

Gasp! Faint! Cry! Making Dramatic Interpretation a Book Optional Event or Not

Amber Kuipers

Imagine yourself, for a moment, in a classroom where six other competitors are talking and eagerly waiting for their next Dramatic Interpretation (D.I.) round to begin. The judge surfaces from the depths of the judging room, coffee in one hand, ballots in the back pocket, pen stuck behind his ear appearing as though he has not slept since the tournament began, and takes a seat back row center. The room is silenced as the authority settles in and then calls the first competitor's name. She stands and walks to the front of the room. The metaphorical lights dim as she commands the absolute attention of her surroundings. It appears as though a spotlight suddenly clicked on; shining gloriously upon her as she begins to open her book ... which ... is not ... there. She continues on in her teaser still holding an invisible book while you, the judge, and all the other competitors are becoming increasingly more confused at this random act. She finishes her teaser, closes her "book," and launches into a delectable introduction about how individuals are being hidden behind the works of others, forcing everyone to fit into molds, and everyone copes by inventing phrases like "I am unique!" then adding, "just like everyone else." Her argument: resistance is futile and change is inevitable. She completes her cutting without a hitch, without a book, and without even acknowledging that this act probably rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. She is disqualified for not having a manuscript.

The rationale behind this fictional narrative and this paper is to point out several things. First is to address the recent request making Dramatic Interpretation (D.I.) a book optional event and what the reasons are on both sides of this debate. Second, relating this issue and its arguments to aspects of creativity and the official rules of unlimited preparation events. Third is the attempt to propose a new viewpoint for this issue and to encourage our community not to concentrate as hard on the actual presence of a book, but the reasoning behind it as to why it is there and whether or not we can do without it. Finally, I will attend to the pedagogical goal for this issue of controversy and display my outlook on this ordeal.

The Competitor Stands ...

The proposal to making D.I. as a book optional event would best be described as competitors participating in Dramatic Interpretation having the option of a book (a binder, folder, something that holds the manuscript of what they are interpreting) with their person and/or using it during their performance

time. This idea was brought to the attention of each district which voted either for or against it, and each district's majority vote in turn was brought to the 2008 AF A meeting, was voted upon there and by call of question was vastly shut down by the populace.

The reasons this issue appears in the first place are rather intriguing when the concept is applied to the event. It began as a thought to turn D.I. into more of a performance event with less emphasis on argument. By making the book an optional thing, it would free up the competitor to move about more fluidly within their time (Cronn-Mills and Cook 9). Making movement an issue of Dramatic Interpretation is not a new concept. Because competitors have to hold a book during their performance, it limits movement and therefore stifles areas of creativity such as blocking, technical movements, and it forces a person to gesture entirely with one hand. By removing this burden, that barrier would no longer be there and the competitor could submerge themselves more into their piece(s) and give off a richer, more complete feel for the performance since they would no longer be constricted by their motions and movements.

A second reason for wanting the D.I. to be a book optional event pertains to clearly divide D.I. from Prose. There are some who believe that these two events are too similar and they want to physically see a difference between Prose and D.I. Not having the book appeared to be the best option since no props, costumes, or settings are allowed. This would subconsciously help judges who critique many of these pieces. In both events, many of the pieces sound very similar. Making D.I. book optional would help everyone: judges, competitors, and audience members remember what event this was and put all viewers in the correct mindset for what they were watching.

Third, there is a concern that the script is turning obsolete. An unwritten rule requires contestants to have their piece memorized (Verlinden 9) and having the script in hand hinders the competitor since it could be considered as a crutch. It appears pointless to have a manuscript that is not being used since it is only really there to get in the way.

On the other hand, the arguments for keeping the book in D.I. are also valid.

Leading this side of the spectrum is the argument that not having the book would direct the competitors into the realm of acting. Forensics is not

acting~ forensics is interpretation (Holloway et al., 44). Having that book in hand gives a consistent reminder to all present that the competitor is interpreting, not acting. When that consistent reminder is taken away, competitors forget that they are supposed to be interpreting and then the experience loses the educational value.

Along side acting versus interpreting, having the book in hand pays physical homage to the authors of the pieces the participant chose. In addition to the verbal verification in their introduction, having the words with them is a constant reminder that they are giving credit where credit is due; even if the entrant wrote the piece themselves. Relating this back to interpretation, the presence of the book is like the competitor silently admitting that they are interpreting what they think the author's intent is for this particular piece and they are not just shooting from the hip or making their piece up.

A quieter argument is from the more traditional side of forensics and that is that this event has never been done this way before; change is bad, our way is best. By suddenly changing the rules, it shakes up what many have found to be a "winning formula" for this event. Not only that, but only changing one unlimited prep event to book optional does not appear to be logical or fair for all involved in the patterns that coincide with D.I. There is a need to keep everything as is for fairness, equality, and consistency; and not changing the rules does just that.

The Lights Dim ...

While both sides of this argument have important, compelling, and legitimate concerns, they are not entirely without blemishes. Removing the book would give more freedom in movement but would take away credit from authors. It would clearly differentiate two events from each other, but that is only if all competitors chose not to use their book in D.I. Keeping the book would let everyone know that this is interpretation, but would constrict movement. And while this is the way it has always been done, it does not mean that it is the right way for this event to be done. So which side is correct? To answer this, I will address the two items that directly affect this controversy: creativity and the official rules.

