Instructional Practices

Competitive Impromptu Speaking

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When the powers that be in forensics created the limited preparation event we now know as "Impromptu Speaking," it is doubtful that they knew what would come of their creation. This event, which began as a sort of "off-the-cuff" extemporaneous speech, has evolved to include business or rhetorical situations, speaking about objects or cartoons, and analyzing a quotation or adage. The event has grown in popularity; it is now second largest in size at the average tournament, smaller only than the interpretation of prose.[1] Novice impromptu speaking is offered at some tournaments, and many debaters choose this event at combined tournaments.

In short, many students are attempting impromptu speaking. Unfortunately, only a small number of those students clearly understand the event. Impromptu is too often used as a place to "throw speakers in," should the novice speaker need a first tournament or the interpreter need a fifth event for pentathlon. Standards of judging are varied and vague, and methods of coaching often appear nonexistent. As a result, we will explore impromptu speaking in both its theoretical and practical elements.

We address this essay primarily to collegiate forensics coaches. We hope that much of our ideas can also be applied to high school variations of the event; moreover, we hope that students benefit by some of the ideas we present here.

Theoretical Grounding

Justification

Impromptu speaking is a peculiar event. On the surface, it seems to deal exclusively with preparing a speech in an inadequate amount of time. We seldom speak on quotations or objects in the "real world." This mongrel of an event, then, relates to forensics only, doesn't it?

[1]The last ten years of ISTR reports by Howe & Harris confirm this finding.

We must disagree. First, impromptu speaking is the only forensic event that doesn't call for particular specialization. Extemporaneous speaking requires extensive knowledge of current events, rhetorical criticism demands a grasp of communication theories, and we hate to imagine (or remember) interpreters of poetry with no sense of metre, But the field of expertise for an impromptu speaker is whatever belongs to the individual speaker. No one field of knowledge is presupposed to be the absolutely vital one. At the same time, impromptu speaking allows the speaker to utilize fields of knowledge that may be of no use at all in other events. Topics such as sports, history, famous people, science, and philosophy are all heard with regularity in rounds of impromptu speaking, while these topics may be wholly absent from other competitive events. This is not to say that impromptu speaking is merely a trivia game; rather, we emphasize how it tends to draw and reward the well-read individual.

A second justification can be found in the practicality of the event. Although Mark Twain once observed that it takes three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech, the competitor must be ready within a minute or two. We know that in our lives we are, and often will be, called upon to make a speech that we must deliver spontaneously. This speech make take the form of arguing for a new school at a P.T.A. meeting, presenting support for a program at a business conference, or being asked "at the last second" to make a speech "because I knew you did that stuff in college." Clearly, impromptu speaking increases our ability to adapt to the situation by preparing and delivering in difficult circumstances. While the actual form of the event is not duplicated in other situations, the skills that it imparts are indeed necessary.

A final justification of impromptu speaking is found within forensics itself. For the forensic competitor, this event offers variety, presents new challenges, and appeals to diversity. Because of the relative unpredictability of the event, it is more likely to produce surprising final rounds. Moreover, this unpredictability offers a stronger common bond between competitors (this is especially true when you consider that most rounds of impromptu require all speakers in the round to speak on the same quotation or object). As a result, impromptu speaking is unique in its function as a competitive speech.

Nature of Impromptu

Almost every other event in forensics has what we easily recognize as a long history, replete with discussions and arguments about what it is and how it may be improved. Surely we know of theories of persuasion, of the oral interpretation of literature, or how to approach communication artifacts to explain their effectiveness. Impromptu speaking, however, does not appear initially to have this theoretical background.

