INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Strategies for Increasing the Use of Ballots in Coaching Individual Events

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The forensic community has long recognized the central role ballots play in competitive speech activities. The ballot is, after all, the medium through which students receive feedback on a specific performance. In an effort to improve the quality of the feedback, forensics research has analyzed the content of current ballots and tested the impact of ballot form on the feedback content.¹ Much of the concern seems to be with ensuring that the ballot gives adequate justification of the rating and ranking awarded a specific performance. This focus is worthwhile, since improved ballots will better justify decisions on completed (past) performances.

The purpose of this paper is to shift the focus away from ballots as justification of past decisions toward considering use of ballots in improving future performances. Although there are programs in which ballots are disregarded and discarded, there are other programs which operate on the philosophy that careful attention to ballots for past performances is the source of suggestions for future improvements. Even when we adopt this philosophy for our own programs, however, there are practical difficulties which come from trying to adapt to ballot-derived criticism, especially since time pressures generally impede the production of "perfect" (i.e., complete and clear) ballots. At times, the limits on ballot quality may make it appear that the ballot cannot be used well in coaching. However, suggestions in this paper are intended to identify ways of reading between the lines, increasing the utility of ballots as coaching tools. To add specificity to the suggestions, I will draw upon ballots my students received and identify ways we adjusted speeches in response to those ballots.

Improving the sense of audience

After discovering the source of particular ballot comments, it can be tempting to discount the comments from an "inexperienced," "less qualified," or "extremist" judge. The temptation should be resisted, since to ignore or disparage ballots from any writer is equivalent to rejecting the validity of another's perceptions, rejecting the reality of


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multiple perceptions. By treating comments generically, rather than as the product of a specific producer, the coach adopts an assumption that every reaction carries validity. Throughout the course of a year, the ballots begin to represent a composite "universal audience," not just of those most able to make reasoned decisions, but a collection of varied interests in the issues being discussed.

Specific personal comments from judges help the students to develop a clearer image of the audience: they are not all homeowners or parents; some may have lost a family member to disease and will require evidence of a speaker's sensitivity. Students are better able to hone attention devices and appeals for action when they understand the diversity of real audiences.

The additional information critics supply may well indicate their predispositions toward a topic. For instance, when one of our students was competing in a Sales event, selling AAA services, she received several comments from judges who complimented her organization, but suggested that she add references to other AAA services. They also often added a thanks for reminding them to renew their AAA insurance. Only an occasional judge criticized the student's organization, saying she hadn't developed the motives for membership sufficiently or early enough in the speech. Those judges did not suggest mentioning additional services. What became clear to us was that she had two camps of judges: AAA members (who knew all about services, were grateful for a reminder to renew, but felt no need for motivation to join) and non-members. Although the former were in the majority (and were satisfied with the organization of the speech as it was), the latter were an audience which could not be ignored. In this case, reading between the lines helped us accept the criticism of the minority rather than the majority's praise.

There is, of course, a competitive reward for improving the sense of audience. It is outweighed by the educational value of recognizing that every audience member has a right to an independent perception of, and reaction to, the presentation and that responding to the majority reaction is not necessarily the wisest approach.

Repositioning logical and emotional appeals

Long ago, I became aware of the fact that judges' comments on the quality of logos or pathos may indicate a need for reordering, not changing, the appeals. Versions of a student's oration on lobotomies drew criticism of the "too dry and logical" or "too emotional" approaches the student used. Initially, we responded by changing the content; later we discovered that without altering the actual arguments, the student could alter reactions to the speech by reordering the arguments. By the end of the season, we had mastered positioning of the arguments suffi-
ciently to generate comments on the "well balanced appeals." More recently, the strategy was used to improve a speech on medical devices by moving a dramatic opening example much later in the speech where it functioned to create an emotional climax. Indirectly, ballots led us to understand emotional structure as an overlay of the logical structure of the speech.

**Length and placement of comments to reduce ambiguity**

When comments about clarity of ideas, interest factors, or delivery appear on ballots, it is often impossible to tell exactly which section of the speech is being criticized. For instance, the comment, "Be careful about preaching so harshly to us as if we were to be condemned. This only happened a couple of times," leaves a question as to when it did happen (and whether it was a matter of delivery or stylistic choices). The judge who inserts such a comment next to an outline of the speech clarifies the issue. Without that, however, we can interpret the ballot more easily by using cues of comment placement and length. Our interpretation of a comment can change when we notice whether the comment came at the end or middle of the ballot. Length of a comment indicates how important the judge perceives the problem to be and explains the level of distraction while the judge was writing. For instance, if an attention-getting device (or lack of it) gets the judge writing at the time a preview will appear, a student would be wise to add some "pre-preview fill" or take extra pains with delivery so that the preview will not be missed. The student's recollection of when the judge began to write, along with the length and location of the comments, can be helpful in interpreting the perceptions of the judge.

