

Playing it Safe as Pedagogy: Finding the Conventional Wisdom in Convention

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Introduction

As forensic educators, I know we are supposed to love all events equally, but one event escapes my comprehension. Rhetorical criticism is like rhythmic gymnastics to me; I can appreciate its verbal dexterity but I always feel like I am missing something. So when a successful coach of the event let me in on a secret, I was grateful. Explain the tenets so people feel like they understand something; don't shy away from complicated terminology but relate it to concrete examples easily grasped. Explanation through comparison a la Aristotle, this made sense. Yet when I suggested this technique to a student in front of another coach, I was told that this is just a convention of the event and should be avoided. My confusion became compounded. Crafting a rhetorical criticism is still a mystery to me, but now I am unclear as to the relationship between the unwritten rules in public address, which should be avoided, and the techniques in rhetoric that comprise effective speech writing. Whatever they may be called—unwritten rules, conventions, norms, cookie cutters or formula—these patterns of behaviors have figured prominently in forensic discourse over the years. At their best, these norms are understandable, providing a uniform code for judging and standards for performance (Mills, 1983). At their worst, norms are nothing more than "unwritten formulas established by coaches, judges and students" used to ensure "winning" (Gaer, 2002, p. 54). Not surprisingly, forensic educators have differing views of these unwritten rules. Paine (2005) observes "new coaches" "tend to place more faith in the value of the unwritten rules" whereas more experienced coaches "seem to become less attached to the redundant patterns of standardization and grow more open to experimental choice" (p. 85). Many educators might find themselves faced with a "love them or leave them" choice, either accept the rules or fight against them.

Unfortunately, unwritten rules do not care if they are liked or not and do not seem to show any indication of leaving the activity in the near future. Therefore, an alternative framework to these pesky guests should be considered. Rather than villainizing conventions, we can look at them as an educational opportunity whereby students can explore elements of communication not strictly related to message construction. This is in no way a paper to defend their existence. But given the amount of time spent discussing the matter in journals, conferences, and even last Developmental Conference, the issue is becoming divisive enough that to take a side, either for or against them, is almost an unwritten rule itself. Perhaps, by examining our relationship with these unwritten rules, we can come to a more holistic understanding of message construction and, in effect, hold a mirror up to our own communication patterns. To explore the conventional wisdom in conventions, this paper will attempt to investigate the ways unwritten rules can hurt and

help our overall educational goals as well as suggest some practical ways we can dialogue about them.

Pedagogical Perspectives

Perhaps many of the difficulties I have concerning convention come from my own educational path. As an art and film student, we were asked to examine successful works to ascertain their effectiveness. In film, borrowing a successful technique is called homage. In art, conventions and norms are considered technique, and assignments are structured to refine technique, such as painting with the pointillism style of George Seurat or integrating primary colors and line weight in the spirit of Piet Mondrian. This is line with the types of pedagogy utilized in rhetoric studies. Lauer (2004) outlines the four types of rhetoric pedagogy, including romantic (which avoids direct instruction), imitation, practice (daily exercises done without context), and artistic (provide students with strategies and give guidance through creation). The strategies range from the experimental to the rule governed. Current discussions about norms tend to rail against the later, especially in regards to stifling creativity. Yet, letting students write without direct instruction forces them to rely on native talent, which moves us away from the inclusionary aspect of forensics that is so commendable. And while letting students experiment each weekend would be ideal, it does raise issues of fiscal and temporal responsibility. Can we justify the time and money expenditures in relation to our administrations and to other members and events on the team? Thus, discussions regarding norms and conventions can reveal our own pedagogical approach and aspects of our own coaching philosophies

The dark side of convention

Those who find fault with convention do so for good reason. As Paine (2005) observes, "unwritten rules possess tremendous power, functioning to separate the 'in-group' who know and follow the rules from the 'out-group'" (79). To a group of individuals who choose to write speeches against inequality and abuses of power or in defense of marginalized groups, the idea of a power imbalance can be particularly offensive. Objections to conventions generally fall under several common themes.

Conventions encourage competition

Perhaps our greatest fear is that convention prioritizes competition at the expense of all else. The dichotomy between education and competition is one this community struggles with repeatedly. Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) openly critiqued forensics, suggesting that "while forensics typically has been promoted as an educational activity...forensics is, in reality, highly competitive" (p. 12). With the goal of a successful season in mind, many fear that students "tend to take the path of least resistance. If a competitor is able to model a 'winning' speech, it is assumed that the competitor

has what he/she needs to win” (Ribarsky, 2005, p. 21). Consequently, the norm becomes perpetuated as students copy what has done well rather than making choices appropriate to their own performance. Yet this may be a simplification of the competitive and educational process. Did the convention win because it was a convention or because it taps into a core communicative process? Do students imitate a norm because it is successful or because they personally experienced the effectiveness of the strategy? Could then the act of imitation be a conscious choice?