And yet, did not Aristotle speak of the devices of invention and memory? These two components of speaking, we believe, are what impromptu speaking offers to a large degree while other events tend to lack. What was the domain of rhetorical invention as given to us by the classical rhetoricians? Invention was a broad and complex concept that subsumes the process of speech-making, the product itself, and aspects of the task of the critic.[2] The canon of invention includes the entire investigative undertaking of the rhetor and it functioned to "stimulate and train thinking."[3]

Invention demands that the speaker or writer "search for and capture thought." The thought searched for is not in a magazine or book, but within the rhetor's mind: "The scope and end of (this) invention is readiness and present use of our knowledge."[4] Thus, invention becomes an investigative undertaking that involves knowledge of self, the subject matter, and a search for that particular knowledge that will be useful in a given discourse.[5]

How a speaker searches for thought was a question to which the classical rhetoricians paid much attention. Three of the four books in *The Rhetorica Ad Herennium* focus almost exclusively on invention. Aristotle devoted *primary* attention to the canon, and Quintilian expanded the work of both Aristotle and Cicero. As Thonssen and Baird note, "certain writers—Aristotle among them—give more attention to invention than to other parts of rhetoric. This is done on the ground, and perhaps properly, that the content is the most important part of the speech."[6]

Tools to stimulate the investigative process, and thus stimulate the discovery of substance, were discussed under the names

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[2]Lester Thonssen & A. Craig Baird, *Speech Criticism: Development of Standards of Rhetorical Appraisal,* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1948), p. 78.

[3]Hoyt M. Hudson, "Can We Modernize the Theory of Invention?" *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education,* (1916), p. 325.

[4]Hudson, p. 325.

[5]Thonssen & Baird, p. 78; 83-84; Hudson, p. 326.

[6]Thonssen & Baird, p. 79.

of "topoi" (Greek), "loci" (Latin), or *topics.* "Topics" are the places "where arguments and ideas may be found and when derived; they are, as the old writers used to put it, the 'common places' of argument."[7] Topics were not determinate entities; rather, they were starting points from which to ask questions about possible discourse content. Classical topics provided a method, a rule that would help the speaker ferret through the immensity of available material. Classical rhetoricians also implemented motives, virtues, constraints, and values in their toolkits. Such notions help to spur the questioning process in which the speaker or writer must engage. In this sense, even virtures, motives, and goals were fundamentally topical in nature, function, and scope.[8] The thrust of this investigative process was to keep the subject (the substance of the discourse) alive in the rhetor's mind—"to keep doing something with it, to look at it from all sides."[9]

The cliched admonition, "Know thyself," takes on greater import in the classical notion of rhetorical invention. Understanding the constraints of a situation and the audience to which the discourse is address is critical in the speechmaking process. But as Harrington argues, the *primary* focus must be on the speaker's or writer's relationship to the substance of discourse:

> Before the speaker or writer thus enslaves himself to an audience, he stands alone, an individual and, we hope, a scholar. He works out that type of relationship to his subject that later will give the brightest lustre to his style, his delivery, and all the other aspects of his rhetorical art.[10]

Knowing the subject matter thoroughly will, in turn, suggest what the speaker or writer can choose to do with the organization, style, and delivery of the discourse. Comprehensive investigation will also suggest to the rhetor the appropriate ways to present content to an audience.

Strategies of invention are not just tools by which we initiate, search out, and capture thought in discourse. They also function as "a realm in which the rhetor thinks and acts."[11] The topics, for example, are both an instrument and a situation; they are "the instrument *with which* the rhetor thinks and the realm

[7]Hudson, p. 326.
[8]Hudson, p. 327.
[9]Hudson, pp. 333-34.
[10]Ebert Harrington, "A Modern Approach to Invention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 48 (December, 1962), p. 378.
[11]Scott Cosigny, "Rhetoric & Its Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric,* 7 (November, 1974), p. 182.

in and *about which* he thinks."[12] Ultimately, invention involves the rhetor's discovery of the process of inquiry. Speakers or writers must learn to identify and apply modes of discover that cross disciplines. They learn to be aware of where they are in the inquiry process, as well as how they arrived there from that "starting point." In other words, they discover the logical of rational inquiry.

Invention is much more than uncovering the right response to a situation or adapting ideas to an audience; it is an encompassing way of thinking, an "attitude of mind."[13] When approached in this manner, invention denotes rhetoric as "a counterpart of our modern method of inquiry an offshoot of all knowledge."[14]

When the canon of invention is seen in the classical form, the disappearance of the canon of memory is easier to understand. Taking invention out of the realm of rhetoric also effectively eliminated a rhetor's need to explore thoroughly "what one knows." Speakers or writers did not need to investigate their own thoughts for discourse substance; they gathered content from external sources. Nor did the rhetor need to develop the liveral and diverse "storehouse of knowledge" that was memory. As education became specialized, the breadth of personal knowledge on which one could drawn eventually diminished. Memory fell from mutual interdependence with invention to a notion which does not resemble its classical conception at all (many students have a difficult time of remembering what that "fifth" canon was called).