**Adjusting to judges' comments on time**

Seldom did I time individual sections of my students' speeches while coaching them; ballots made us aware that other judges watched watches more. Two ballots at one tournament criticized a persuasive speech when they noted that the speaker had begun to consider solutions when only four and a half minutes had passed. The comments did not identify a need for more development of the problem and seemed to recognize that the speech required a lengthier solution section than most speeches might. The student inserted additional material early in the speech, choosing to increase the level of pathos. Obviously, the speech needed something interesting enough to distract the judges from their watches.

In another case, judges of a rhetorical criticism repeatedly noted the lateness at which actual analysis of the artifact began. In coaching sessions after each tournament, we struggled to identify areas where the introduction and the justification of artifact and tool choices could
be pruned. Never could we find a way for the student to reach the analysis before at least three minutes had passed. By that time, watch-conscious judges had already been distracted. Finally we found a solution. Rather than dropping the preliminary material we deemed critical, the student inserted a preview which, in essence, moved the justification of artifact and tool out of the introduction (since it followed the preview) and into the body of the speech. Although the time allotment was actually unchanged, the anticipation of the audience was altered, as was evident in subsequent favorable ballots.

Discovering a more moderate solution

At times, responding to the specific suggestion of a judge will create more problems than it solves, because any specific change will also alter perceptions of a more general nature. Two examples may clarify the point.

Case one: A speaker analyzed an abortion debate using metaphors to provide insight into the positions represented in the debate. The initial version broke into elimination rounds quite often; judges found it interesting. One judge commented on the oddity of this version, in which the tool (metaphorical analysis) was addressed before the artifact. In an effort to conform with judge expectations, the student adjusted the speech as the ballot suggested: artifact first, then tool. The revised version elicited comments on the "over-used topic." Judges now had a chance to respond to the familiarity of the abortion issue before they could be intrigued by the use of metaphors. Moreover, the ranks were regularly lower. The student switched the order back again, but prepared to defend the uniqueness of the approach.

Case two: A student giving an informative speech on McGuffey's readers used no visual aids except an actual copy of one volume of the readers, held up early in the speech. Judges suggested incorporating visual aids, which the student did. Then judges viewed the visual aids as unnecessary and distracting. When the student experimented with eliminating not only the visuals, but also the actual book, the calls for visuals ceased. Holding up the book had created a predisposition to expect visuals. In both cases, the real solutions to the speakers' problems lay in something short of what the judges suggested as a remedy. By reading between the lines, the coach and student can use ballots to discover the spot where a problem exists and invent their own solution to the problem.

Incorporating judges' lines in revision

Not only did my students and I read all ballots they received, but on occasion, we also "plagiarized" the ballots, a process the students fully enjoyed. For instance, one judge reacted to a rhetorical criticism with,
"Woo, Wait a minute. You've told me 'how' and 'what,' but what about 'why' and 'with what effect.'" The student transformed the comment into the following transition, "So far, I've described what the speakers did. Now, let's consider why and with what effect." The transition was subsequently refined a bit, but the initial adjustment was useful. In another case, the frequently asked question, "But what can we learn from this analysis?" became the transition into the final point of the criticism. While this strategy is more a matter of rereading lines than of re-reading between the lines, it is undoubtedly a use of ballots different from what the judge had intended.

Conclusion

For students involved in forensic competition, the pay-off for paying attention to ballots can come on future ballots. One of my students received a ballot which began, "Basically, see my comments from last week," but ended, "WOW! Sounds better this time!" The ballot reflected the pleasure of a judge who felt that he or she had been listened to; it also made both coach and student feel that the week's work had been on target and worthwhile. I was probably as proud of that comment as I was of any student's success, for it indicated that for our program, tournaments were not intended as trophy collection events, but as places to test ideas, learn from the ballots, and adjust the messages.

Most of us can identify with the frustration of hearing a speaker a second (or more) time who has not responded to our criticisms, even through we are certain that our judgments were astute and our suggestions clear and easy to adopt. It is equally likely that we have worked with students frustrated with ballots which (they are sure) are not quite accurate and not possible to use. They are willing to throw up their hands and change topics. They may throw out the ballots. The frustrations of both ballot writers and ballot readers can be eased when ballots are accepted for their real value. The key principle is this: the ballot writer may not be right about how to solve the problems in students' speeches, but they may be right about where there are problems. The role for coaches, whose experience and insight are greater, is to help students interpret the ballots, to read between the lines, use their own judgment, and enjoy the process of helping students tinker with their speeches.

Notes