not be artificially distinguished from arrangement, style, memory, and delivery; nor should it be reduced to the discovery of possible arguments. Broadly conceived, invention names a process of judgment: discerning the available means of persuasion and making a choice about how to intervene with symbolic action. Students competing in one of the public address events may revise a single speech more than twenty times over the course of a year. From topic selection to polishing delivery, they engage in strategic crafting and re-crafting of their message as their understanding of the rhetorical situation evolves. A student who is adept at the art of invention displays rhetorical sensitivity. The rhetorically sensitive person can read a rhetorical situation and find a fitting response. Rhetorical sensitivity is a primary good of forensic education; a preparation for democratic citizenship. What does focusing on invention mean for coaching the public address events? I offer the following practical suggestions.

1) Expand your team's critical vocabulary. Much of coaching, I think, already falls under the heading of expanding vocabulary. We leach distinctions via the language of public speaking: a sign-post word vs. a transition, the harms vs. the significance of the problem, writing in the active vs. the passive voice, adding a justification for the choice of a rhetorical artifact vs. a justification for the choice of a critical methodology. The vocabulary we teach helps students to articulate why some speeches are more persuasive than others. As Charlie Parrott notes in this issue, the forensic community adds its own constellation of slang terms as well. Intentionally building a critical vocabulary provides more tools for
students as they interpret what works and what doesn't and why in their particular event. As any coach will attest, much of the learning in forensics takes place on the ride home. You can measure the maturity of a group by listening to how they talk about their speeches and other competitor's speeches. It is the coach's responsibility to raise the level of discourse - from claiming "that judge was an idiot" to recognizing that "lay judges bring different expectations than judges inculcated by their own participation in forensics..." One of the best recourses for building vocabulary is simply to talk with experienced coaches and competitors about what performances they have seen in competition, what they have liked, and why. If you're new to coaching the activity, ask what people mean by their jargon. They'll be more than happy to expound.

(2) **Negotiate the events' conventions.** As noted above, the expectations for speeches in these four events are defined more by their unwritten rules than the written ones. In some ways, a good speech is a good speech - whether it is delivered in forensic competition, at the local P.T. A. meeting, or from the steps of the Lincoln memorial. In most ways, however, the unique rhetorical situation makes all the difference. Encourage students to explore the norms that define the events: What are the unwritten rules? What are the exceptions to those rules? What is rewarded and what is disciplined concerning topic selection, organization, and types of argument? What style of language and manner of delivery is privileged? Of course, the answer to those questions varies from year to year and region to region and judge to judge. One excellent resource is to order video tapes of the final round performances at the previous year's national tournament. (See the NFA website for details.) Have students compare those performances not only with their own speeches, but also with their experience in a public speaking class, high school speech and debate, or any other speaking venue. The differences will highlight the unique norms that constrain the four public address events in intercollegiate competition. As students develop their notion of "the formula" that succeeds in competition, encourage questioning how some speakers succeed by taking a risk and breaking the mold. After all, merely meeting the median of expectations rarely wows an audience.

(3) **Present students with choices.** As students develop their critical vocabulary and negotiate their event's unwritten rules, they should discover that competition in forensics, like life, is a series of choices. Coaches can focus on invention by helping students to identify and evaluate strategic choices - and by resisting the urge to make those choices for the students. If I take home a stack of speeches on Friday, "fix" them, and return those scripts to students on Monday, then I have short-circuited the student's invention process. I have made the choice and the student is at a loss as to the rationale. One simple practice that preserves the student's own invention is to prioritize coaching students' performances rather than scrutinizing their written scripts. Insist that students perform the speech (or at least read the script) out loud. After all, that is the way the speech will be received in competition. Then, coach and student can work through each choice together. Moreover, when each coaching session is an opportunity to make choices, the student can take ownership of the process.
Topic selection and definition provides a case and point. The ideal topic is a topic for which the student has a passionate interest and a topic that is likely to please judges in the event. When a student feels that he or she must make compromises between the two, coaches can help that student imagine the implications...and let the student make the choice. Another way to encourage making choices is to insist that students receive feedback from multiple coaches. Encourage peer coaching with other members of the team. Take every ballot from a judge seriously. Enlist the aide of colleagues teaching public speaking. Inevitably, the student will receive conflicting advice. Coaches focused on teaching invention will empower students to sift through competing suggestions. The student must choose whether or not to cut a paragraph, add a visual aid, or tell the risque joke. For coaches with a lot of confidence in their knowledge of what works and wins in the activity, this may mean allowing a student to make the "wrong" choice. Knowledge of the activity positions coaches with considerable power over students; that power ought not to be abused. Granting students full ownership of the invention process secures learning.

(4) Set goals - and revise them. The examples above point out that the student's speech is both an act of self-expression an act of strategic persuasion. Coaches should not presume to know which aim is most important for the student. We should ask questions. What are your goals for this season? This speech? This upcoming tournament? This coaching session? If invention is discovering a fitting response to a given rhetorical situation, then the student must first name his or her goals in this situation. It is far from sufficient (or accurate) to assume that each student's goal is simply to win. Each coaching session can include some time for talking about where a student is in the process of preparing for competition and what the student's next step should be in that preparation. As other commitments intrude on their time, students often need to revisit and revise their ambitions. Coaches that listen to the whole person in these conversations can help students set realistic objectives and develop realistic assessments of their success and failure. As students meet their own goals and exceed their own expectations, they win confidence in their own ability to face constraints and invent a fitting response.

Whether it is the trophy at the end of the weekend or the national tournament at the end of the year, students are understandably focused on the final product. After all, it is their performance that will be evaluated. Coaches know that it is the coach's job to be focused on the process - the process of invention. Teaching invention means that students do not imagine that they are learning a prescribed formula of absolute maxims for effective public speaking. Instead, they self-consciously engage in reading a particular community's norms, and they craft a strategic response to an evolving rhetorical situation. The latter is a far richer education in rhetoric.
References