Oral Interpretation: What Are Students Learning?

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"Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people" (McBath, 1984). With this definition it has been debated as to whether or not oral interpretation belongs in the area of forensics education at all. Elbert (1976) and others have resoundingly declared that oral interpretation is not suited to forensic competition. These scholars believe that oral interpretation is an art and that competition encourages disrespect for the literature. Yet others believe that forensics and oral interpretation go hand in hand and that each enhances the other (e.g. Manchester, 1981; VerLinden, 1983). This study accepts the latter view. Oral interpretation can be a valuable device in which students learn to select, analyze, and defend literature as well as present believable and understandable personal interpretations of an author's work. Forensics as an educational laboratory can motivate and teach students to examine literature, its relevance and its design (Murphy, 1984). Therefore, this study examines 43 collegiate contestants' use of the interpretive study which is required in the justifications of forensics educators for including oral interpretation in forensics.

Oral Interpretation

The concern that forensics education fails to meet the goals of literary study and defense has grown up with oral interpretation in forensics. Lowrey (1958) voiced her concern that oral interpretation was focusing on the reader, not the literature nor its analysis. She wrote that oral interpretation not only had to be performed, but analyzed for meaning and understanding if it were to be a valuable learning tool. She suggested that judges should look for a student's progress toward communicating the "whole of the author's concept" rather than the performance. Yet, in spite of these early appeals, oral interpretation appears to have continued in the direction of performance, contrary to the position encouraged by Lowrey.

Rhodes (1972) suggested that the problem lay in tournament structure and requirements. He felt that students, in order to satisfy tournament requirements for themes and time limits, were choosing "easy" literature with trite but accessible themes. Students were minimizing


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the authors' meanings for the sake of clearcut thematic programs which ignored literary quality but appealed to judges who wanted a compact and entertaining program.

An action caucus at the Speech Communication Association's 1982 convention reiterated a concern that students were forsaking literary study in forensic competition and thus the focus was being placed upon reading technique rather than the meaning of the literature. The caucus reported that inconsistency in judging theory and a lack of competent judges were partly to blame; however, coaches were also implicated. "Oral interpreters must be coached to focus on sharing or contributing to the collective experience of the literature with the audience, never becoming separate from that audience but remaining part of the audience for that piece of literature" (Holloway, et al., 1983). The caucus indicated that students were not being taught to view oral interpretation in this way.

A follow-up caucus at the 1983 Speech Communication Convention reinforced the discrepancy between the literary analysis needed in oral interpretation and that which occurs in forensics. While Keefe (1985) introduced a study indicating that some coaches do coach literary analysis in rehearsals, the concern that the process of in-depth oral interpretation, which includes study outside of practice, (Yordon, 1989) remained.

Pelias (1984) explored the judging issue by examining ballots from forensic competition. His study revealed that judges were indeed encouraging and rewarding students for performance technique rather than literary study. Judges were criticizing performance first, enunciation and clarity second, and literary quality last, with only 14.7% of judges' comments being made in this regard.

This trend is incongruous with the tasks of forensics and reduces the potential assets of forensics. Manchester (1981a) stated in a position paper presented at the 67th annual Speech Communication Association convention that the clearer the analysis of a piece of literature, the better chance the student has of creating a character. He stated that dramatic technique means nothing if literary study is neglected. Manchester (1981b) referred specifically to dramatic interpretation in forensics when urging instructors to push for more than a cursory understanding of literature, and stated that preserving the literature must be the primary concern when cutting for competition. He suggested that students should use the introduction to explain textual considerations and defend literature.

The idea that the introduction could be the vehicle for the development of literary argument, theory, and interpretation was addressed by Jay VerLinden (1983). Verlinden noted that interpreters should make
several critical and argumentative decisions when presenting a selec-
tion. These decisions included selecting a quality piece of literature,
determining the author's intent, developing style and meaning, and
using the body and voice. He agreed with Thomas Colley in suggesting
that to eliminate these decisions and reduce the interpretation to skill
and technique meant eliminating or at least reducing forensic skill.
Therefore, he created a judging model called the "metacritic" in which
judging decisions would be based upon how well a student states and
defends claims made in the introduction. The claims would include why
the piece is noteworthy, critical examination of the work and the
author, and universal themes in the piece. VerLinden closed his argu-
ments by stating that if forensics judges and educators continued to
reward those who did no analysis, such literary study would not occur.
These sentiments have continued through to the present. Hershey
(1987) and Swarts (1988) reiterated the need for forensics educators
and critics to encourage and reward students who examine and defend
the rhetorical and argumentative features of interpretive study. Unfor-
tunately, this practice is not always happening. All too often the oppo-
site seems to be true. The implications of lack of analysis on the part of
oral interpretation students for forensics education and competition
are extensive. Educators must face the decision to reevaluate what
constitutes forensics education and include what seems to be primarily
a competitive acting event or begin to teach and judge students by the
criteria used to justify oral interpretation's inclusion in the field.

