EDITORS FORUM: A Defense of Questions in Rhetorical Criticism

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At the Student Assembly of the 1989 Individual Events Nationals, Representative Cam Jones, a Cornell University senior, led a discussion of the issue of questions in rhetorical criticism. Jones prefaced this discussion with an interesting analogy. Student deliberations on this topic, Jones claimed, were akin to 1968 Czechoslovakian deliberations on whether or not the Soviet tanks should decimate their national rebellion. The Czechoslovakiens could deliberate at length, but the tanks would come anyway. Ultimately, the tanks did come; at the 1989 NFA tournament, the coaches voted to end questions in rhetorical criticism. While we do not agree with the extent of Jones' metaphor, we do feel it accurately reflects student sentiments. Jones' metaphor failed, we hope, because unlike the Soviet Politburo, the coaches' ultimate motive was the education of forensic competitors. In addition, we hope Jones' analogy fails, for unlike the Czechoslovakian massacre, the decision to eliminate the questioning period can be reversed.

The forensic community should continue its debate on questions in rhetorical criticism. We suggest that ending this questioning period was inconsistent with the goals of both forensics and the event of rhetorical criticism. Any forensic activity which helps fulfill a forensic goal without any deleterious consequences should be maintained. Consequently, we will endeavor to answer two important questions: (1) Do questions in rhetorical criticism help satisfy a forensic objective? and (2) If so, are there any valid arguments against maintaining the questioning period?

This first question necessitates a review of forensic objectives. Forensics is commonly justified as a co-curricular activity which extends classroom theory and practice. The Second National Conference on Forensics affirmed this justification by adopting a


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rational statement which said, in part, "Forensics remains an ongo-
ing, scholarly experience, uniting students and teachers in its basic educational purpose." The conference report went on to recom-
mend measures for strengthening the educational goals of foren-
sics. Specifically, the report recommended that forensics should foster "students' ability to adapt to various communication con-
texts." This recommendation encourages events which offer com-
petitors a unique rhetorical setting. In addition, the conference suggested that forensics is "an expression of scholarship," and fo-
rensics activities are "laboratories within which the results of stu-
dent scholarship are evaluated." These statements seem to en-
courage forensic activities which promote superior student schol-
arship. Questions in rhetorical criticism help satisfy these educa-
tional goals of forensics; they subject students to a unique communicative environment, and they produce superior rhetorical scholarship.

Several individuals at the coaches' meeting argued that ques-
tions in rhetorical criticism merely foster skills already tested in limited preparation events. These advocates fail to realize that there is a considerable difference between having two to thirty minutes to prepare a speech in response to a written question and having two to five seconds to formulate a cogent answer in re-
sponse to a direct oral question. This latter form of question-
answering skills is exceedingly important in our society. A plethora of textbooks on business presentations include separate sections on answering questions. Our national laws are ultimately interpreted by nine justices who persistently pepper attorneys with questions during oral arguments. Politicians rise to and maintain prominence through interviews, press conferences, and debates. In all of these instances, respondents cannot utilize two to thirty minutes to formulate their answers. In these settings, respondents cannot answer with a multi-part speech. The Second National Conference on Forensics advocated alternative tournament events which would train students for "business communication," "legal argument," and "political settings." Questions in rhetorical criticism already help advance student skills in each of these rhetorical contexts; thus, these questions partially satisfy a forensic educational prior-
ity.

Questions in this event also fulfill a second educational pur-
pose: they encourage more knowledgeable rhetorical critics. Campbell claims that success in scholarly rhetorical criticism is positively related to the critic's exposure to rhetorical acts, critical
analyses, theories, and studies. Rhetorical scholars also argue that exemplary criticism only emanates from critics with expansive methodological knowledge. At present, questions in rhetorical criticism encourage students to expand their knowledge base. Competitors read additional scholarly materials while preparing for questions. Some of this additional information leads to revisions in their speeches, and some of this material simply helps them answer questions in an informed fashion.

At the coaches' meeting, some instructors argued that a properly schooled student will pursue abundant scholarship irrespective of the foreboding question period. We admire the idealism of these sentiments, yet this idealism cannot overturn the past and present realities of forensic competition. The Second National Conference on Forensics recognized that "forensics is extremely demanding of students' time and energies." The conference report also stated, "The knowledge that contestants will have the products of their labors compared for the purpose of a judgment motivates them to do their best." Forensic educators, through this report, clearly recognize that harsh schedules limit competitors to those scholarly pursuits rewarded by competition. If questions no longer reward a student's rhetorical knowledge, students will cease to possess such knowledge.

Questions in rhetorical criticism rounds do help satisfy the educational objectives of forensics. Notwithstanding this conclusion, we must examine the arguments against questioning because not all educational activities are pragmatically or ideologically sound. In this instance, instructors at the coaches' meeting leveled three charges against questioning in rhetorical criticism: (1) questions unfairly designate rhetorical criticism as an elitist event; (2) judges abuse their questioning privileges; and (3) questions impede tournament timing. While these arguments have some merit, we believe they do not justify eliminating a valuable, educational practice.

Those who fear elitism in rhetorical criticism usually brandish the slogan: "We need to have questions in all or no events." These individuals force a very convenient dichotomy which relegates questions to a realm of pragmatic impossibility. These advocates should consider that some universities cannot afford seminars for all their students. Should these institutions eliminate all seminars? Some schools have inadequate forensic budgets which cannot meet the student demand. Should these schools discontinue forensics for the few students they can serve? In both of these scenarios, we
realize that the university should not randomly select students for seminars or forensic activities. Consequently, if we can only have questions in one event, there must be some non-random justification for our selection.

