Original Material in Forensics Oral Interpretation: A Violation of Integrity

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A recurring question in intercollegiate forensics is the use of original material in interpretation events. In April, 1984, the American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament (AFA-NIET) agreed to allow original material in the established AFA-NIET interpretation categories. Outside of the AFA-NIET, none of the national forensic organizations has a specific policy on the use of original material. Establishing of such a policy is not a decision to be taken lightly. We must seriously consider the impact of allowing original material in the established interpretation categories.

The purpose of this essay is to argue that using original works of literature written by or for a student competitor, specifically for competition, is detrimental to forensics oral interpretation. I believe there are three major reasons for our keeping original literature out of the established categories: violation of the purpose of the event, the disparity of judging criteria, and the ethical concerns raised by allowing this material to be used.

To put these arguments in sharper focus, some parameters are needed. The first question that is always raised when discussing this controversy is, "What is original material?" For my perspective, I propose the definition used by Scott Ford and myself in our paper presented at the 1987 Speech Communication Association National Convention: "Any work of prose, poetry or dramatic literature written by a student competitor or for a student competitor specifically for use in competition" (1987, p. 1). I want to make special note that this definition does not rest on the questions of publication or literary merit that are often used. The core of the problem lies, I believe, not in the literature itself, but in the problems associated with its use. Thus, any questions of literary merit really become moot points. The key phrase of this definition is "specifically for use in competition." When original material is produced with the ultimate aim being success in competition, problems arise.

A second parameter to establish is that I am against the use of original material in the nationally-established interpretation events. I am not including any events for which original material is

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considered acceptable material, such as experimental events established specifically for the interpretation of original literature. Also, Reader's Theatre, a unique form of group performance, falls outside of this controversy. As found by Scott Ford and myself, "In all events [prose, poetry, dramatic interpretation, dramatic duo], with the exception of Reader's Theatre, there is a tendency to disagree that original material is acceptable" (1987, p. 7). Thus, my arguments are specifically limited to prose interpretation, poetry interpretation, dramatic interpretation, and dramatic duo.

The first reason for my dislike of original material in the interpretive events is that I feel its presence violates the pedagogical integrity of the event. The purpose of competitive oral interpretation is twofold: to teach students how to analyze a piece of literature for theme, mood, images, emotion, plot and other factors; and to learn how to control and utilize nonverbal communication behaviors in the suggestion of these underlying factors. Using original material does not require the student to undertake the first of the two processes. A student who has written his/her own work will be working from a different perspective than a student using an outside work of literature. Instead of analyzing the work to extrapolate what needs to be communicated to the audience, the student will be determining how the piece must be written or re-written to work successfully for the audience. Initially, this sounds acceptable. However, let us keep in mind that the purpose of oral interpretation is to engage in the analysis of literature. While a student writing his/her own material is in the realm of a writing workshop, it is not our purpose as educators in forensics.

The interpreter is meant to serve as the intermediary between the work and the audience within the confines of the piece itself, communicating the intent of the author. However, the author as interpreter, becomes the one in control. There cannot be any question of author intent as a restraining factor, as the student is the author; he/she can adapt as he/she sees fit. Thus, oral interpretation becomes a literary reading—two communication situations with very different expectations for the performer. Since oral interpretation is defined as a two-step process, to remove one or both of these steps is to change the very integrity of the activity. Unless we wish to alter the educational function of oral interpretation, original material should be kept out of the established interpretation categories.

A second reason for keeping original material out of the current interpretive events is its negative impact on judging criteria. Currently, a judge looks at two primary areas when judging interpretation: the student's analysis of the work of literature, and the
student's translation of his/her analysis into appropriate nonverbal behaviors. Comments generally revolve around specific vocal or physical actions and their appropriateness for the work being presented. In other words, the effect interaction of analysis and expression is primary. However, if we allow original material into the event, we have negated the first area of evaluation. While we may express via the ballot that what we interpret from an original work is not the same as that being communicated by the reading, we cannot argue author intent. Since the student is the author, his/her decision of the intent of the work must take precedence. This holds true for students using material written for them in competition, as the interpreters have not been required to engage in analysis. Instead, in a worst-case scenario (but not unrealistic one), the author tells them "what it's all about." Again, the first purpose of oral interpretation has been violated, and one major judging criteria has been circumvented.

Not only does the use of original material remove a judging criteria, it also turns speech judges into literary critics. Many feel uncomfortable in this role. I am not a literary expert, nor are most coaches and judges in forensics specifically educated in literary expertise. While we are able to teach analytical tools, this does not necessarily make us qualified to evaluate a new piece of literature for its literary merit. When judging original material, we are forced to evaluate two different forms of communication: written and spoken. Our job and training is in teaching and evaluating the success of the oral expression of literature, not its creation. We must confine our efforts to that which we know best—oral communication.

The last reason for excluding original material from the established interpretation categories is one of ethics. I feel it is unethical for a student to use original material in the same round as students using non-original material. My concern is that students will write original material to fit the conventions of the event. For example, while I cannot speak for all parts of the country, in the Upper Midwest, very prosaic poetry seems to have more success than more figurative poetry. Conceivably, a student with some writing skills, or a friend who is talented, could create poetry to fit the conventions. While I grant that this argument is based largely on propensity, it nonetheless points out a potential disparity over using original material: should material specifically written for competition be allowed to compete against material not written with the conventions of forensics competition in mind? It is an unfair advantage for those able to write material to fit those conventions. To extend on this potential hazard, it is then conceivable that instead of the interpreter altering his/her interpretation, the piece simply
gets rewritten to fit within the skills of the interpreter. Instead of
the student evaluating and developing the interpretation to a finer
degree (certainly an important goal of education-oriented oral in-
terpretation), the piece itself can be altered, removing the bother-
some section; words can be changed, lines can be changed, the
entire piece can be changed. Is it ethical to allow this advantage to
some students while not allowing that same flexibility to those using
non-original material? I think not. By allowing original material in
the established oral interpretation categories, we are entering some
ethically questionable ground.

Clearly, the use of original material in the established interprer-
tation events is neither advisable nor warranted. The violation of
integrity, the judging disparity, and the ethical questions all argue
for keeping original material out of these events. While I have no
argument with original material-specific events, they must be kept
separate, with clearly defined and understood criteria.

Moreover, as Scott Ford and I found in our 1987 survey,
coaches want the national forensic organizations to establish some
policy on this issue in order to "aid in coaching and judging consis-
tency" (p. 12). I firmly believe that NFA, AFA-NIET, Phi Rho Pi,
Pi Kappa Delta, and Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha must
establish a specific policy banning the use of original material from
the established interpretation events.

We have a lot of good students competing in forensics. A lot of
those students are good writers, and that talent should be carefully
cultivated. However, it must be encouraged in the appropriate fo-
rum, such as a writers' workshop, where experts in literature and
literary form can give proper and constructive assistance.

Reference
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