Thoughts on Limited Prep: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

The formulaic nature of the limited preparation events is keeping many of our students from accomplishing the learning objectives of public speaking. Simply changing judging paradigms will likely fail to prevent these formulas from winning in the future because, to some extent, they are based on applying sound practices in a simple way. However, the abuse of these formulas is leading many students to learn detrimental speaking habits. This paper attempts to discover new ways of approaching the limited prep events in order to develop methods for better educating students through the most commonly applicable speech genre.

Introduction

Nearly every coach would agree that the knowledge gained from participation in the limited preparation events should be the most applicable to daily life. The ability to clearly articulate thoughts when the time is right without the need for lengthy preparation could be the difference between making the best of a moment and missing an important opportunity. For most people, these moments to speak can be incredibly nerve-racking. However, in theory at least, those students who regularly participate in the limited preparation events should be able to quickly find the courage, steady mind, and calm demeanor that is necessary to give an outstanding speech in almost any situation. Unfortunately, this may not be the case due to the way the unwritten rules of our activity have shaped public speaking in the minds of our students. I could not have seen this more clearly than when one of my students decided to compete in an oratorical contest at Indiana University Purdue University of Indianapolis during this past season. The tournament was developed so that students from the school could compete alongside speech team students in a final round before the speech tournament's awards ceremony. The judges were made up of university faculty and leaders from around the Indianapolis community. The oratorical contest consisted of three IUPUI student finalists who competed against each other and then the top three students who competed in the speech team side of the contest. The purpose of the contest was for students to give speeches about how to resolve some form of conflict in the world. The IUPUI students used PowerPoint and gave solid speeches, albeit other than the young woman who won, they had many fallacious arguments. The speech team students on the other hand, incorporated strong argumentation and solid delivery. Of the finalists though, it was apparent that my student was out of place. One of the three students used the persuasive speech that he performed at the tournament earlier, one student gave a very intelligent extemporaneously delivered speech on conflict resolution theory with a very natural delivery style, and my student gave what would have been an incredible extemporaneous speech in competition. The student who gave his usual persuasion was not very competitive on the national circuit despite having a wonderful speech. I attribute this to the breaking of forensics norms in his speech. He spoke on a topic that many had used that season, his delivery was less polished, and his speech had significantly more pathos than a typical competitive persuasion. The judges of this final of course didn't know speech conventions and loved the speech. This student won. The student who took second gave a very natural speech, moved all around the stage, and would have never been successful with his speech in collegiate competition. He cited ancient Chinese leaders and classical approaches to conflict resolution. I don't believe he cited the specific date to any source and his only current source was from a paper written by an instructor of his. Despite this, his speech was still impressive and well received. My student however, gave what many in our activity would call a long extemporaneous speech based on the formula he usually followed. He used a large number of current sources and he spoke on a topic that few had heard about before, the bombing of Christian churches in south Asia. He also delivered the speech like a polished nationally competitive speaker, just as he did in his national semi-final round of persuasion and national semi-final round of extemp the year before. His largest flaw of course was not adapting to his audience. His judges found the source citations to be too lengthy and distracting along with his delivery being too stiff and unnatural.

The purpose of writing this lengthy story is to do two things: to demonstrate how the speeches that our top students develop, especially in the limited prep events, are at times indicative of poor public speaking habits; and to show that we can teach our students to adapt. Shortly after placing third out of three in that final round, I spoke with my student at length about what he did well and what went wrong. I found myself continually saying, "Well, in competitive speech yes. You do that to adapt to your audience. But in actual public speaking…," and then I immediately questioned why I wasn't calling what our activity does, "actual public speaking".

Coaches speak to each other at length about how our forensics norms can develop poor speaking habits. Many of them have also argued that this development of norms is a natural part of the activity and any changes we make will simply lead to future norms and competitive formulas. Moreover, many also argue that adaptation to these norms is healthy for the learning process. I agree that certain norms are certainly beneficial for students to learn. However, I argue that due to the inevitable development of norms, a regular refreshment of speech events is necessary to cultivate the construction of new approaches to our activity, both at the level of the individual speech and as regards the educational value of the forensic experience as a whole. I believe that we, as educators, have watched the formula for success surpass our

ability to accomplish our learning objectives. Therefore, we must assess both what we see as being detrimental to those objectives and possible ways we can improve our activity.

While I would love to discuss every genre of our activity, I think that the limited preparation events are the most vital to analyze first, given that they are the most commonly applicable to life outside of the activity. At future developmental conferences I will be happy to discuss the other genres if no one else does so at that time.

