

"I Got All Stupid Judges:" A Pedagogical Reframing of the Ballot as Friend, Not Foe

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Abstract

This paper will focus on ballots as pedagogical tools and discuss how we (and our students) can get the most out of them. It is easy for many students to become overwhelmed by the varied and disagreeable comments—or lack thereof ("Good job! 5-18")—they receive from judges, leading them to argue with ballots, rather than engage in constructive dialogue with them. This paper does not ask students to literally talk to their ballots; rather, it seeks to enable us to better serve our students by helping them find a more healthy and productive understanding of the ballot, its intended purpose, and how to effectively interpret and integrate the messages within.

Introduction

During my first semester as a graduate forensic coach, I witnessed something that literally made my jaw drop. We had just returned from one of the first tournaments of the season. I had looked over ballots and was in the process of handing them back to students. There were the typical murmurs and moans as the students—both energized and frustrated by the feedback they received—began poring over the blue half-sheets of paper. Suddenly, one of them let out a loud sigh, crumpled up her ballots, and screamed through gritted teeth, "I GOT ALL STUPID JUDGES!" It was her second tournament. *Then* came the part that really bothered me: she threw her fistful of ballots in the trash and stormed out of the room.

When I reflect back on this experience, it is not the boisterous insult that stands out as being particularly egregious. I can understand a student letting off steam in dramatic fashion—I am, after all, a forensic coach. It was neither her volume nor tone which earned her a place in this paper. The part of this story that burns in my memory is the moment she threw her ballots away, as though they contained nothing of value.

As a new judge who had just spent the better part of a weekend pondering and meticulously scrawling my heart and brain onto such sheets of paper, the reality of this situation hit me particularly hard. How many students like her were out there? How many of the ballots I had so carefully crafted would face a similar demise? Initially, one might respond, "Not very many. I would never tolerate this type of behavior from a student." Surely, the example I shared is extreme; yet, it is important to remember that there are many other routes—however passive—which lead to the same destination. A student never receives their ballots. Another does, but neglects to read them. Yet another looks at them only to see how long their pieces are running. After all, by the time they are caught up on homework, there is no time to make revisions before getting back in the van and heading off to another tournament. In other words, passive neglect of ballots is just as wasteful as actively disposing of them. Our students do not have to physically crumple up

their ballots and throw them into a waste receptacle to arrive at this outcome. It stands to reason, then, that as educators, we should be as concerned with the figurative act of throwing away ballots as with the literal one. In both cases, these pedagogical tools are not being allowed to fulfill their intended purpose: to communicate judges' observations, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes about a given performance.

Outcomes

The message I seek to convey in this paper is much easier in theory than in practice: if we want our students to take their ballots seriously—and we should—then we must lead by example. We must be willing to set aside our preconceived notions about particular judges or judge characteristics, conceal our deeply-rooted stereotypes and event expectations, and camouflage some of our longstanding personal biases in order to foster our students' personal development as thinking performers. As both judges and coaches, we must approach each and every ballot as an opportunity for student growth, sacrificing some of our own self-righteousness for the sake of pedagogy. (I never said this would be easy!) Only then can we expect the students within our activity to do the same.

Who's Opinion Matters?

By its very nature, forensics is an insular activity. We see and interact with many of the same individuals, weekend after weekend and at nearly every tournament we attend. As a result, it can be easy to develop expectations for how the many variables will play out. We make assumptions about coaches, judges, and competitors, and often, it takes an act of Larry Schnoor to convince us otherwise. Surely, it is only natural to try and reduce uncertainty by identifying and making predictions about as many variables as possible; however, it is important to consider the ways in which this tendency limits our growth as educators, as well as the growth of our students. One of the most common ways this scenario plays out is when a student is judged by someone whose opinion they or their coach do not value. Renz (1991) acknowledges this, stating, "After discovering the source of particular ballot comments, it can be tempting to discount the comments from an 'inexperienced,' 'less qualified,' or 'extremist' judge" (p. 167). I would add to this list a judge with whom we or our students have had negative experiences, either in or out of rounds. One of the most common examples I hear is the student who says, "I had this judge before and they hated me." Such a statement reflects not only an overly personalized reading of the ballot, but also a larger tendency to pigeonhole judges into being either for us or against us. While it is tempting to discount ballots written by individuals whose influence on our students' speeches we would prefer to limit, this "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 multiple perceptions" (Renz, 1991,

pp. 167-168). This brings up an important question: when it comes to ballots, whose opinion matters?