Method

This study was conceived to examine student responses to ques-
tions surrounding literary study in oral interpretation: the time and
work done prior to competition and concern for the author's purpose. It
was assumed that students who had done a literary study of selections
would be aware of the author's intent, theme(s), and the steps in
examining a work for presentation. This assumption was based upon
the work of scholars in oral and written literary interpretation (Booth,
1988; Lowrey, 1958; Manchester, 1981; VerLinden, 1983; Yordon,
1989).

Subjects

Students were asked during the first preliminary round of program
of interpretation, poetry and prose at a large, midwestern state tourna-
ment to complete a survey for a research project. Forty-three out of 175
surveys were returned.

The students were from schools ranging from student populations
of 10,000 or more to less than 1,200. The breakdown of respondents was
as follows: 18 responses from schools of more than 10,000, three
responses from schools of 3,000 to 10,000, nine responses from schools of 1,200 to 3,000, and 13 responses from schools of less than 1,200.

Sixteen of these students had taken no classroom instruction in oral interpretation. Ten of the students had taken high school oral interpretation or one lower level college course in oral interpretation. Seventeen of the students had taken two or more semesters of collegiate instruction in oral interpretation.

Procedure

Students were asked to complete a survey with the following questions:

1) What is the approximate size of your student body?
2) Have you taken a formal class in oral interpretation? If so, please indicate at what level (high school or college, introductory, intermediate, or advanced).
3) In general, how do you select cuttings for this event?
4) How did you select or find the piece(s) on which you are now working?
5) Prior to your first verbal rehearsal, what did you do to prepare this selection for competition?
6) In terms of hours, how long have you worked on this selection OUTSIDE of rehearsal?
7) If you were to explain the steps in doing oral interpretation to a novice, what would they be?
8) Do you feel that your interpretation of this literature would be similar or the same as the author's would be? Why or why not?

After completing the surveys, students were asked to fold and return the survey to the judge who then returned the surveys along with ballots to the tab room. Responses were initially divided into groups containing responses considered to indicate some literary study and those which did not indicate literary study. Responses were also examined to determine any apparent association between school size and literary study or having had coursework in oral interpretation and literary study.

Results

In response to the questions, "In general, how do you select cuttings for this event?" and, "How did you select or find the selection on which you are now working?" students indicated that they most often find pieces by reading, paging through literature or by recommendations of others. Of the respondents giving other responses, five chose selections previously rehearsed as plays, three were given selections already cut by coaches, three chose selections they were familiar with
from other contests and two responded that they found selections in scene books or by randomly reading parts of book chapters.

Prior to the first verbal rehearsal, respondents indicated the following preparation of pieces. Eleven students noted that they had cut selections for time. Eighteen students read their pieces silently. Twelve students worked to memorize pieces. Five students had followed conventions such as creating script books or manuscripts. Four students had done nothing prior to rehearsal. One student stated that there was nothing to do, saying, "My coach did all the analytical stuff and marked my script." Seven students noted having done various forms of literary analysis; e.g. marked script, studied characters, researched author, and/or discovered poetic devices.

In terms of hours, students were asked about the time spent preparing their selections outside of rehearsal. The lowest figure was given by a student who indicated that he or she had not touched the selection outside of rehearsals with his or her coach. Fourteen students reported two to three hours of outside work. Ten students reported spending seven to ten hours. Six students reported 10 to 20 hours. Seven students estimated over 20 hours of work. Six students did not respond. Of the seven students who had indicated various forms of analysis, five reported spending 20 or more hours on their presentations outside of rehearsal.

When asked what the steps are in doing an oral interpretation, eight students responded, "Don't know," or "No idea." Sixteen students included little or no analytical work; e.g. "find something," "do it," "feel it," "practice," and "read and enjoy." Responses to the question which indicated traditional kinds of literary analyses were categorized by type. Eighteen students included one type of analytical step. Five students suggested knowing or becoming the character. Four students included finding the meanings or themes of the pieces. Five students included cutting for completeness (as well as time). Three students included learning and delivering the author's purpose in their steps. One student also included study of literary form and poetic devices.

The final question asked whether or not the students felt that their interpretations were the same or similar to what the author's would be and why. Answers were divided into positive and negative responses. Eighteen students indicated that they felt their interpretation would be close to or agree with the author's interpretation. Three of those eighteen stated no reason. Eight said they had done some research to verify the author's meaning. The remaining five made these replies: "It's light-hearted like I am;" "There isn't much disagreement on how to do this piece;" "Accents and cutting are accurate to [the] script;" "I
chose funny poems and I do them funny"; "It's like my life." Twelve students were unsure if they were interpreting the piece such as the author would, and nine of those indicated that they didn't know the author's intent. Seven students indicated that it didn't matter what the author's intent was. Four of the seven believed knowledge of the author's intent wasn't needed for oral interpretation; two of the seven believed this knowledge wasn't necessary because they weren't the author, and one stated, "Knowing the author's meaning is not the purpose of oral interpretation; it is how you feel about it." Six students replied that they did not have the same or similar interpretations for the following reasons: "No one could do what the author intended;" "The author wrote the piece; therefore, he is an author and not an interpreter;" "No one knows what any author means, and I wasn't there and I do not know who they actually are;" "Each person has a thought as to what they mean;" and "I don't like to do it the same way as the author."

