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A Proposal for the Re-Categorization of Interpretation Events

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Background

I began to seriously consider the need for this proposal in 2009 when the AFA-NIET National Committee was faced with evaluating a potential violation of the rules related to Dramatic Interpretation

(<http://www.mnsu.edu/cmst/niet/minutes/November09.htm>).

The violation centered on differing interpretations of what texts are included within the parameters of the event description. In response to the controversy, many called for a revision of the Dramatic Interpretation event description in hopes of making it more specific, thus preventing future disputes. My assessment of this, as well as other more regional controversies, has led me to believe that many of the concerns related to interpretation events are not due to the wording of the event descriptions, but rather the way in which we categorize the events as a whole.

This proposal is also motivated by the work of members of the National Forensic Association Executive Council to develop a document which “features descriptive analysis of prerogatives for collegiate forensics pedagogy” (Kelly, Paine, Richardson & White, 2010, p. 1). Work on this document revealed areas within forensic competition where our practice is not maximizing our ability to meet possible learning outcomes. Specifically, in the area of interpretation events, we as a community “seem to cater to one school of thought emphasizing performance over analysis, thus deemphasizing critical thinking skills” (Rice, 1991, p. 125). Rossi and Goodnow (2006) make a similar observation stating, “The value, necessity, and power of an awareness of literary content and form, as well as a credible attempt at honoring the two, is almost a given for most theorists... How then does contemporary forensics deviate from these values and why” (p. 48)? After spending several months helping to draft possible learning outcomes for our interpretation events, I began to wonder if a re-categorization of the events would help maximize our ability to meet certain learning objectives.

Concerns with Current Practices

Categorization of Texts

The first concern related to oral interpretation events is the growing confusion over where certain texts “fit” within our literary genre categories. The introduction of the internet, the spoken word revolution, an increasing interest in alternative literary forms and the growth of unconventional performance pieces all erode our traditional notions of literary genre distinctions. The podcast “The Moth” is an excellent example of these current ambiguities. The Moth describes itself as “a New York City based nonprofit organization that conducts live storytelling events” in the form of podcasts, storySLAMS and staged performances. During the 2008-2009 forensic season, I had a student run a Dramatic Interpretation piece taken from The Moth podcast. Given the

piece was transcribed from a live performance my assessment was Dramatic Interpretation was the appropriate category for the piece. My student and I were both surprised to discover another competitor doing the same selection in Prose. As the piece was a traditional first-person autobiographical narrative, the placement in Prose seemed equally reasonable. In this instance, which student was breaking the rules? If the story had been published in a book of essays it would have been considered a Prose, that it was delivered on stage, however, is what led me to consider it Dramatic Interpretation. The text itself was the same, essentially rendering genre distinction irrelevant.

Homogenization of Voice

A second concern I frequently encounter related to interpretation events is the complaint that all performances sound alike regardless of the event category. The predominance of first-person voice found in all interpretation event categories has led some to question if these events are meeting their educational potential. Texts written in first-person are capable of creating more intense immediacy with an audience and as a result, from a competitive perspective, may lead to higher ranks. As Steele (2005) argues, “The first-person narrator is a wonderful device. It allows us to inhabit a fictional character more fully than is possible in any other point of view, or even in any other form of storytelling.” Yet our students’ reliance on the first-person voice leads to the neglect of other equally valid and perhaps even more challenging narrator points of view. Fludernik (2001) explains the limitations of texts presented in the first-person voice explaining, “the first-person narrator, as a persona endowed with no magic powers, is precisely limited to his or her knowledge and perception and, except by infringement of these natural parameters, cannot move from one locality to the next” (p. 621). Calling upon the writings of Genette, she explains that the difference is found in a “problem of distance”. Essentially, there is a significant difference between a narrator who “tells” the audience a story and one who “shows” the audience the events.

Proposal

In an effort to address these concerns, I argue the Interpretation Events should be categorized according to the primary narrative voice (point of view) used in the text, rather than the text’s assumed genre.