It stands to reason that, as coaches, we should encourage our students to review their ballots with the same care and respect we would like our own ballots to receive in the hands of the students we judge. Just as we feel we have valuable insight to share as judges, so too do the individuals judging our students. The idealist in me would like to believe that everyone's opinion is equally valuable, and that each and every judge will provide our students with significant feedback. However, like many within the community, I am adept at silencing this voice. Thus, I propose a compromise in which we approach every ballot as though it has the *potential* to offer us something worthwhile—regardless of who wrote it or any other circumstances—while understanding deep down that some ballots will be far more beneficial than others. It is my view that a strict good/bad dichotomy, when applied to ballots, leads coaches and competitors alike to disregard many ballots containing potentially important and meaningful feedback.

What Constitutes a “Bad” Ballot?

I feel it is time to make an important admission: I am not so naïve as to believe there are no bad ballots. They exist. We have all seen them. That said, I propose a much narrower definition of what constitutes a bad ballot than the one embraced by most people within our activity. For the purposes of this paper, I contend that this negative label is only applicable to ballots containing flagrant errors, no content, or material of an offensive nature. Judges make mistakes. Many of us have perhaps seen ballots where the student's name does not correspond to other details of the ballot. (An example might be a comment which reads, “I liked the part where you fed the cats,” written on the ballot of a student whose piece has nothing to do with animals.) Obviously, written feedback about someone else's piece is of no use to the student whose name appears on the ballot. Another example of such a ballot might be the result of a judge who does not understand the ranking and rating system, perhaps ranking a round backwards. While there may be no way of knowing for sure when such an event takes place, the result is a ballot that does not convey the judge's actual intent, thus potentially invalidating the overall effect of the ballot.

The second type of bad ballot I will address is the blank or nearly-blank ballot. As both a competitor and coach, I have consistently found empty ballots to be the most irksome. “Good job,” one might read in its entirety. Combine this with a low rank and you have yourself one extra delicious dish of student frustration. Such ballots offer neither competitive nor educational benefits, yet remain the most common type of bad ballot.

An offensive ballot, on the other hand, might contain *too much* information or comments of an inappropriate nature. Again, many of us can think of examples of such ballots, on which judges fail to properly filter their comments through a constructive lens, resulting in statements that are insulting or offensive to competitor, coach, or others. There is some

gray area here, but I am speaking specifically of ballots containing comments that would be universally viewed as obscene, offensive, or inappropriate. A relatively tame example might go something like this: “This speech sucks so bad I want to poke my eyeballs out.”

I am well aware that this understanding of bad ballots is narrower than the definition most—if not all—coaches and competitors adhere to. It is easy to apply this label to a wide range of ballots that we do not see serving their purpose; however, such an approach leads us as coaches and students down a slippery slope of dismissing any ballot we disagree with. Certainly, many a ballot will contain individual comments which could be dismissed as bad, but it is important to keep in mind that these ballots may also contain a variety of useful comments laden with helpful information. One bad comment does not void an entire ballot. We must be careful to not discount ballots simply because they contain one or a handful of individual comments we find disagreeable. Constructive and useless comments can, and often do, coexist on ballots.

Helping Students Get the Most out of Ballots

The implication of this conservative understanding of bad ballots is that most ballots—and far more than is typically believed—contain at least *something* of value to our students. As such, one of our top priorities should be to help our students seek out those bits of insight. I propose a goal for us as educators to help our students develop not only greater appreciation for the feedback they receive at tournaments, but the ability to sift through a variety of comments, read between the lines, reflect critically, and implement changes they feel will strengthen their performances. These are learned skills with educational outcomes, and as such, teaching them should be a top priority.

This is not to say that our students must adhere to every bit of advice they get on a ballot; nor does it limit our role in the coaching process. In fact, I would contend that this proposal asks for quite the opposite. It asks *more* of coaches by encouraging us to present ourselves not as inerrant authorities on all that is good, but as opinionated individuals in a fluid activity, who are still open to new ideas and recognize that we have much to learn. Having begun my coaching career as one of several coaches who shared responsibilities for all events, I have witnessed the frustration of students faced with contradictory advice from multiple credible sources. From this experience, I came to understand the importance of framing my coaching advice as an opinion. I would present my case to a student, so to speak, explaining as best I could *why* I felt the way I did about a particular bit of advice, but reminding them that they had ultimate control over their events. Not only does this approach provide students with a much needed sense of ownership over their pieces, but it promotes critical reflection by engaging students in the decision-making process and encouraging them to always reflect on information, regardless of its source. This approach to coaching is not always easy, but the pedagogical benefits are difficult to overlook.

