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An Inductive Approach to Communication Analysis

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Alumni Challenge

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ALUMNI CHALLENGE: *Forensic alumni can be a tremendous to individual programs and the activity as a whole. While we commonly ask alums to judge at tournaments or maybe even speak at a year-end banquet they don't get many opportunities to address the entire forensics community. Through our "Alumni Challenges" Speaker & Gavel offers our alumni an opportunity to speak to the forensic community. We encourage them to challenge us to re-examine, re-envision, and possibly re-invent the way we operate as a community.*

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Forensics can be a perilous place to break with molds and traditions. Not least among the perils of forensics are the numerous little norms that, if violated, mark one as a newbie or not a competitor from the better sort of program. I recall that one of these was the unwritten rule not to take notes in individual events. I always broke this rule, especially in Communication Analysis (hereinafter CA), because I felt I could not learn from (or size up) my fellow competitors if I did not make notes about their speech. Unfortunately, the deeply conservative mood that legitimates such "unwritten rules and performance practices" also affects our understanding of the events themselves (Kelly, Paine, Richardson & White, 2010, p. 38). For instance, to alter the form of an event, unless one comes from a nationally competitive program, indicates that one does not understand the practices of the forensics tribe.

As I recall, in CA this sometimes took the form of condemning persons who used generic models, such as Burke's pentad. I cannot actually recall, even from the worst forensics tournaments, a competitor who did not even have a model. But I am sure if there had been such a competitor, they would have quickly learned of their mistake from a ballot. The model is so deeply integrated into CA, that I think we have forgotten that the beginning of any CA is not the model but the artifact. After all, what competitor ever found their CA topic by rummaging through a journal until they found a good model to apply? But from listening to CAs, as I did frequently, you might get the impression that the artifact was ancillary to the application of the model. I have since come to realize that the reliance on a model in CA places certain limits on the intellectual development of competitors through the event. So, as a challenge to the community, I want to briefly discuss the limits imposed by the model-based structure in CA, attempt an explanation of their origins and propose an alternative way of doing CA that would improve the event.

A Constraining Structure

In form, the CA that I wrote my sophomore year was identical (e.g. in how it approached the event) to the CA that I wrote my senior year. In terms of the intellectual work required, there was not that much to challenge me when writing the speech. Like some other forensics events, CA lacks tiering. That is to say, the event remains essentially the same from the day you enter your first tournament with your first speech until you perform for your final time at nationals your senior year. This is particularly a problem with the platform speeches, though it may also impact the other events.

Aside from the possibility of some students getting bored and quitting the event or even forensics, there is also a pedagogical problem. That problem is that upon mastering the event as it is commonly done, students inevitably plateau. I am not suggesting that there are no benefits to performing in the third and fourth years, but that the benefits diminish the further one goes with an event. This is even more so the case with CA. Because unlike the other platform speeches, the form of a CA is absolutely rigid. In the other platform speeches, one can choose to approach the speech using different patterns, but there are no similar options in CA. The rigid structure has become our way of inventing the speech—not unlike the trend in nineteenth-century rhetoric to substitute arrangement for invention (Rowan, 1995).

While I do not want to argue for the abolition of the current structure—model, application, implications—I do want to suggest that there are other structures that more advanced students can adopt. The most limiting factor with the current structure is its reliance on the model. In the current structure, the model guides most of the analysis and is privileged (at least in comparison to the artifact). Of course, the model exists because students new to the art of rhetorical criticism (as embodied in CA) need a set of ideas to help them analyze an artifact. In that sense, it serves a very valuable purpose. But for students who have already learned about some communication theories and their associated terms, the model limits the development of their analytic creativity.

While one might be able to find a model to fit every artifact in existence, at some point, one should move beyond the need for models and learn to analyze the artifact on one's own terms. (After all, this is how rhetoricians generate models in the first place). In any case, the ability to look at a communication artifact and understand how it functions is more fundamental than the ability to apply a list of criteria to the artifact. And ultimately, CA should be a vehicle for making students into citizen-professionals who can make critical judgments and theorize about artifacts for themselves. But the current structure places a ceiling on the development of students, making them an immobile intellectual underclass within the communication discipline. In order to empower students as budding rhetorical critics, I think we ought to consider an alternative approach to the current CA structure that is widely used. In the next section, I will briefly sketch the origins of the

model-based approach to analysis and argue for its alternative, the artifact-based approach.