Conventions discourage innovation

Because conventions represent a pattern of behaviors prevalent in forensics, the resulting concern becomes the loss of innovation in the activity. Gaer (2002) observes, “When we talk education, we must not forget that creativity and open expression of ideas are the foundations of what creates new and innovative theory and advances our disciplines” (p. 55). Because convention represents an often imitated choice, the consequence must be a loss of creativity. “While some students may attempt to take minor performance risks within event norms to separate themselves from the competition, few students truly seek out innovative performances that challenge the unwritten rules of performance” (Ribarsky, 2005, p. 20). Yet could the imitated behavior be a stepping stone to a truly innovative idea? Could what is considered a minor risk represent major new skill acquisition for a student? How do find what’s innovative without having norms to contrast it against?

Conventions hamper educational objectives

With our Aristotelian roots, we take pride in our educational role. In public speaking especially, the components of message construction—topic selection, research, and writing—all represent valuable skills that must be taught rather than relying on the presence of inherent skills. Yet the existence of norms represent short cuts, ones that chip away at a core educational beliefs, namely that knowledge must be earned. As Kay (1990) suggests, “we have lost sight of the fundamental goal upon which our activity is based – providing a laboratory in which students learn about human communication through experimentation and critique” (p. 63). Given that the conceptualization of forensics as a laboratory is common; could students be experimenting with norms? Do norms give students insight into the ways people process messages? Could use of some norms free students to experiment with other aspects of message construction?

Conventions lack real world application

Since graduation usually marks the end of a forensics career and the beginning of a “real” one, norms potential impact on the applicability of message construction in “real world” settings could be considerable. Ribarsky (2005) suggests that as forensics continues to rely on a limited set of presentational formats, we become unable to develop and utilize other equally acceptable formats. Consequently, the ability to adapt to more diverse audience is restricted. Kay (1990) goes a step further, critiquing the way individual event competitors and coaches have advanced the notion of a uni-

versal audience, where individuals in a round represent everyone and no one. “If we buy into the conclusions generated by argument fields research—that different fields involve different argument standards—then the universal audience concept is inadequate and fails to contribute to sound pedagogical experience” (Kay, 1990, 67). This sentiment is echoed in Hinck’s 2003 article where he observes Swanson’s concern that conventions “reflect a disconnection between the audiences in our tournaments who value unwritten rules and the audiences of our students’ future communities who expect personalized responses to communication transactions” (p. 64). Yet could teaching students to recognize patterns of behaviors in forensics train them to look for communication norms in other settings? Is it even possible to prepare students for every “real world” speaking situation? Would they be better served by reimagining the idea of a universal audience?

Convention as an educational opportunity

Unfortunately, easy answers do not exist for any of the questions posed in the previous section. Not all norms can, or even should, be treated equally. For example, in the interpretation events, the first person perspective could be detrimental. Important aspects of performance are not being taught when the student veers away from other types of literature. Yet, in public address, specific techniques often get singled out as undesirable even though they represent solid technique. A pun in the preview demonstrates creative and vivid language attempts, but is rarely looked on favorably by judges. Yet, generic statements, as in “the problems are twofold”—which could belong in any speech in the room, seldom garner attention. Compounding the issue, public address is meant to be written by the student. Building upon what the student can see and experience gives the student more ownership, especially given the fact that many forensicators are not communication majors or budding rhetoric scholars. Yet, technique without a theoretical foundation is empty instruction. It is in the best interest of the student and the coaches to understand why conventions emerge if we are to utilize them as an educational opportunity.

Conventions can make competition manageable

As a subjective experience, competition can be frustrating. Message composition has many facets, and not every judge weights these components the same. Consequently, final round participants change from weekend to weekend. This uncertainty can take a toll on students and even coaches. Yet as Paine (2005) points out, “the more these decisions appear to abide by a mutually accepted body of rules or norms, the easier it is to make and accept the decisions that are made” (p. 81). While we, as educators, may take issue with the nature of the norm, they do provide a means for students to process tournament results, thereby enhancing their own self-efficacy. Borrowing a construct from Bandura’s theory of social cognition dealing with people and control, DiRaimio and Payne (2007) define self-efficacy as a “confidence in one’s ability to organize and execute a course of action required to attain a goal” (p. 677). The more out of control an individual feels in a situation, the more likely they are to

experience a negative emotional state. Rather than feeling “not good enough to break”, norms create order out of the confusion of competition and may even suggest courses of action for “next time”.

