"WHAT'S GOOD FOR THE GOOSE IS GOOD FOR THE GANDER": TOWARD A CONSISTENT POLICY ON QUESTIONS IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Currently, the National Forensic Association (N.F.A.) stands alone among national forensic organizations in its decision allowing for each judge to ask each speaker entered in the rhetorical criticism event a question at the conclusion of the speech. The event descriptions of other national forensic organizations such as the American Forensic Association, Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, Pi Kappa Delta, and Phi Rho Pi do not allow contestants to be questioned by critic-judges in any event. Further, this N.F.A. policy is not consistent across events; rhetorical criticism is the only event of the N.F.A.'s nine national events that includes the provision for questions in its description.

This inconsistency with other organizations as well as within the N.F.A. itself leads to two important questions: 1) Is there an inherent value in the policy of allowing critic-judges to question contestants in the rhetorical criticism (communication analysis) event? and 2) If this policy is of value, should it be expanded to include all individual events?

Is there an inherent value in the policy of allowing critic-judges to question contestants in the rhetorical criticism (communication analysis) event?

To answer this question, it is necessary to consider three major issues: the nature of the questions asked, the purpose of these questions in light of the goals of the event, and the role of critic-judges in the event. Currently, the event description provides no parameters for the types of questions that may be asked by critic-
judges. While some critic-judges restrict their questions to those that clarify, others often use this opportunity to display their knowledge of rhetorical criticism in an attempt to impress students and even other critic-judges by making statements (not necessarily in the form of a question) that serve only to belittle rather than add to the student's educational experience. The diversity of questions asked by the critic-judge reflects a wide range of topics and styles. Some critic-judges focus on methodology choices by asking students to defend the use of methodology "K" as opposed to methodology "L," "M," or "N," while still others require that students compare the speech under analysis to another speech by the same speaker or to a speech given by another speaker. Additionally, some critic-judges ask students multiple-questions-in-one, while yet others ask "follow-up" questions even though the N.F.A. event description restricts the critic-judge to a single question.

Not only does this diversity of questions exist among critic-judges, it also exists within the single critic-judge in any given round of competition. For example, critic-judge "Z" in Round 1, Section B of rhetorical criticism may ask student #1 a single clarification question, student #2 a leading question, student #3 a closed question, student #4 a question to compare the speech under analysis to another speech, student #5 a series of questions, and student #6 no question at all. Such diversity in questioning techniques minimizes the consistency (and therefore reliability) of the questioning process.

For the sake of argument, however, let's assume that this diversity can be minimized by establishing a clearly-defined set of parameters to which critic-judges can be forced to adhere. Even then, in order to determine the broader philosophical issue of whether there is an inherent value in asking questions in rhetorical criticism, it is appropriate to examine the purpose of this process in light of the goals of the event. Simply stated, the goals of rhetorical criticism include developing the student's understanding of communication through analysis and/or evaluation of a prior communication act initiated by someone other than the student by employing a critical approach that will serve to "open up" understanding of that communication act. Rhetorical criticism, as well as all other individual events, have as an additional goal teaching students to make choices concerning how best to present their "findings" clearly and concisely given certain time constraints. Since the student may be given the opportunity to clarify ambiguities as well as explain omissions or errors in the speech during the question and answer period, it is possible to conclude that by
allowing such questions forensic educators are not upholding the goal of teaching students to be as clear and concise as possible. If this is so, then students should not be held accountable for their choices. Instead, the critic-judge is thrust into the position of asking the "right" question to insure as complete an understanding of the message as possible. This shift in responsibility from the student to the critic-judge does not serve the educational goals of the event.

Finally, the role of the critic-judge is to provide appropriate critical feedback to assist students in their development as communicators. The current practice of writing comments to each student that reflect a multitude of strengths and weaknesses provides the feedback necessary for the student's growth and development far more effectively than any single question posed in a public forum. Assessment of these written comments in subsequent student-coach interaction can serve as the basis for future speech development and refinement by the student. Also, if critic-judges are expected to ask questions, this obligation may force them to take time away from listening to each student's speech for the purpose of formulating the single "right" question to ask. If the goals of the event include developing the ability to analyze and/or evaluate a communication act and present this analysis and/or evaluation in a clear and concise manner, then asking a single question not only distorts those goals for students but may place critic-judges in direct confrontation with students to whom they must eventually assign rankings and ratings. This evaluation process should reflect an assessment of what students have chosen to include as well as exclude rather than what they can "fill in" after the conclusion of the speech. To do so effectively the critic-judge must remain as objective as possible.