**Discussion**

While some students do perform some kind of literary analysis, this study indicates that that analysis is neither thorough nor as complete as possible. Students may feel that analytical work is not important or intended as part of the forensics activity.

This study reiterates the concern that students are not actively pursuing literary study as a part of oral interpretation of literature in forensics. Students are finding selections without having read the entire literary work, and in this study three of 43 students were handed cuttings by coaches. These students miss a valuable opportunity to discover how their cuttings reflect the whole piece of literature.

Few students are doing research outside of rehearsals, although those who do seem to do a great deal. A large number of students have no idea what the steps in preparing an oral interpretation are and fail to include such basic ideas as theme and knowledge of author's intent in the their outlines of interpretive steps. While one can argue that not being able to identify these steps doesn't mean they didn't take them, this does raise the concern that students haven't thought through the goals of oral interpretation nor have they carefully considered why and what they are doing in their interpretations.

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting results of this study is the number of students who do not know or care what the author intended by selections, nor do these students feel it is important to the interpretive event to attempt to share the author's meaning. While a student may validly argue that their text can stand alone, responses indicated an ignorance and a misunderstanding of the goal and justification for interpretation in forensics. Student comments "I only touch it at tour-
nments," "My instructor thought these poems have some meaning so he gave them to me," "My instructor gives me suggestions about the author that I usually hate and then I do it my way," "I haven't a clue [to author's intent], and I never really thought about it," reflect a failure in forensics education.

Perhaps these misconceptions can be blamed in part on judging practices. As one student put it, "The author was not competing." Maybe the way judges reward and encourage students does create this attitude. However, the problem can't be attributed solely to judging practice. Repeatedly scholars have reiterated the ideals for forensics interpretation and put down beginning guidelines for judges (Holloway, et al., 1983; Murphy, 1984; VerLinden, 1983). Repeatedly these guidelines have been ignored by tournament directors, judges, and coaches. It may be that the problem needs to be approached not from what happens at the tournament, but from what happens before the student ever begins.

For example, Murphy (1984) suggests these resolutions for forensics judging standards in oral interpretation:

1. The interpreter's program should communicate an apparent purpose/justification for the literature selected.
2. The interpreter's program should communicate a motivational link (relevance factor) between the selection and the audience.
3. The interpreter's program should maintain the ethical integrity of the literature.
4. The interpreter's program should display an understanding of thematic development and a sense of continuity in the presentation.
5. The interpreter's program should be delivered using appropriate vocal and physical presentational skills which enhance rather than detract from the literature. (90)

If these are the criteria on which a student should be judged in the forensics laboratory, then these are the criteria which need to be emphasized and taught in the forensics classroom before the tournament ever begins.

Students need to be told and taught to pursue the goals of interpretation in advance. Writing is an act of interpretation (Booth, 1988). Oral interpreters do have a responsibility to know and consider the author's intent, not just how one "feels" about a selection. Students cannot be led into believing that the literary study doesn't matter, even if at times it seems as if judges aren't looking for it.

Coaches must not give students the selections or the analyses. Just as writing a speech for a student is ethically questionable, so is eliminat-
ing a students chance to discover the literature and what it means. In addition, forensics educators should strive to insure that students are reading and analyzing selections entirely and that cuttings are representative of the whole.

Students must be required to do complete literary studies of pieces being prepared for competition. The action caucus report (Holloway, et al., 1983) suggested that perhaps students could be required to turn manuscripts in to tournaments in advance for judges to consider and examine for analyses. While this may not be practical, forensics educators should require students to complete analysis as part of forensics participation, just as debaters prepare briefs and public speakers create their manuscripts.

Forensics educators should consider approaching the writing of introductions as a presentation of literary claims (Swarts, 1988; VerLinden, 1983) and encourage inclusion of criticism and justification in the introduction. This would be an asset to judges and would enable competitors to discover reasons for performance choices and interpretations.

In closing, since this study was not equipped to measure adequately the relationships between size of school and the use of analysis, nor did there appear to be a relationship between having taken an oral interpretation class and doing literary analysis, further research is warranted. In addition, since this study was conducted at only one state tournament, this kind of study should be repeated on a more extensive basis such as across tournaments or at a national tournament in order to validate its results. Likewise, further structuring of questions may yield more precise results. Oral interpretation is a popular forensic event with tremendous potential as an argumentative, communicative and decision-making tool. Scholars (e.g. Holloway, et al., 1983; Murphy 1984) have studied ways by which those criteria could be judged and taught. Yet, those ideals have not reached students. The link between the scholarship and the students must be forensics educators who demand that both judges and students are aware of and use what has been written and debated in order to adhere to the rationale and the reasoning for forensics education of any kind.

References