My approach to this topic was a simple one. I decided to brainstorm about problems with and solutions to limited prep and ask everyone who is listed on the Individual Events Listserv to brainstorm about problems and solutions as well. As it turns out, many of us have felt the same way about the limited preparation events for a while (right now I can imagine many long-time coaches' responses of sarcasm after that statement). While the problems brought up with the LP events were often similar, the possible solutions were usually quite unique and at times seemed so obvious after thinking about it. For example, Dillon White suggested that we host all of our limited prep events in random casinos in Las Vegas (D. White, personal correspondence, July 28, 2010). While it was not an obvious suggestion, it was certainly unique.

The purpose of this paper is not to solve the problems of the limited preparation events overnight. Rather, it is to foster another discussion at the best place for it to happen, this year's developmental conference. I hope that by briefly discussing some of the problems with limited prep, and then showing some of the arguments involved with specific potential changes, we can shorten our discussion of the topic and actually decide on something that makes *most* of us happy.

The Problems with the Limited Preparation Events

While I most certainly will not be able to express all of the problems with limited prep here, this attempt will touch on some of the most commonly discussed issues.

Impromptu Speaking

1) Students don't use the language of the quotation provided and have weak links to the thesis (Pape, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
2) Speeches are being canned. Students are memorizing short speeches and adapting a quotation to fit (Copeland, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
3) Most students leap to an obvious answer which leads many speakers to say the same thing as others in the round because the Agree/Disagree format takes away from a unique thesis. Quotations are the problem (Melendez, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
4) Quotations overlap and students can and do reuse examples (A. Duncan, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
5) Depth of analysis has become the exception rather than the rule. Fast prep times, smooth delivery and humor are often rewarded at the expense of depth of analysis. (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

Extemporaneous Speaking

1) In extemporaneous speaking, the predominant structure has become the 3x1 simply because students have been taught that this is what is supposed to be done (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
2) Cross examination is not a mandatory factor in ranking the final round (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010).
3) Students are not utilizing live access technology when this is likely the way they will prepare extemporaneous speeches outside of the activity (Lauth, 2007).

Some Potential Solutions

Impromptu Speaking

1) Coaches can teach students how to link their thesis to the quotation better. Deano Pape suggests that as an experimental component, a slip of paper should be attached to impromptu ballots stating that the ability of the student to evaluate the quotation as written should be a factor in the judging decision (Pape, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

While it seems obvious that coaches should teach students how to link their thesis to their quotation in an effective manor, at least in my opinion we are asking too much if we expect students to do well at this every time. This step in argumentation is a difficult one. I have found that students are usually quite adept at determining what a quotation means. However, explaining "why" it means such a thing can be difficult to impossible for some students under the pressure of an impromptu speech. This is why in most circumstances we should, and I believe do, reward those who do this well. I believe that Pape is indicating the need to use the specific language as a means to assure that the student is better able to understand the linking step. This would help students find the ability to articulate the "why" part of the link in a way that allows the connection to the thesis to become clear.

Regarding the experimental aspect, I think this would be a great idea for future research. However, many may be reticent to include such a statement on all ballots. As Preston (1992) explains the distinction between extemp and impromptu, in impromptu it is important that students use a metaphorical or indirect response to a quotation by creating their own thesis. I think many would agree that impromptu should be on topic; however, it should not be a literal discussion of the topic. For example, if a student were given the quotation "Happiness is a warm puppy", most of us would prefer not to hear a speech on happiness or puppies. However, a speech on why we should care for those things that are more delicate than ourselves would be acceptable. The challenge, of course, is showing how such a thesis links to the quotation by using the language of the quotation.

2) When evaluating canned speeches we must realized that there will always be canned speeches in impromptu or at least sections of canned material. The word "canning" carries a strong negative connotation to many coaches. This is why some tournaments have developed alternative prompts to help reduce this tendency. Kristopher Copeland explains that he once ran a tournament where the round one prompt was a quotation, round two was an object, round three was a cartoon and the final round was a scenario. He found that this was confusing for some students but others had no trouble handling it (Copeland, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

This use of alternative prompts seems as though it would reduce the ability of canned speeches to be as competitively successful. It would also allow for more creativity in analysis, something that has been discussed on numerous occasions. Some organizations already give prompts in such a way. However, in order for such a change to really take hold around the nation, the NFA and AFA-NIET rules or practices would have to change in order to encourage most local tournaments to follow suit.