Invention corresponds to the speaker's analysis of what his/her job is in a particular speech. It asks how he/she will deal with a quotation, object, or, word. Unlike other events, this analysis must be made on the spot; furthermore, the speaker is not merely asked a question (as in extemporaneous speaking). Instead, the motivation for speech is much more open-ended, often deliberately vague and confusing. No ground rules are given to limit a speaker's choice; thus, speakers must invent, using the imaginative and logical powers to create what they will discuss.

In this way, we may think of the quotation, object, or word as metaphor. The metaphor is given to the speaker, and from it the speech must be fashioned. A high degree of interpretive skill is required—skill that will be compared to those of all other

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[12]Consigny, p. 182.
[13]Consigny, p. 182.
[14]Harrington, p. 377.

competitors on the same limited choice of metaphors. The metaphor, however, is only the starting point for the speech; it is not the sole purpose of it (as in a persuasive speech). The metaphor must be explained through the use of memory.

The relationship between the canon of memory and extempore speaking was posited by Quintillian in the Institutes of Oratory:

> The ability of speaking extempore seems to me to depend on no other faculty of the mind than this; for, while we are uttering one thought, we have to consider what we are to say next; and this, while the mind is constantly looking forward beyond its immediate object, whatever it finds in the meantime it deposits in the keeping as it were of the memory, which, receiving it from the conception, transmits it, as an instrument of intercommunication, to the delivery.[15]

Quintillian's view can be extended to include the impromptu speaker because, in essence, the cognitive process of eliciting ideas from the "storehouse" is the same. Quintillian suggests that ideas must be positioned in the memory in order to be brought forth. This justifies the idea presented by Eubank and Owens when they suggested that the impromptu speaker be well-read in order to speak with substance on a variety of topics.

Further evidence for the faculty of memory is offered by Richard Weaver. According to Clark T. Irwin, Jr.:

> Memory is the precondition because it stores past experiences; history is a present recall of past thought about that experience. History involves valuations; the rhetor retrieves from memory thoughts about those historical incidents of war, diplomacy, or personal life whose valuations have become relevant for rhetorical appeal. These fragments of value-laden past experience must appear or lie implicit in, even the most avowedly logical appeal.[16]

Weaver's view of memory suggests that the mind will store experiences about events as well as facts from sources other than personal recall. This allows the student in impromptu a wider range of experiences to "tap" for speech content. Not only does this broaden the speaker's range of possible strategies, but

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[15]Quintillian, *The Institutio Oratorio of Quintillian,* Trans, by H. E. Butler, (London: William Heinemann, 1961), IV, Book XII.
[16]Clark T. Irwin, "Rhetoric Remembers: Richard Weaver on Memory and Culture," *Communication Quarterly* 21 (Spring, 1973), p. 25.

serves to legitimate the "personal experience" appeals from the speaker as well.

Memory is a simple enough concept to understand. It only means that the speaker is using what he/she already knows, calling it into use in the speech. The memory is comprised of the speaker's fields of knowledge. As we noted earlier, many different fields are employed in impromptu speaking. These should be areas with which the speaker is genuinely familiar, not simply some trivia overheard in the hall.

The larger and more extensive the speaker's memory, the more varied and creative his/her speeches will be. Memory will aid invention by goading the speaker to call up more than a limited range of examples and proofs. An excellent memory also will be one that is not simply comprised of facts, but interpretations of those facts.

We wish to offer one caveat. Too often, we hear impromptu students and coaches refer to using "blocks" or canned speeches. The problem with this is not that they might get caught being repetitive, but that such set pieces do not employ memory and intention in tandem. This attitude and practice runs the danger of producing stiff and unimaginative speeches that are not adapted to the demands of each specific metaphor.