Possible Scenario

First-Person Interpretation

Selections of material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source, which use the first-person narrative voice as the predominant point-of-view. The inclusion of dialogue within the first-person telling should be limited. Poetry is prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Second and/or Third-Person Interpretation

Selections of material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source, which use the second and/or third-person narrative voice as the predominant point-of-view. The inclusion of dialogue within the second and/or third-person telling should be limited. Poetry is prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Dialogue Interpretation

Selections of material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source, which use dialogue between two or more characters as the predominant point-of-view. Poetry is prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Poetry Interpretation

Selections of poetry of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. A primary focus of this event should be on the development of language. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Duo Interpretation

Selections of material of literary merit, presented by two individuals, which may be drawn from more than one source, which use dialogue between two or more characters as the predominant point-of-view. This is not an acting event; thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc, are to be used. Presentation is from the manuscript and the focus should be off-stage and not to each other. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Program Oral Interpretation

A program of thematically-linked selections of literary merit, chosen from a balance of material representing first-person narrative voice, second-person narrative voice, **and/or** third-person narrative voice, **as well as** dialogue **and** poetry. A primary focus of this event should be on the development of the theme. The material must be pulled from at least three separate pieces of literature. Only one selection may be original. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Proposal

I understand that any change to current practice will involve the resolution of some concerns while simultaneously introducing new potential problems. My goal in this final section is to address some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of this proposal in an effort to engage the forensic community in a discussion of the feasibility and desirability of this proposal.

The most immediate logistical concern with this proposal is that it would add an additional event to the traditional eleven AFA-NIET and ten NFA events. Scheduling at the national tournaments is already difficult. The need for even 10 additional classrooms at any time slot could be impossible

for future host schools to absorb. One possible way to help alleviate the increase in tournament entries, would be to limit students to only one Duo Interpretation entry at the National Tournaments.

A second issue is, with the exception of poetry, this change would almost eliminate disputes related to differences of opinion regarding the categorization of texts into different literary genres. However, if implemented, the proposal could usher in a whole new area for controversy. Given the ever contentious nature of forensics as a competitive activity, disagreements about what voice is predominant in a text seem likely. Narratologists already question the concept of “voice” as a definitive construct. Literature is an ever evolving art form which many would argue will always defy strict categorization. Nielsen (2004) argues we can accept some level of ambiguity with respect to how voice is defined stating, “The concept must necessarily assume metaphorical signification in connection with literature, but that this metaphorical usage hardly makes it an invalid concept (p. 134). If we accept some level of ambiguity will always be present when categorizing literature, the real question becomes is it better to deal with ambiguity surrounding genre or voice?”

For me, the answer to this question is found in the final benefit I see of this proposal. I contend the risk of introducing new ambiguities is justified because of the pedagogical advantages this proposal offers. The current categorization of events by genre does not lend itself to a wide diversity of skill development from our students. The vast majority of competitors focus their efforts on the development of texts written with the first-person voice. We as judges reward this meticulous character development and often shun the less accessible third-person voice or multiple character dialogue. Our ranks follow our emotional responses and we have become overly dependent on the easy identification with the “I” of a first-person account. Re-categorizing events by voice would level the playing field for these oft maligned narrators. Students would be exposed to new approaches in literary analysis and would also need to learn how to create strong emotional responses in an audience using a more distant narrator. Our public speakers learn the nuances between the varying purposes of informing, persuading and entertaining. I argue it is time for our interpretation events to encourage this same diversity of skill acquisition.

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Appendix

Discussions among session participants resulted in the presentation of the following revised proposal to the General Assembly.

Resolved: The performance of literature events be re-categorized as follows:

Justification: Growing difficulty in clear genre distinctions and lack of diversity of narrator perspectives performed.

Performance of Monologue

Selections of material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source, which use the first or second-person narrative voice. A minimal presence of dialogue, as filtered through the narrative voice, is allowed. Poetry is prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Performance of Dialogue

Selections of material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source, which include third-person narration and/or dialogue between two or more characters. Poetry is prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Performance of Poetry

Selections of poetry of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. A primary focus of this event should be on the development of language. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Duo Performance

Selections of material of literary merit, presented by two individuals, which may be drawn from more than one source. This is not an acting event; thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc, are to be used. Presentation is from the manuscript and the focus should be off-stage and not to each other. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Performance of Literature Program

A program of thematically-linked selections of literary merit, chosen from a balance of material from each of the other solo individual performance of literature events. A primary

focus of this event should be on the development of the theme. The material must be pulled from at least three separate pieces of literature. Only one selection may be original. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Discussion during the General Assembly revealed support for a further adaptation of this proposal. Some members suggested dropping "Performance of Poetry" as a category and adding "Second and/or Third-Person Performance". Poetry would then be allowed in all the categories as long as the material adhered to the narrator perspective described in the event category.