ON QUESTIONS IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Human fallability has diminished the glow of some of our best inventions. Somebody probably thinks the birth of the alarm clock was a momentous occasion. Simply push a little button, and you're sure to be to work on time. Funny, that has not been my experience with the machine that screeches at me several mornings each week. Whether we turn them off in our sleep or throw them at the wall, due to some action on our part, alarm clocks don't always work. While proper usage can increase the likelihood of our punctuality, mechanical difficulties can still occur, and we might still be late.

The use of questions in rhetorical criticism seems to be suffering from some human fallability and some mechanical difficulties. The glow of the invention has dulled and it's time to evaluate our continued use of questions. While I accept that the original justifications for using questions were honorable, my position is that the practice is, and will continue to be, inherently flawed.

Asking questions, just as setting an alarm, should have worked in achieving what I can only speculate were its original goals. Judges who ask questions will make better decisions, because they will have the chance to clarify their perceptions of the student's presentation. Coach influence will be kept within appropriate parameters because the competitors will be responsible for explaining their analysis. Students will become better rhetorical scholars, because they know they face the prospect of being questioned.

Optimistically, it seems as though questions should have been a simple check and balance; the quality of the competition should have been enhanced. I would argue the system has not produced
this result. Rather, our fallability or, less kindly, our lack of expertise in the study of rhetoric and our lack of empathy for students has kept the addition of questions from meeting its original goals.

Regardless of my perceptions of the quality of the judging in rhetorical criticism, I do not hear questions of clarification being asked in rhetorical criticism. It is rare that I judge a round of criticism at an invitational tournament, but if my most recent judging experience is any indication, questions are being used by judges to flaunt their knowledge of criticism or to harshly expose the student's lack of theoretical background in rhetoric. The most valid question I have ever heard in criticism concerned a factual matter in the student's presentation; the question truly was one of clarification, and was significant in the evaluation of the round. The most invalid questions I have heard are those which challenge the student to justify his or her methodology over whatever critic the judge understands.

In terms of minimizing over-coaching in a difficult event, one question is not going to stop anybody from doing anything. It is as easy to prepare for questions, and to be given the right answers, as it is to memorize a speech.

If students have become better rhetorical scholars, the nature of the items they are choosing to criticize doesn't indicate their increased level of awareness. I am not sure Aristotle would approve of a contest that seems to reward that speaker who is most entertaining, over the speaker who is most rhetorically sophisticated.

When we have abused our alarm clocks to the point of inoperability, we usually search for a new appliance, louder and sturdier than its predecessor. Consistently, when we find a few flaws in anything we try to fix it. We can change our behaviors or we can change the product. I wish I believed the judging community was going to change its behaviors in regard to the use of questions in rhetorical criticism. As optimistic as I would like to be, I believe many of us will continue to abuse the privilege of questioning.

We have attempted to compensate for our fallability by making some mechanical changes, such as only allowing one question from each judge, for each competitor. I don't see this adjustment as changing the system significantly; it merely limits the potential abuse, rather than doing something to prevent it.

In attempting to be as clear as possible in my analysis, I have waited to explain that I perceive the art of questioning to be one of the finest arts to be learned and that rhetorical criticism teaches
skills that no other event can. My affection for questioning is diminished, however, by what I see as an inherently flawed practice. If there is an adaptation that can make the system work, I hope we try it. The current system is not working, however, and mechanical and human limitations suggest no improvement is likely to be seen in the near future. To continue to pursue unobtainable, yet admirable, goals is counterproductive for all of us. It is time to learn from the chronically late individual who, rather than continuing to invest in alarm clocks, invests in an evening job because she knows the system just doesn't work for her.

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