Conventions can conceptualize innovation

Frequently cited as a forensics’ goal, innovation remains a nebulous term for me. It implies invention, yet to create something new or novel that is also effective, ethical and educationally viable seems daunting, especially in public address, which has so many of its foundations in Classical Rhetoric. In 20 years of collegiate forensics, large scale innovation such as finding a new organizational structure or a novel form of proof has yet to manifest itself. The exciting innovations seem to occur in topic selection, or Invention as outlined in the Canons of Rhetoric. Ironically, experimenting with Invention is also considered a convention. As Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003) suggest, “The unwritten rules for public address, such as having a timely but not-too-well-known topic and making each informative speech personally relevant to the judge” (p. 17) occur frequently. Yet, significance statements represent good ethos. Finding the “not-to-well-known” topic is a function of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, shortcutting central processors whose counterarguments would interfere with message comprehension. Perhaps this is the inherent dichotomy of innovation; change is not perceived the same by all. Discovering that humor can be an effective rhetorical device in a persuasion or getting to write a speech about taboo topics like sex and religion can be exciting to a student but mundane to an experienced judge. Innovation becomes harder to achieve the more immersed one is in the activity. If we can separate norms for solid speech writing, innovation may become easier to recognize.

Conventions enhance educational objectives

As Paine (2005) points out, “Very few of the unwritten rules are purely capricious - essentially all of them develop a worthwhile skill...Thus, learning the rules can promote the acquisition of an array of educational goals” (p. 82). While teachers and coaches of forensics generally have some background in communication, the same cannot be said for all forensics students who come from a variety of majors and disciplines. As such, understanding norms has repercussions in both a student’s general skill acquisition and message construction.

First, learning through convention may be better suited to some learning styles. Burton (2007) suggests that the observation of successful speaking or writing needs to precede an individual’s own speaking or writing if one is to improve those skills. As educators, we have the responsibility to move students through imitation to genesis. O’Rourke (1996) observes this practice was heavily utilized in early rhetoric studies. Through imitation, students can learn techniques they can employ elsewhere. Later, amplification, changing a speech’s content while retaining its form or changing a speech’s form while retaining its content would be applied. Through imitation, a student can investigate is-

ues of invention, arrangement and style simultaneously. While this technique may not be suitable for everyone, imitation of norms could provide students a means to integrate abstract information taught in the classroom in a practical and meaningful way.

Conversely, decrying a norm without taking into account the reason for its existence could hamper educational goals. Discussions about convention usually boil down to the topics that get used (invention) and the organizational patterns that get used (arrangement). However, Burton (2007) suggests that when invention and arrangement are in competition, rhetoric can get reduced to style alone. The result is what Hauser (2004) terms “rhetickery”, or the practice of using rhetoric without regard to its ethical dimensions. As educators and judges, it becomes imperative that we remain focused on what students say and not just how they are choosing to say it. As Hauser (2004) argues, “The test of rhetoric is not its ideological commitments, but its consequences.”

Conventions have real world application

While engaging in the forensics walk or a three point speech may lose effectiveness in the classroom, they do represent patterns that can be adapted in the “real world”. Moving around a room can keep the whole audience engaged and not just those sitting in front of a speaker. Like telephone and social security numbers, people tend to remember complex info when it is grouped in three’s. In this way, training students to look and explore norms prepares them to examine those that exist on the job and in society once they leave their institutions. LaMaster (2005) contextualizes conventions as “a set of discursive constraints that each speaker must discern and navigate, meeting the audience’s expectations in some ways and exceeding those expectations in other ways” (p. 32). Teaching students that every situation has its own set of expectations and training them to look for those behavioral cues that go unnoticed by many fulfills a tenet put forth in experiential learning, “help students learn how to learn, rather than merely acquiring facts and procedures” (Sellnow, 1994, p. 9).