Origins of the Model

The history of rhetorical criticism as a disciplinary practice dates back to the 1920s, when Wichelns first described an approach to criticizing speeches that involved applying a heavily condensed version of Aristotle's rhetoric to speech artifacts (1925). Wichelns spawned a school of critics who would become known as the neo-Aristotelians (Bryant, 1958). Eventually, the neo-Aristotelians were roundly excoriated for relying too extensively on their oversimplified version of Aristotle as an approach to analysis. Black wrote of their approach that it was "seriously compromised as a critical system" because it required the critic "to yield to the judgment of…[the] theories [that] guide him" (1965, p. 56).

Instead of a single pseudo-Aristotelian model, the new critics simply used models derived from a diversity of sources (e.g. Foucault and Burke). From the rejection of the Aristotelian model, the contemporary approach to rhetorical criticism was born. In its nativity, that approach involved the use of ideological models to critique artifacts and so deconstruct the oppressive social systems that created them (Wander, 1983; McKerrow, 1989). This approach still dominates the journals today (Medhurst, 2015). Though the new critics replaced the old and more models were admitted as authoritative, ultimately, as Leff puts it, little changed except "a substitution of new moulds for old ones" (1985, p. 378). And Black's criticism of the neo-Aristotelians remained applicable to the new critics—their judgment was constrained by their use of models.

Reliance on models is all too common in academic rhetorical criticism (and communication theory) and so in turn it is pervasive in the event created to mirror that academic practice. But an alternative exists to the model-based approach to rhetorical criticism. In rhetorical scholarship, it is a marginal practice. The chief proponent of this view, Leff, argues that criticism should focus on "the rhetorical action embodied in particular discourses" and not on "theoretical constructions" (1985, p. 378). In other words, the artifact ought to be at the center of a rhetorical criticism, not the model.

A New Mold for Communication Analysis

As an alternative to the model-based or deductive approach to CA, I want to propose an inductive, artifact-centered approach to the event. Instead of following the traditional structure, an inductive CA would have: a description of the artifact, a research question, an analysis of the artifact and an implications section. The challenge in the first section is for students to correctly identify salient features of the artifact to describe. The purpose is to identify those features of the artifact that are relevant to the analysis undertaken in the second point of the speech.

In the analysis section, there are two objectives. The analysis should 1) establish certain generalizations about the rhetorical function(s) of the artifact and 2) offer some proof that these generalizations are valid. If a student were, for instance, analyzing the ever-popular visual artifact, the analysis section would be an appropriate place to identify the rhetorical elements used by the artifact (such as visual metaphor or visual irony). Of course, an analysis is not limited to identifying rhetorical figures at work. One might also connect the artifact to a wider genre through comparison to other artifacts or highlight how the artifact constructs a view of its audience (constitutive rhetorical criticism). But none of these forms of analysis will be as rigorous as their counterparts in academic rhetorical criticism. Other approaches could include a biographical treatment of the author (a neo-Aristotelian form of criticism).

The analysis section is the most substantially different portion, in that it allows the student to analyze the artifact without a list of criteria to look for provided by the model. This is not to say that the student will analyze without using any theory—just that no one theory or model will guide the analysis. Instead, the analysis will be driven by those elements of the artifact that make it worth investigating. Common terms and ideas such as 'visual ideograph' or 'constitutive rhetoric' may still be employed, but only insofar as they reveal something about the artifact. But instead of relying on the connections suggested by a model or theory, the student would be required to generate such connections on their own and offer some kind of evidence to substantiate them.

The last point of the speech, the implications, does not differ all that much. But instead of identifying rhetorical elements, this section should use the rhetorical elements identified to generate broader conclusions. For instance, the implications section is the place to point out that a visual metaphor identified in the second point actually constructs harmful power relationships between the viewer and the creator of a visual artifact etc.

Conclusion

I do not propose the artifact-centered, inductive approach to CA as a complete replacement for the model-based, deductive approach. I think the two can co-exist in the same space, fulfilling different functions. There are certainly cases when the artifact analyzed is a very good example of a particular rhetorical theory or when the competitor wants to explore the implications of a rhetorical model. In such cases, it is more appropriate to follow the current CA format. But these uses will not account for all cases. By accepting an inductive approach to doing CA, the community will open up opportunities for competitors in CA to develop an even more nuanced understanding of the art of rhetorical criticism. So in a way, my proposal for an inductive approach to CA challenges the community to make the event more intellectually challenging and rewarding for competitors.

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