3) Many students may select the obvious thesis. As Tanya Melendez explains, certain quotations lend themselves to obvious answers and many students quickly run with this approach. Melendez suggests that in order to alter this, alternative prompts should be used. She notes that objects, values, words, or photos would be an alternative that would force students to develop a unique thesis. She also notes that at least once during the SNAFU season there will be quotations that are context related such as items from that week's news, celebrities, or headlines. This requires that students have some understanding of how to relate to the context of the quotation in the speech. Melendez argues that if a student creates a unique thesis the rest of the speech will likely be better as well (Melendez, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

The major downside to such an argument is one that I later questioned Melendez about. If the link to the thesis is so important in order to determine if a speech is canned and this prompt is so relative that the link can be very creative, this will make it easier to can speeches. Melendez responded by explaining that the ability to construct a quality thesis and the link to that thesis should make the thesis clear and applicable. She explained that good students of limited prep should be able to do this. Melendez explained that if all the parts of the speech support the thesis and the link is clear, the judge is put in a tough spot even if he or she disagrees with the interpretation. In her opinion it is much more important that a student constructs a unique thesis because a well constructed thesis will make everything fall into place (Melendez, personal communication, July 28, 2010).

4) As has been discussed previously, quotations do overlap and students will reuse examples. Aaron Duncan explained that one solution to this could be to do what Craig Brown does at the Kansas State University tournament. They ask questions like, "Who would you put on the $10 bill?" or "What one skill would you be sure your child had?" Duncan explains that this is an effective means of breaking the formula of forensics. (Duncan, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

This could be an effective means for moving away from the impromptu formula. While it would still be important for students to develop some form of structure to answer questions similar to these, it would also force students to rethink what impromptu is. That discussion would be quite important to the activity. Similarly, this form of response would be much more applicable to the lives of students outside of the activity.

The downside to such a prompt is that it becomes much like extemp in the literal form of the answer. If we really are searching for a metaphorical approach to the thesis, this may not be the best way of accomplishing that goal. However, it is difficult to deny the pedagogical value in such a prompt. It is for this reason that alternative forms of impromptu, such as editorial impromptu, have intrigued many in the community. We will have to ask ourselves how much value we find in the metaphorical approach before such adaptations are adopted.

5) In order to improve the depth of analysis in impromptu, Michael Chen suggests that we adopt some of the rules of certain high school leagues. He notes that in Illinois students are given two full minutes of prep time before six full minutes of speaking time. Chen explains that this would have three major benefits. First, it would make it easier for novices to handle impromptu. Second, students could spend more time developing stronger analysis and could experiment with structure. Third, the time would allow students to utilize more "sophisticated examples" (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

While many might argue that students can still use two minutes of prep time if they so choose, this then forces the student to sacrifice time that could be used to develop more in-depth analysis. A change in the rules of prep time does seem warranted. However, a change such as this would require the support of NFA and the AFA-NIET in order to become the national standard.

Extemporaneous Speaking
1) The increased prevalence of the 3x1 unified analysis structure has been noticed recently by many coaches around the nation. M. Chen believes that this may be the case due to the teaching of the structure at high school camps around the country. This structure is easier to teach in a short amount of time and is also the standard at the high school level. These students later become collegiate competitors and then collegiate coaches. Chen notes that there is no elegant solution to this problem (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

Perhaps this issue can only be improved by the continual push to have students structure their speeches in the way that best accommodates the overall argument and supporting material. It is also important that judges refrain from writing on ballots that students should use one structure over another unless the judge can explain why the specific structure would be a better fit in that situation.

2) Many individuals in the forensics community are in support of cross examination in extemp. Michael Chen argues that the pedagogical benefits outweigh the costs (Chen, personal communication, July 26, 2010). Many individuals agree with this assertion; however, it certainly creates logistical challenges. I am strongly in support of a cross examination period. However, perhaps the best argument for or against cross examination that I have heard was explained by Jessy Ohl in, ironically, the cross examination period of the final round of the AFA-NIET in 2009. After being asked what he thought about CX in the final, he said that it seemed unfair that a student could give an outstanding extemporaneous speech in the same way that he or she did to get to that point, but then face a situation in which one small miscue in that period could cost the student a national championship, even though the actual speech portion was the best in the nation. Since hearing that statement I have agreed with Jessy and I know that others in the community feel the same way. The simple solution would be to add CX to every round of extemporaneous speaking. I find it problematic that, in essence, students are competing in a different version of an event in the most important round of the AFA-NIET. If that is what we want extemp to be, we should make it that way.