Putting the education into convention

Forensics is a culture unto itself, and convention is merely an implicit message system that allows us to identify ourselves. As such, it can be seen as a tool to carry out larger educational objectives, but first we need a pedagogical approach to dealing with these unwritten rules. Several options exist. First, as Hinck (2003), Paine (2005), and Ribarsky (2005) all suggest, we need to discuss the existence and limitations of norms with our students. However, research did not reveal how to conduct this conversation. When faced with situations requiring an individual to choose the skill best appropriate, Weaver (2007) suggests Strategic Flexibility. This process allows us to examine our “communication repertoire” or our “collection or stock of communication behaviors” to find the most appropriate (p. 29). The first step is to anticipate. Rather than react against an idea, realize potentials situations, or speeches, may need certain

components, including norms. Second, assess or take stock of the factors, elements, and conditions of a situation. We can discuss with students the demands of a topic, argument, or their own personal goals with the speech. The third step is to evaluate, determining fact based and realistic outcomes from choices made. Is the student prepared to move forward with a choice knowing that it could be negatively assessed by others? The fourth and fifth steps are selection and application, with an eye towards the impact of the choice, including any ethical ramifications. Is this a technique that if imitated by others, reflects sound speech writing and ethical concerns? Finally, outside judges and coaches help achieve the last step, reassess and reevaluate. Is this speech accomplishing its goal? If not, we can start the process over again. Strategic Flexibility allows us to examine all techniques in a student's arsenal, including norms, and gives them a voice in their implementation or exclusion.

Another popular suggestion to navigating norms centers on how we, as critics, compose our ballots. Hinck (2005) advises using a ballot to help a student improve by noting what was good and what may need improving, noting, "Choosing this orientation...is satisfying when the ballots written by judges fulfill our expectations for instructive comments; where the comments demystify the rankings and ratings, and provide students and coaches with suggestions for improving students' performances" (p. 68). Further, Paine (2005) observes, "Judges can only evaluate the performances they see" (p. 86). While the comment refers to the fact that norms must be challenged to be seen, it also could apply to judges who are trying to coach competitors to fulfill their own likes and dislikes because sometimes our expectations of norms can color our expectations. Last year, none of our After Dinner speeches used hypothetical situations as attention getting devices. Yet the expectation of the norm was enough that students still received ballots admonishing them for doing so. Granted, half a sheet of paper doesn't always give us enough time to fully explain ourselves, which is why I enjoyed a piece of history I discovered as a graduate student. In the late eighties, spiral bound books were put out that contained not only the winning speeches from various nationals but also the extended comments of the judges who ranked them. As a new coach, these were exceedingly educational, allowing me to see what choices represented solid technique and which were perceived as ineffective given the context. Perhaps such transparency could be made possible again.

Finally, we can recognize that imitation is an educational tool itself. Paine (2005) touches on this notion, suggesting an "apprentice" system is in place, where students must demonstrate they have certain skills before we "let" them break norms in competition. This system of imitation and amplification closely resembles the progymnasmata used in early rhetoric education. Progymnasmata is a set of exercises, escalating in difficulty, meant to gradually add skills to the repertoire of a speech writer. Sigrell (2003) observes an increased interest in the use of progymnasmata in today's rhetorical pedagogy because they stimulate "reflection over

the impact of the language choice for our opinions and actions" and do "not wasting time and energy to reinvent the wheel" (p. 4). Corbett and Connors (1999) characterize the progymnasmata as "one of the most influential teaching methods to arise from the rhetorical tradition." As forensic educators, we are fortunate that we are not limited to twice a week classes to develop a student's skill; we can gradually introduce them to more complex ideas over time rather than trying to create a perfect product in a single semester. This might also lead us to reexamining the audience not as a blank universal slate but as a group of individuals trying to master a specific set of rhetorical skills. As a result, both students and educators would be forced to evaluate the speech as a whole to determine if it involves good use of reasoning and evidence as well as containing stylistic devices that others could imitate.

Conclusion

The dangers of conventions are irrefutable; they can be a barrier to education and creativity as well as cast unwanted emphasis on competition. But as with most elements of forensics, they are not quite clear cut villains on the verge of destroying our institution. Classical Greek and Roman rhetoricians taught students strategies to initiate discourse, to explore lines of argument, to gather supporting material and to create ethical and emotional appeals (Lauer, 2004). These are still worthy teaching objectives and demand us to look at the whole of the product as opposed to the part. After all, examining a painting only by its brush strokes diminishes its overall power. Perhaps this is true of our perspective on our students as well. Our time with them is really only a brushstroke, but capable of some amazing final product. Forensic students tend to be civically engaged, participate in politics, assume leadership positions, and have higher self confidence, productivity, quality of life, self motivation, and emotional maturity (Billman, 2008). And I bet some of them even understand rhythmic gymnastics.

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