

Rationale for the Event, "Teaching"

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Abstract

Our paper intends to introduce a new limited preparation event called "teaching" to the forensics community. By combining traditional rhetoric with the modern art of teaching, our proposal seeks to shed light on a rhetorical vision of education. We want to move beyond conventional teaching styles to emphasize a greater understanding and comprehension between the teacher and the student. Now, more than ever, education needs rhetoric. Rather than learning a specific piece of knowledge, students should have access to a rhetoric-based education that involves critical thinking and productive arguing. The activity of forensics is rooted in rhetorical education, and consequently provides a forum to promote this nuanced style of teaching. Therefore, this paper will provide the basic rhetorical and educational background to justify the event "teaching," offer an explanation of how the event will unfold, and describe how the forensics community will benefit from the proposed event. Rhetoric and education have long been intertwined. As, scholars, teachers, and students, it is important that we nurture this combination, so that our community may benefit.

Introduction

The tradition of rhetoric has long been wedded to the arts of education. For instance, as Takis Poulakos and David Depew write, the early school of Isocrates provided a powerful counterpoint to Plato's critique of rhetoric. Modern educational theory can draw upon the insights of the Isocratean version of "civic education" as "reflective, aesthetic deliberation [introduced to] the discussion of rhetorical training and practice" (Poulakos & Depew, 2004, p. 4). From this standpoint, education is a matter of fostering self-reflection, an urge to debate topics to achieve greater understanding, and commitment to the duties of civic life. From Quintilian to Booth, this rhetorical vision of education has been honed; and in all fields—from mathematics to literacy—it carries relevant insights. This stance on education moves beyond the traditional, Aristotelian emphasis on a speaker engaging subjects; rather, it moves now into the critical literacy theories of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, treating "teachers as students and students as teachers" (Poulakos & Depew, 2004, p. 2). Teaching, from this standpoint, becomes an ethnographic art, in which teachers must directly engage the audience, check their comprehension, and help them learn to be autonomous learners.

Now, more than ever, education needs rhetoric. Teachers and students can become better advocates against the threats of economic disparity and poor conditions for learning through awareness of rhetorical theory; but this is not enough. Curriculum itself needs a heavy dose of rhetorical revitalization. As Wayne Booth has observed, a litany of legislators and misinformed educational reformers have

become obsessed with setting academic standards, deciding that each and every student must know this or that piece of knowledge (Booth, 2004). The result is that education becomes less didactic, relying on a vision of students as receptacles for teacher knowledge; the interactivity of education is lost. As Booth puts it, "teachers [are] being forced to stress regurgitation of daily fact-menus, rather than critical thinking and productive arguing" (Booth 2004, p. 94). As education becomes rooted in the push for "standards," and teaching becomes a matter of preparing students for assessment (or worse, the market), teacher education becomes focused on psychological and corporate pedagogical perspectives. Less time is spent concentrating on the educational moment: when the teacher stands before the students and attempts to engage with them, motivate them, and generate within them a love of learning.

Forensics, as an activity rooted in the tradition of rhetorical education, can provide a forum for teacher education programs to better aid future educators in this more nuanced style of teaching. However, in its current iteration, the events concentrate too largely on the "performer/audience" model of rhetoric: wherein the speaker does not ask questions of the audience dialectically, but rather unveils knowledge in as stylistic a way as possible. While these events certainly help future teachers (particularly limited preparation events, where the spontaneous and extemporaneous style of education is used), clearly they do not go far enough in challenging didactic models of education.

To this end, we propose the creation of an experimental event. The event would be called, quite simply, "Teaching." It would be a limited preparation event in which students have thirty minutes to prepare before speaking. The objective is for students to prepare an engaging, student-centered lesson to present in seven minutes. This is a basic explanation of how the event would unfold:

- 1) The speaker, as in extemporaneous speaking, receives the "topic" on which they must present a lesson. The topic will include a bundle of information sufficient for planning a seven-minute lesson. Competitors will also receive a "grade level" to target the lesson toward; they will be expected to engage their audience as they would that level of student. Topics could include:
 - a. An excerpt from a literary text the competitor must help the audience interpret and understand, presented to a tenth-grade class.
 - b. An explanation of the food pyramid, presented to a third-grade class.
 - c. An explanation of the water cycle, presented to a seventh-grade class.

- 2) During their half-hour preparation time, speakers would prepare a lesson. Unlike other events, which stress a rigid structure of delivery, in this event extra emphasis would be placed on the speaker's ability to adapt to the information given. The structure should differ from speech to speech every bit as much as the structure of a high school teacher's lessons. If the host school's computer access permits, students would be encouraged to prepare worksheets or printed materials to give out to the audience during the course of the seven minutes.
- 3) During their lesson, competitors will be encouraged to "break down the wall" that normally separates them from their audience. They must ask questions and explain information in a tone and style that fits the given grade-level. Checking audience perceptions and encouraging audience members to actively participate in the construction of new knowledge are fundamental to this step; the competitor should emulate an interactive classroom lesson. Competitors and audience members can enact several other traditional classroom strategies that are inexplicably taboo in other forensics events:
 - a. Competitors may write on the chalkboard to break down a concept.
 - b. Competitors may ask the audience to take out a pen and paper and write something down (and reprimand audience members who forget to bring a pen and paper "to class").
 - c. Competitors may move around fluidly.
 - d. Audience members are allowed to interrupt the speaker and ask for clarification, another approach to an issue, or simply to ask questions. They are to take on the role of students of that grade level.
- 4) Judges are to evaluate on the following criteria:
 - a. Above all: How well would a student, of the listed grade level, have understood the given concept?
 - b. Did the speaker engage with audience members, answer questions well, and avoid an overtly performance-driven model of teaching?
 - c. Did the speaker adhere to more traditional speech concerns: delivery, content, and understandable progression through information? Was the speaker energetic, enlightening, and inspirational?

If these guidelines feel familiar, it is not just déjà vu: these are precisely the standards that we hold ourselves to as coaches and teachers in our own classrooms. The rationale behind the event is therefore clear-cut. It is an event specifically designed to train teachers in the most practical way imaginable: by doing. It is no coincidence that this event resembles the "sample teach" often required by educational employers and organizations like Teach for America. From a competitive standpoint, success in this event would easily translate well into resumes and anecdotes in job interviews. From a practical standpoint, the event would foster in future teachers—on both the K-12 and collegiate levels—the intellectual nimbleness, interactivity, concision, and lesson planning prowess demanded by the field.

For forensics, it would finally offer a way to escape the relentless rigidity of events that have been roundly criticized for their reliance on unwritten rules, formulaic structures, and disconnected performances. Moreover, by injecting a decidedly education-centered influence into the activity, the existence of teaching as an event would undermine the activity's notorious emphasis on competition. Crucially, it would provide forensics coaches the ability to extend a hand into teacher certification programs, offering future teachers a hands-on environment in which to test their skills. The result could be expanded interest in the activity, a bridge between Departments of Communication and teacher certification programs, and a greater diversity of attitudes regarding what forensics represents. Finally, it would reconnect the skills of teaching with the wisdom of rhetoricians, helping to undermine the growing corporate influence on education with a promotion of hands-on experience between teacher-students and student-teachers.

In a small way, it could help make education about what it is meant to be about: people connecting with one another.

References

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