Given the concerns outlined, analysis thus far would suggest that the forensic community should abandon the practice of asking questions in rhetorical criticism employed at some tournaments; there appears to be little if any evidence of an inherent educational value associated with this practice. Nevertheless, let's assume that after extensive evaluation by the forensic community the conclusion is reached that there is an inherent value in continuing the policy of allowing critic-judges to question contestants in the rhetorical criticism event. This decision, then, should logically lead to the second major question.

If this policy is of value, should it be expanded to include all individual events?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine current tournament schedules as well as the nature of the various individual
events. The argument has been advanced that asking questions in rhetorical criticism can impede the attempts of tournament directors to run tournaments on schedule. However, this argument alone should not prevent the extension of questions into the other events as well. If the inherent educational value is sufficiently strong, then asking questions (and the resulting educational value) should be extended to include all students regardless of the events in which they choose to participate. It seems logical that the way to maximize this inherent educational value is not to shortchange non-rhetorical criticism enthusiasts, but instead to alter tournament schedules to accommodate a question and answer period for all participants in all events.

One may speculate, however, that the rationale advanced years ago by some members of N.F.A. that led to asking questions in rhetorical criticism focused on the complex nature of the event. Unfortunately, no one at that time (or since that time) has chosen to address persuasively the complex nature of the remaining individual events as well. As is too often the case, once an organization's rules have been established, they become set in concrete and the original rationale is lost in the passage of time. Repeated attempts on my part to unearth the original rationale have been unsuccessful. (Suggestions that the question was added to insure that the rhetorical criticism was indeed the work of the student have been rejected since no one would argue that a single question at the end of a speech could serve to verify or deny authenticity in this or any other event.) One can only assume then that a reasonable case was made for the unique complexity of rhetorical criticism alone, while the other events were not considered in a similar vain. As a result, the N.F.A's event descriptions stipulate the question and answer period in only one of its nine events.

Certainly rhetorical criticism is unique in that it is the only national event that requires speakers to present formal critiques of speeches or speech acts that were originally created by someone other than the contestants themselves. While a case can be developed for the unique and complex nature of the rhetorical criticism event, especially by those colleagues with an educational background and special love for rhetorical criticism, the contention that every individual event is unique and complex in its own way could also be advanced. Maybe it is only because of my somewhat unique background (M.A. with a major in rhetoric and public address, minor in oral interpretation; Ph.D. with a major in oral interpretation, minor in rhetoric and public address) that allows for
viewing all of the events as unique and equally complex for students striving to master them. Granted, a student can pick up a short story and just "read" a portion of it in competition with little or no effort, while the same can't be said of the student in rhetorical criticism given the nature of the original, prepared events. Nevertheless, the serious student interested in mastering prose interpretation must commit to a process of intensive internal as well as external analysis, adaptation, selection and justification of performance options, and practice that is as comprehensive, challenging, and time-consuming as any student desiring to master the rhetorical criticism event. Thus, it is only because of ignorance that one would claim "their event" as the most unique or complex.

The forensic community must embrace the notion that all national events are unique and sufficiently complex to challenge the student's development as communicators. Rejecting this notion suggests that certain events should be dropped from national competition because they do not rigorously adhere to the educational goals of the forensic activity of individual events. Until such action is taken and assuming that the question and answer session is an educational necessity, then all students should partake. In the persuasive speaking event, for example, questions might focus on the nature of the problem, the extent of the problem, documentation, further amplification of evidence, or consideration of alternative solutions. Questions in the prose interpretation event might focus on thematic concerns, narrator attitude or motivation at any point in the selection, the impact of language choice, use of specific literary devices by the author, discussion of the impact of the setting, nature of relationships, adaptation, or performance choices made by the student. Hopefully, these brief examples provide the reader with an appreciation for the range of questions that might be addressed to the competitors in any individual event assuming that the critic-judge has sufficient expertise to formulate appropriate questions.

It seems clear then that there can be no adequate justification for the inclusion of a question and answer period by critic-judges in only one of the N.F.A.'s national events to the exclusion of the other eight events. If the educational process is significantly strengthened as a result of such questions, then all students in all events should receive these educational benefits; to do otherwise is to allow a false sense of elitism to flourish. Truly, what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Either questions promote the educational goals of the activity and thus should be applied to all events, or they are superfluous and should be eliminated from the one event in which
they sometimes appear. The "elitist" posture of a vocal few should not be allowed to prevail over the educational goals designed to benefit the many.

BRUCE B. MANCHESTER

George Mason University