A second problem that arises out of the use of blocks is complacency. If speakers already have established what they will discuss in a given round, then they will not continue trying to expand the fields of knowledge or use newer learning. This type of thinking, even in a purely forensics sense, precludes development. In a larger sense, using only memory co-opts the purpose of the event in a way that can make it meaningless as an educational tool. Just as we would not welcome a speech that is only analysis with no concreteness, so should we discourage those speeches lacking the speaker's original thought.[17]

Qualities of the Ideal Impromptu Speaker

Many of the abilities of the ideal impromptu speaker are no different from those considered advantageous to other speakers. The speaker should have a good voice, gesture effectively, speak clearly without marked defects, and be able to use a variety of proofs and arguments. But in seeking out the ideal impromptu speaker, there are certain other qualities that cannot be overlooked.

In addition to the primary requirements of invention and memory, the impromptu speaker needs poise. A speaker who is

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[17]Harrington.

easily flustered or who is easily thrown will have difficulties. That poise is also necessary to convince an audience that may already have heard a conflicting interpretation of the metaphor. Finally, poise is necessary when the speaker uses a less traditional approach to the event or the metaphor.

For three specific reasons, the ideal student of impromptu speaking should also have a sense of humor. The most obvious reason is the communicative abilities of humor— establishing rapport, making a point through irony or sarcasm, or in simply making a more interesting speech. The second need for humor is related to a rich understanding of the metaphor. Often, there is an inherent or implied joke within the quotation form. Failure to understand the humor may result in misunderstanding the metaphor. Finally, a sense of humor is necessary to help cope with the inevitable bad round. Even the best speaker is going to experience those occasions where not only did the audience get confused, but even the speaker did not know what he/she was trying to say! Being able to "laugh off" these problems is essential.

The third major skill of an impromptu speaker should be a solid command of the mechanics of speech structure. Impromptu speakers must be explicit and completely organized as they make their way through the speech. Inability to show clearly the speech's direction forces the listener and critic/judge into a "detective story" set of Sherlockian deductions. An impromptu speaker who simply rambles from one point to another without relating ideas back to the metaphor is delivering a less than ideal speech.

Finally, an impromptu speaker needs the ability to go beyond what seems obvious to synthesize new ideas. We have seen too many instances of speakers listing proofs for an idea without contextualizing the impact of significance of those proofs. The speaker must show the audience why it has been important to listen to the speech, why this public discourse was justified. This demands that the speaker have enough insight or foresight to see beyond mere facts, to provide some valuable perspective on the metaphor's symbolic nature.

The abilities of poise, humor, organization, and synthesis, combined with invention and memory, provides a picture of the skills we seek in an ideal impromptu speaker. Obviously, the skills are varied, and they are not always found in a single individual. The coach and speaker need to evaluate, on a theoretical level and a skill level, if the speaker has enough of these qualities to pursue the event.

Thus far, we have explored the nature of impromptu speaking. Clearly it is a worthwhile event, possessing its own special place in forensics. With a longer scholarly background than we usually imagine, we turn now to the more practical side of impromptu speaking by exploring preparation and practice strategies.

Practical Elements

Preparation

The coach and student need to understand initially that one cannot simply walk into a round and hope to deliver a great speech. We will examine what can be done in practice sessions and at the tournament to ton a student's propensity for this event. Between tournaments, the speaker should practice. When we hear impromptu speakers tell us that they are afraid they'll "burn out" if they practice, we are amazed. This is like a baseball player saying he can't take batting practice or he'll burn out! impromptu speaking needs drill work—work enough that it can become second nature to do things that were previously difficult (or impossible).

First, one must recognize that an impromptu speech is divided into two parts—what is said and the time that leads to the speaking. Of these, the preparation is the more important. An excellent means of preparing for tournaments is to concentrate on the thought process that leads to the speech. Since this thought process ordinarily includes an analysis of the metaphor (also called the "translation"), we begin by giving students a number of metaphors and having them translate the metaphors. The student's translation should make enough sense that it can be defended; it should be germane to the topic, and it should allow for some latitude in discussion. The translation is not simply "what the quotation says," but what meaning the student wishes to draw from it.