Reframing the Ballot as Friend, Not Foe

With our newly refined notion of what constitutes a bad ballot and the accompanying belief that all other ballots have the potential to contain truly beneficial ideas, we can now get down to the true goal of this paper, inherent in its title. As educators, we must help our students develop and maintain a positive relationship with their ballots. This relationship must be rooted in respect and the desire to improve, not just as competitors but as thinking performers. Our students must learn to regard the ballot not as an opposing force which is to be debated and discarded, but as a friend with whom they may share constructive and thoughtful dialogue. In other words, they should develop a friendship with their ballots, recognizing that they will still have differences but expecting primarily good things to result from the partnership.

A fulfilling student-ballot relationship is not easy to come by. Consider a student who is running four events at a two-round, two-flight swing tournament. Even if they advance to no final rounds, they will receive written feedback on sixteen performances over the course of two days. Sixteen ballots, four per event, can equate to a lot of opportunity for reflection and heightened understanding on the part of the student. Surely, some of these ballots will prove more helpful than others, but the point is that there is an abundance of feedback available to our students, feedback from a larger audience of individuals with unique talents, expectations, experiences, and expertise. These individuals are eager to provide feedback, and for students seeking to hone their skills, this feedback should be regarded as a gift of friendship.

A Note on the Value of a "Hired" Opinion

This issue ultimately boils down to a matter of perception. While I am not so bold as to claim expertise in the fine art of open-minded-ballot-reading, I can say with certainty that it is a worthwhile goal, and one I plan to actively pursue. As coaches and mentors, it is natural for us to want ultimate control over our students' educational experiences. We all have our own perceptions of the activity and its goals, and we go about accomplishing these objectives in different ways. Obviously, we will follow the pedagogical path which leads most directly to the specific outcomes we desire for our students. Yet, no matter how much we think we have it figured out, we must never lose sight of the democratic nature of our activity. Forensics is not just about reaching individuals, but about reaching entire audiences of individuals. Thus, any coach or student who claims to have all the answers is neglecting the very blood which pumps through the forensic artery. If we are to claim that forensics has benefits which extend beyond ourselves, then we must make sure our activity retains its relevancy. The fastest way to lose this is by devaluing all opinions removed from our own belief system.

Moreover, our students reflect our ideals. Thus, it is imperative that we lead by example in our efforts to promote positive student perceptions of ballots. One common situation

we encounter, which serves as an excellent example of how we can adjust our own perceptions to influence our students, is the way in which we regard hired judges. As forensic insiders, it is easy for us to think of hired judges evaluating our students as less than ideal. I, too, was guilty of making this association between contentious ballots and hired judges—that is, until I became one. There is nothing quite like moving a thousand miles out of your district and having no team affiliation to change your view on "hireds." Every time I wrote "X" on a ballot next to my name, I faced the reality that my twelve years in the activity were obsolete. My currency was no good in this new place.

This is an experience I will undoubtedly take with me as a coach, one who will again have the privilege of writing a school affiliation on my ballots. I will encourage my students to think of their unaffiliated judges as they would student competitors—unfamiliar does not equal bad. In fact, we should value this outside perspective as it keeps us in touch with reality by providing a much-needed dose of "real world" opinion. Renz (1991) touches on this by noting the value of the minority opinion:

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. (p. 168)

Rather than discounting the ballot of an unaffiliated judge, we should remind our students (and ourselves) that the goal of forensics is to build skills that will serve our students long after their brief stint of eligibility has expired. If those who succeed in our activity fail to succeed out of it, forensics loses its practicality and becomes a purely competitive forum. By thinking through issues such as this and sharing alternate interpretations with our students, we are encouraging them to keep open minds and promoting a healthier student-ballot relationship. This is just one example of how we might successfully shift student perceptions in a more positive direction.