I would also note that at the 2010 Developmental Conference on Individual Events I spoke to Jessica Furgerson, another competitor who was in the same 2009 AFA-NIET Extemp final round as Jessy Ohl. She was adamantly against CX because of the unfair advantage it gives men and because of the way college CX differs from high school CX. She argued that the college style is often overly aggressive and questions are asked that attempt to simply make another competitor in the round look unintelligent. She persuaded me to believe that questions should be proposed by judges rather than other students. In a final round with five judges this would allow for a variety of questions that were not malicious in nature. (Furgerson, personal communication, August 6, 2010). In the same way, I am unsure of the need for cross examination by students in extemp because this is already a significant pedagogical tool of Lincoln Douglas debate.

3) Live internet access for extemp is a difficult topic to propose due to the challenging logistical issues that it gives rise to. However, few students in their post academic future will have a large filing system at their fingertips that they have presorted for the purpose of answering a question. The much more likely scenario is that students will need to hurriedly do an internet search shortly before giving a speech. In this scenario, it is vital that students learn how to quickly search through and filter information. As Taylor (2002) and Voth (1997) have argued in the past, we need to continually utilize technology in our speeches if we want students to learn how to utilize such technology in the future. If we do not, we will not be adequately teaching our students. While it may still be years away before schools have so many computers available that this could be achieved easily, it is important that we keep searching for ways to accommodate live access in a fair manner. Many years ago students were all given the same library at a school to look through. I see no reason that students should not be given one online database to research from, other than logistical concerns that one day will not exist. The best argument I have heard is that filing is incredibly educational. However, with nearly all schools using electronic filing that requires few students to actually read the articles, this argument is becoming less impactful every year. I believe that soon the pedagogical value of live access extemp will outweigh the benefits of the status quo. We need to look for logistical solutions now so that when that time comes we will be able to accommodate every student in a fair way.

Discussion

We can use the limited prep events to do a better job of fulfilling our pedagogical mission for our students. We can make changes that increase creativity while still teaching students to develop a solid structure in their speeches. We can also deter students from taking the unethical approach to limited preparation speaking that leads to canning. The solutions that have been proposed here may be the way to do just that or maybe there is an entirely new solution. However, there are a few things to keep in mind.

First, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This sentiment was expressed by John du Bois when he noted that an attempt to change impromptu in a way that eliminates the use of structure will likely result in speeches that simply confuse an audience (du Bois, personal communication, July 27, 2010). This concern is well taken, and we must keep in mind that many individuals, including the writer of this paper, love the way impromptu and extemp work right now. However, this doesn't mean that we should be afraid to alter it in minor or major ways if that helps to improve the educational value of the activity.

Second, we need to be very careful when complaining about the canning of speeches and we must be especially sure not to accuse students of canning without being absolutely sure first. Simply reusing an example over and over does not constitute cheating if the example is used in a different way every time. The Star Wars series, for example, could be used one hundred different times in unique ways that all act as proof for an argument. The same can be said for countless examples. The mark of a good limited prep competitor is the ability to describe examples in a way that supports a thesis which has been tightly linked to the quotation or question. Nearly all of the great limited preparation competitors will use unique examples in nearly every speech because that specific example best fits the argument he or

she is trying to make. Furthermore, simply because a student gave an amazing speech with a poor link to a quotation does not constitute prima facie proof that that student presented a canned speech. Some students are simply amazingly good. However, even these students make mistakes and such accusations can unfairly damage the ethos of students in a way that they may never recover from in forensics. We must remember that these are simply students who are trying to get better and the limited preparation events, especially impromptu, can scare almost anyone into making mental hiccups.

Third, we need to consider what the rules actually are before ranking students and before making wholesale changes to any event. Allow for creativity first and then rank based on the final product before making assumptions based on the unwritten rules of the activity. The same can be said for making decisions about the way we run our tournaments. Joe Cozza explained that rule changes may not be worth the likely multi-year process necessary. Instead, he argues that the easiest and fastest way to refocus an event like impromptu into an event that is more in line with the values of the activity, would be to make it align with the actual rules. Impromptu topics at NFA are supposed to be "short excerpts dealing with items of general interest, political, economic, and social issues" rather than "a short quotation". Cozza believes that adapting to this description will allow for interesting, political, social, and philosophical arguments to be formed. He believes that we should address the ways these rules were originally written (Cozza, personal communication, July 26, 2010).

It is unlikely that changes to the prompts/structure of impromptu speaking or the addition of cross examination in extemporaneous speaking will cause us to lose any educational benefits. However, these changes have the potential to make improvements that many of us could be thankful for decades from now. Thank you to all of the students and coaches who helped me with this paper by responding to a simple e-mail. It was very much appreciated.

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