Another drill can involve the translation and application of the metaphor. In our experience, application is too often left until the end of the speech, at which point the speaker "wings it;" however, application of the metaphor is central in going beyond the obvious and should be planned. This drill reinforces that idea upon the speaker. Application is as simple as stating the translation's relevance to the student's own life.

A third thought process drill adds to these components by asking students to support their claims in the speech. It should be noted that this is simply a key idea, not the developed speech. For example, a student might list support for a transla-

tion as Abe Lincoln and the Chicago Cubs. In an actual speech, the student would describe further these two areas; however, here the student merely lists. The purpose of these drills is not to produce complete and perfect speeches, but to create a time-efficient exercise that develops the thought process that leads to better speeches.

Finally, the coach can work with students by using an expanded thought process drill. Students can be asked to give all possible translations which they can imagine, all applications, all examples. The purpose of this longer drill is to reinforce the idea that students should not limit themselves to the obvious or the tried and true.

All thought process drills can be performed privately by students. They carry additional advantages of exposing speakers to increasingly varied quotations, objects, or words, as well as encouraging students to reduce the time necessary to prepare in actual rounds.

The second type of pre-tournament work concentrates on the mechanics of speaking off-the-cuff. Improvisational games can be of great service here. The first of these games gives students a subject on which they are an expert. Students then decide in what situations they are speaking and what audience they are addressing. After speaking for a few minutes, they may take questions from the audience. This game is extremely challenging, and it can present quite a number of problems (such as trick questions or being an expert on something the students knows absolutely nothing about).

A second game randomly selects a word from the dictionary. Students must define the word without giving its real definition, then give an example of its use in a sentence or trace its etymology.

A third, less improvisational game simply asks students to relate an experience, but makes them do so as a speech. They may simply explain how their political science test went, but they must use organization, examples, and all the other components of a good speech. This is a less threatening means of teaching speakers how to use proper form and to deliver speeches conversationally. These secondary games, then, are designed to improve the actual performance of the speech.

At a tournament, it is difficult if not impossible to practice with a coach. We recommend that speakers engage in thought process drills privately. A small supply of quotations transported to the tournament allows the students to "warm up" before competition. Running through a few metaphors and deciding

how one would develop them is an effective method of preparing for the actual contest. Warming up is perfectly acceptable and certainly better for the speaker than standing in the hall gossiping or pacing.

We wish to make clear that these drills do not substitute for performing practice speeches. The latter are not only fundamental, they are about the only means of teaching the speaker to sense how long those seven minutes really are. But practice speeches alone will not help as much as will a supplemental program of understanding the various parts that comprise the entire speech.

Strategies

Participants often forget that, in impromptu speaking, there are a number of ways to organize and develop ideas. It is important to recognize that the speech is essentially persuasive. The speaker should propose a position or advocate an attitude change and offer arguments for it.

The most basic method of arrangement (and the most prevalent, it seems) is an agreement with the metaphor and examples that tend to support it. In recent years this has led to the development of the "O.P.L." (our "Own Personal Lives") point to lend some legitimacy to the speech. However, impromptu speakers need to be reminded that this is not the only way a speech can be arranged.

Many impromptu speakers are impressed when someone disagrees with a quotation, but this is just a different interpretation of the metaphor. It is the metaphor as used by the speaker (and not just the word, object, or quotation) that is of major importance. So we are still left with only speeches that agree with the metaphor. Also, one may elect to say "now this is the metaphor" and disagree with it (although the distinction seems minimal).

However, more creative strategies are available to us. The compare-and-contrast speech, which inherently has two different means of conclusion, seems a better truth-tester than simple agreement. In the first type, the speaker's third area will be spent examining which side of the metaphor fared better and how we might emulate that kind of behavior or thinking. If we wish to show that "Honesty is the best policy," we might demonstrate how one man prospered through honest and another man met his downfall through deceit. Thus, the message to the audience can be clear and easy to follow.

A variation of the compare-and-contrast method is to consider the first two points as the thesis and antithesis of an argument. The third then explores a synthesis between the two. This strategy may be especially useful when the metaphor cannot be seen as black, or white—when some middle ground must be sought. The synthesis approach avoids "sitting on both sides of the fence" because it seeks to find that which is new.