Student Application and Advice for Forensic Educators

As educators, there are additional approaches we can take and tips we can pass on to our students which will help them capitalize on the benefits of an open-minded approach to ballots. Again, I will hold to the friendship analogy, identifying four facets of any healthy friendship that I feel are particularly relevant to the student-ballot relationship. The following are things we should encourage our students to do: keep an open mind—every judge, every round; avoid taking ballots personally; read between the lines; and approach each ballot as an opportunity for positive personal growth.

First and foremost, just as friends must keep open minds when interacting with one another, our students must take a similar approach going into every round and when reviewing every ballot. If students do not perceive a judge to be credible during their round, they will be less likely to re-

spect that judge's ballot. Thus, we should remind students that different judges have different processes and perspectives. Some write during a speech, some after. Some write a lot, while others can make an ink pen last a decade. Students need to be reminded that even if they think they know what a judge is thinking or writing, they may well be wrong. I have heard stories of judges eating meals, falling asleep, running out of ink, not watching the speaker, sifting through other ballots, and so on. This reflects more on the judge than it does on the student's performance. Frankly, some judges do not make very good audience members; yet, it is wrong for students to assume that they know how such behavior will affect the outcome of a round or the keenness of a judge's insight.

Furthermore, we must remind students that each round is different, and judges frequently change their minds about a given performance from one day to the next. Aside from giving students a more positive outlook for the round, this way of thinking promotes the pedagogical understanding of the value of live performance, in which new circumstances *should* make each performance unique. Students have nothing to lose by approaching each round with an open mind; on the contrary, they are likely to have a more positive experience by focusing on the one thing they can control—themselves.

This open-mindedness leads directly to the second key, which is to avoid taking ballots personally. As in all true friendships, the advice students receive in rounds should ultimately seek to help them. As such, this should be the underlying understanding going into their interactions with friends, or in this case, ballots. While honesty is not always the easiest thing to hear, it is the shortest path toward enlightenment. As competitors, then, we must encourage our students to interpret their ballots pedagogically, rather than personally.

As matters of interpretation are concerned, it is also imperative that students learn to read between the lines. In our face-to-face interactions with friends, we have a host of subtle cues to consider beyond the verbal text exchanged. Similarly, when reviewing ballots, students should be willing to *search* for meaning. Renz (1991) points out that “[b]y 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” (p. 170). Judges do not always know exactly how to articulate their thoughts. Rather than disregarding comments which are seemingly unclear, students will benefit far more if they situate themselves in the seat of the judge and attempt to garner clues as to what the judge may have meant by a particular comment as it relates to the ballot as a whole.

Finally, we must encourage our students to approach each and every ballot as a chance to improve their performance

by adapting to feedback from others, a necessary skill in just about every aspect of life. In relationships, jobs, classes, and the like, students will constantly be faced with feedback—both positive and negative. It is how they adapt to this feedback that determines how much they will be able to grow as individuals. The same is true within forensics.

In the end, there is a direct correlation between the quality of the written feedback our students receive and the opportunities they have for growth. Along with reconsidering the ways in which we read ballots, I would urge us as forensic educators to do the same for the ballots we *write*. While this paper is primarily concerned with the ways in which we interpret ballots, it is worth taking a brief moment to reiterate our other role in this process—that of critic. In addition to helping our own students find meaning in the words of other judges, we are responsible for providing the feedback that our colleagues will help their students interpret. It is with this in mind that we must remember to hold ourselves accountable for the ballots we write. This paper is not the forum for a detailed description of what I (or anyone else) see as the ideal ballot. Rather than arguing for specific components or proposing guidelines, I will opt for something much less formulaic but equally identifiable. As forensic educators, we should strive to write ballots we would want our students to receive.

Conclusion

One of the most beautiful things about forensics is that it allows students to give dozens, or even hundreds, of performances for audiences large and small. It demands that students not only create and invent, but recreate and reinvent, again and again, each time in a uniquely intimate space. Over the course of the competitive season, a student may collect hundreds of ballots. These ballots are an essential component of our students' personal development, as they provide written feedback from judges of all different backgrounds and experiences. As Renz (1991) states, “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” (p. 168). In this way, ballots have the potential to change not only speeches, but the students giving them. They impact our students' development as competitors, but more importantly, they have the power to make our students better thinkers, scholars, performers, and people. It is our job as forensic educators to make certain that our students are learning to take full advantage of these abundant tools.

Reference

Renz, M. (1991). Strategies for increasing the use of ballots in coaching individual events. *The National Forensic Journal*,