Questions are better suited for rhetorical criticism than any other individual event (although all events would benefit from questions). In no other event do we ask for so much in so short a time. Dean and Benoit, in their content analysis of rhetorical criticism ballots, concluded that judges expect the following: a justification of the artifact, a justification of the methodology, an explanation of the methodology, an application of the method to the artifact, an explanation of the historical context of the artifact, a judgment of the rhetorical effects, and a discussion of the implications of the criticism.14 Harris' 1978 ballot content analysis reported similar expectations.15 Larson's survey research indicates "judges hold competitors to the compositional standards of a professional criticism."16 Many coaches have similarly espoused strong parallels between forensic rhetorical criticism and professional scholarly criticism.17 In short, we ideally expect a twenty-five page journal article condensed into a ten-minute, insightful, and invigorating presentation.

This high level of expectation has compelled numerous coaches to comment on the harsh time restrictions in this event.18 Larson's survey study revealed that the most frequently mentioned "general problem" in rhetorical criticism is the restrictive time limits.19 Since rhetorical criticism couples exorbitant expectations with stringent time restrictions, questions are particularly well-suited to this event. Judges attempting to understand and "flow" the extensive analysis sometimes miss a significant item. With questions, the judge can pursue a clarification. In trying to fulfill the vast expectations, students often omit subpoints which an individual judge may find of consequence. Questions enable a judge to probe an area of interest. At the coaches' meeting, some instructors argued that questions hamper the forensic goal of presenting succinct, complete messages within a specified time limit. A complete and concise rhetorical criticism is impossible within a ten-minute time frame. At least with questions, judges can compensate for the time limit and explore areas which the student simply could not address.

Ironically, even with the high expectations and harsh time limit, rhetorical criticism judges want more and better analysis. Larson found that the most frequent suggestion for improving competition was a call for "more analysis." Dean and Benoit found
that the most common negative comment on rhetorical criticism ballots is that "speakers need to expand their discussions."

In addition, the majority of rhetorical criticism articles suggest, in some manner, the need for improved arguments and analysis in this event. If the forensic community truly wishes to improve the analytic quality in rhetorical criticism, then we have lost sight of our own goal by eliminating the question period. Without questions, many students will not pursue additional rhetorical scholarship once their speech is complete. Lesser knowledge requirements cannot lead to improved analysis.

At the coaches' meeting, most opponents of the questioning period argued that too many judges use this time to harass students and flaunt their own knowledge. Some judges do misemploy questions; however, these judges constitute a minority. In 1984, the Rules Committee presented a motion to end questions in rhetorical criticism to the Student Assembly. Christina Reynolds commented that the committee "fully expected to hear resounding support for our position from the students. Instead, the students emphatically [sic] discouraged abolishing the question." Reynolds added, "The students' position eventually led to a committee recommendation that the motion to abolish the question be rejected." In 1989, the committee, for presently unexplained reasons, chose not to solicit student opinion on this issue. At the 1989 student assembly, competitors once again firmly favored retaining questions in rhetorical criticism, but the decision to drop the question had been finalized by the council before the students ever met. It is unfortunate that our students devoted the majority of their meeting to this issue when their opinion was of no consequence. Jones stated that many students left the meeting wondering why they bothered to attend at all.

Finally, some opponents of questions in rhetorical criticism argue that questioning disturbs a tournament's timing. These minor disturbances cannot possibly justify ending an educationally sound practice, especially since many factors affect the tournament schedule—not only the presence of questions in an event. The National Forensic Association rules clearly state that each judge is to ask "one question." If judges obey the rules, timing problems are minimal. Furthermore, we believe that timing difficulties have been minimal because in the 1985 coaches' meeting, as well as the 1985 National Forensic Journal forum on this issue, no opponents of questioning treated timing concerns as a major argument—it was only "tagged on" as an added harm. The Second National Confer-
ence on Forensics warned that coaches must "give primacy to educational objectives in all aspects of forensic activities." The Conference also cautioned that it is easy for "forensic directors to get caught up in the details of administration and lose sight of their central role as educators."25 If we eliminate questions in this event due to timing concerns, we ultimately fall victim to our own admonitions.

Questions in rhetorical criticism serve a viable educational purpose, and they should be maintained. Ending questioning based on an "all or none" principle is inconsistent with the expectations and directional goals of this event. Ending questioning because of too many abusive judges is inconsonent with experience, and ending questioning because of inconvenient timing is incompatible with our values as educators. The Second National Conference on Forensics recognized that "there is nothing inherent in a forensics program that insures positive educational outcomes."26 As coaches, the conference report implies, it is our mandate to insure such outcomes. We hope the forensic community will pursue further dialogue on the hastily handled issue of questioning in rhetorical criticism. Cam Jones suggested that the tanks have forever doomed questions in rhetorical criticism. We hope that both his metaphor and its conclusion will have overstated the real case.

NOTES

1Cam Jones, telephone conversation with author, June 7, 1989.
4Ziegelmueller and Parson, 46.


3 Ziegelmueller and Parson, 44.


6 Ziegelmueller and Parson, 38.


12 Larson, 152.

13 Dean and Benoit, 104.

14 Geisler, 1-5; Hans and Gustainis, 13-18; Thompson, 17-19, 31; McCorkle, 18-20; Murphy, "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," 918-925.


23Cam Jones, telephone interview with author, June 14, 1989.


25Ziegelmueller and Parson, 38.

26McBath, 9.