One might also explore the significance of the quotation or the object to demonstrate its place in history and contemporary society. Of course, this requires familiarity with the metaphor, but it can be quite effective as it shows definite links between speech and subject. While this could be the entire strategy for a speech, it can also be used as a subordinate point. For example, a speaker well-versed in Chinese history might conclude a speech based on a saying of Confucius by explaining what role it has had in that nation's development.

Another method displays why the metaphor is worthy of our time. It could be compared to other thoughts and shown to be more complete or more elegant. It might be considered a unique perspective, heretofore unnoticed. Justification for the speech could be found in the fact that the message is simple and even commonplace, but too often overlooked. Or it may be that the metaphor expresses something about us, not simply in its matter, but in its manner of telling.

We also must remember that these methods can be combined in a variety of ways. A speaker could begin by examining the style of the metaphor, compare and contrast examples, and conclude by showing how that argument has shaped us to this day. Given some thought and practice, the strategies for developing the speech can expand rapidly beyond mere agreement.

General Thoughts on Coaching Impromptu Speaking

In addition to drilling students, listening to practice speeches, and encouraging qualified speakers to try impromptu, coaches can do much to improve this event. With one's team, a coach can encourage taking impromptu seriously. Not only does impromptu speaking require practice, but it requires students to know themselves and their areas of personal expertise. The coach can and should expect that students will improve mastery over these areas. To this end, a coach can urge speakers to utilize knowledge that they are obtaining currently in classes. Coaches can emphasize the importance of outside reading in the students' particular fields, and can encourage students to explore the extent of their knowledge.

With other coaches, more planning can be undertaken so that the same quotations or objects do not appear at tournaments over and over again. Tournament directors might consider including a list of the topics used in the results packet. This not only would prevent repetition, but would give competitors a greater variety from which to practice.

Additionally, tournament directors might consider experimenting with their usual format. One might hold a tournament using nothing except proverbs as topics, or one might use a different subject each round. Perhaps a person could be the subject of an impromptu speech, or the speech could be based on three words which are revealed as the speech is in progress. As long as people are alerted before the tournament (for practice's sake), variation can only serve to strengthen the enjoyment and educational benefit of the event.

General Thoughts on Judging Impromptu Speaking

Since we have already dealt with the important issue of "canned speeches," we need not delve into it again. However, the judging in this event can be improved in several ways.

Impromptu speaking cannot be judged quite like any other event. It is far more transient than even an extemporaneous speech or debate, and doesn't always leave a firm impression in the competitor's mind. Thus, comments need to include more emphasis on improving the student's abilities as an impromptu speaker, not merely what went on in that round. To be noted is the fact that the speech will never be given again, and so many comments that are too content specific are of little application for the student.

At the same time, it is better to give too many comments than none at all. It is very difficult for most speakers to gauge how they are doing as they are doing it. It is even more difficult in impromptu—thus criticism is vital if the speaker is to improve. Ranking and rating is not the entire job, only a start.

On the question of time, we will only say that too much emphasis on "filling up the time" leads to speeches that wander for the last minute or two, grow redundant, and expand simply for the sake of not being short. We question whether "taking more prep time" will guarantee that the student will have enough more to say to fill the time; taking additional preparation time just to avoid finishing early seems dishonest. Just as we do not want speakers to speak before they are ready, we should not insist that they wait after they are.

If there is no place whatsoever in forensics for personal examples or humorous asides, then where is our connection to humanity and "real life" speaking? Comments such as "Who cares what you think?" are not only rude, but they introduce a dangerous precedent to the event. Ordinarily, we expect that a spontaneous speech will be somewhat off-the-cuff. It is not unreasonable to allow for more informality and conversationally to be used in impromptu speaking.

Judging impromptu is not an easy matter. Many of our finest coaches competed in the event, and many more are uncertain of how to approach it. By insisting that we improve the quality of competition, we believe that we will also improve the quality of judging.

Conclusion

This article has only begun to approach the issues that need to be addressed with respect to impromptu speaking. A firmer grasp of its theoretical groundings and nature are a first step to a better understanding of how impromptu may be practiced in forensics. More and more emphasis on taking the event seriously and assiduously striving to improve it will elevate the level of performance.