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What are We Doing?: An Argument to Change a Name

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Abstract

Despite years of heated debate over the relevance and future of the oral interpretation events, our performances have evolved to an extent that the definition of oral interpretation no longer applies. In an effort to address the necessity of a change in the name of the largest genre of events, this paper details the separation of title and practice in interpretation before offering a solution.

Introduction

There are few things that are more compelling than a poetry program that has been marvelously constructed and performed. In one of my poetry courses in college, the best lesson I took away was how two words when placed side by side can force the mind to construct new thoughts and meaning, much in the same way that placing the word “Hitler” with “mustard” is very different than placing “mustard with baseball”. The world of forensics has developed a method of performance that is at times enlightening because of our development. This is the case with our use of programming to construct new meaning through the combination of poems in the same way that a poem combines words. In a sense, students can easily create their own greater poem through performance. Some of the most ambitious performances have begun with a simple goal to communicate a single thought to an audience. Many theorists argue that such a transmission is impossible, that no one will ever be able to really think the exact same thought as another. However, in our search for such a seemingly ridiculous goal, we have created a form of art that is unlike any other.

In a poetry writing workshop in graduate school, a well accomplished professional poet and my teacher was quite impressed by what poetry performances can do when the forensics mold is applied. In the same way, the teacher of my oral interpretation class during my freshman year loved the way I incorporated a book into my performance. Unfortunately, she only allowed students to perform one poem or one work with only minimal “cutting” of the work, meaning that I couldn’t perform the script I used in competition. When trying to explain what competitive oral interpretation was to this teacher, I quickly discovered that either she had not kept up with the current state of oral interpretation or what I performed on the weekends was something entirely different.

Later in my academic career, as I began to learn more about the study of performance, I realized how incredible and unique our performances of literature really are. We have found a way to develop creative and at times deeply emotional experiences for our audiences. This new connection to the performance can literally change the lives of members of the audience if done well. And for most forensics educators,

this is our exact goal, to help foster the voice of our students so that they can shape the world around them for the better.

In so doing however, we have strayed from the word that is in the name of nearly half of our events, “interpretation”. Many would argue that students have moved out of the realm of oral interpretation when they perform home written material, do not introduce each selection of a poetry program, pantomime, use literature to construct a performance rather than performing what is in the form of the literature, as well as countless other things many of us may love and hate.

Rossi and Goodnow (2006) describe how interpretation has evolved in forensics to the extent that it is no longer oral interpretation. Rossi and Goodnow argue this by pointing out many of the contemporary and historical definitions of oral interpretation; detailing the way our activity differs from this traditional definition based on the literature we use, our process of developing a performance, our performances themselves, and the way we evaluate performances; and then finally offering some solutions.

There are many aspects of the work by Rossi and Goodnow (2006) that I disagree with, such as the insinuation that much of this evolution happened in order to win trophies rather than as a search for a better way to leave the audience with an impactful experience. However, the most important conclusion of their discussion is salient. The larger field of oral interpretation must change, our activity should revert back to oral interpretation, or we should simply change the name of our events to “performance”. Rossi and Goodnow argue that this would be the simple and honest way to keep the unique art form that we have created as well as to foster the development of our performances in the future.

This would be a relatively simple change that more accurately depicts what we currently do. It would also align us with more contemporary scholarly work in communication. Performance Studies is a blossoming field with immense opportunities for research. Unfortunately, many of the scholars of communication no longer view “oral interpretation” as a contemporary and developing field. This was no more evident than when I was searching for doctoral programs in performance studies and was told by numerous individuals at one top program, “We no longer have a speech team because the faculty here believes forensics is dying and we should let it die.” Perhaps that is only one institution; however, few institutions are developing new oral interpretation departments.

Many might believe that a slippery slope in judging will occur if this change were to happen because performance is so relative. However, subjective judging is how this activity

works. Besides, at least in the past eight years, I have never seen a ballot with constructive comments that would no longer be valid with a simple name change. I see few negative ramifications that we can not work through as well as positive benefits. I do not see this as any major change, simply calling the events what they really are. Rossi and Goodnow (2006) have done a wonderful job depicting the negative ramifications of maintaining the status quo and I suggest that each of you read their work.

I like what our students do right now. They use the works of past authors and maybe their own to graft together a unique and creative experience for an audience. No matter the event, students should be learning how to express their own voices through their ideas and the ideas of others. This is the foundation of critical thinking. Students analyze literature to find as many meanings as possible that can come from it. They then use that meaning to bring light to something in the world that others had never seen so clearly before.

Rossi and Goodnow (2006) illustrate the changing role of literature and authors in contemporary forensics by describing them as “colored media that the oral interpreter mixes and applies as he or she sees fit in the rendering of an original artwork” (p. 49). They argue that students are treating literature as if it is “a tube of cadmium blue” (p. 49). As educators we have to ask ourselves a simple question, do we want students to show us the paintings of others, or do we want to hand them a brush and let them paint?

At the 2010 Developmental Conference on Individual Events

After this proposal was made to the interpretation division at the conference and the issue was discussed, the group decided to propose that the name “Oral Interpretation” should be changed to “Performance of Literature”. Nearly all of the larger body at the conference supported the change as well and the proposal was approved.

Reference

Goodnow, T. & Rossi, M. (2006). Interpreting interpretation: The future of the art of oral interpretation in its most popular venue-forensics competition. *National Forensics Journal*, 24(1), 43-59.