Creativity is a main issue because the presence or absence of a book is part of the creative process. Choices are made with how the entire piece is presented in competition because of this manuscript and there are those who believe that since this is a part of creativity, competitors should have the option of doing away with it.

But where does the forensics community draw the line? There are numerous works supporting creativity in forensics and has a sort of "call to arms" per se for creativity, to embrace originality, engage imagination, and encourage ingenuity. There are some who encourage competitors to stretch the lim-

its of "the line," to see just how much they can get away with, but stay within at least the mandated rules of the community. Dave Gaer states that, "we have a tendency to want everything to be in a little box" (Gaer, 1) and encourages students, coaches and directors to break free of it. Creativity and the open expression of ideas are the foundations of what creates new and innovative theory and advances our disciplines. Our society should integrate and encourage creativity in all the events forensics has to offer. The events are ever changing and by supporting new vision, it helps the community to change and keep up with the times.

At the same time there are just as many works written praising the stability of tradition; persuading others to be more conservative so as to not offend anyone. They do not want to rock the boat and instead wish to keep tradition strong. There is no complete answer of where the creative lines should be drawn; however there is a consensus that unrestrained creativity is not a notion of this community. Keith Green depicts his dislike about competitors using original work, claiming that, "the purpose of competitive oral interpretation is twofold: to teach students how to analyze a piece of literature for theme, mood, images, emotion, plot and other factors; and to learn how to control and utilize nonverbal communication behaviors in the suggestion of these underlying factors. Using original material does not require the student to undertake the first of the two processes" (Green, 70) and to an extent, that is true. Having the ability to write your own unpublished piece is a choice in the creative process, but to some that choice is too far over the line.

Creativity is one of the many rules and/or guidelines for success in intercollegiate forensics, but since 1976 for AF A and since 1967 at NF A, the rules for all unlimited prep events specifically depict that, "a manuscript is required"

(<http://www.mnsu.edu/spcommlniet/niet.html>). And that is a good thing. That means, that no matter what, a student must have what they are going to say with them in their round. It helps all people involved having the exact words written down. For competitors, it gives them a fall back if they were to forget a line during their performance and for the judges; it provides a sense of security that the piece that the competitor is performing is not an impromptu.

Also, within the AFA-NIET use of literature policy, there are rules against plagiarism, changing the text and rewriting scripts to change it to the contestant's liking.

These are important to point out because these rules relate back to giving credit where credit is due and keeps us from potentially plagiarizing someone else's work or changing an ending to force the piece into something that the author had no intention of saying.

The Spotlight Clicks On ...

The rules, creativity, and this book optional controversy, all combined, create interesting questions and "what ifs." For example, how do you put into manuscript a play that does not have words? If D.I. becomes a book optional event what will happen to the interpretation aspect of it all and giving credit to the authors? Should the book be considered in the creative process? Is the book a prop and if so, then should it be done away with since there are no props allowed?

My friends, colleagues, esteemed professors, and directors: This is the wrong way to look at this issue. Every district, every school, every team, coach, competitor and administration will have a different answer for each of these questions with different rationales that, for some, will be incredibly difficult to overturn. To argue over these questions would be like arguing over an abortion debate; everyone has their own set values and beliefs and no one would be willing to listen to the opinion of the other side. Instead, I call to attention the words everyone is throwing about without a second thought.

They ask about a manuscript, what is a manuscript? According to www.dictionary.net, a manuscript is one of five things:

The original text of an author's work, handwritten or now usually typed, that is submitted to a publisher. Any text not printed. A book or document written before the invention of printing. Writing, as distinguished from print. Handwritten or typed, not professionally printed. (www.dictionary.net/manuscript)

No matter what the context is about, it must be in written form to be a manuscript. A manuscript has immense value to forensics. Without it the entire community would cease to exist since we base all of our events from the written word. In addition to that, the lack of a manuscript within an event would change the pedagogical assumptions to the event in its entirety. To not have this visual aid of proof that what is being said is not made up on the fly would be devastating to D.I. and all unlimited preparation events. It would change from an event that would intelligently use literature to argue a theory to something that would turn argument into acting. Since they are classified in a category of their own, proof is needed that what the individual is depicting has had at some point in time, pre-determined thought; much like how a persuasive or informative speech requires sources. Cronn-Mills and Cook define the common use for the term manuscript in the forensics community. A manuscript refers "to any book, script, or papers the student holds during performance of prose, drama, programmed oral interpretation, poetry or dramatic duo" (Cronn-Mills and Cook 2-3). If the forensics community agrees that the

book, script, or papers that the student uses during a performance as a manuscript; and according to AF A rules a manuscript is required, then the book must be a mandated thing as well since that is what is commonly accepted as a manuscript.

Coinciding with a manuscript, literary merit is to be defined as "quality of written work, generally applied to the genre of literary fiction. The reason the forensics society has a need to define literary merit is to be more precise about original works, unpublished material, and other gray areas concerning creativity and the contexts of a manuscript. When this term is defined within AF A rules, then questions about such things will be eliminated. A work is said to have literary merit (to be a work of art) if it is a work of quality, that is if it has some aesthetic value"

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/literary_merit). It has long been noted that the concept of "literary merit" is practically impossible to consistently define in our community, and that it is hard to see how such an idea can be used with any precision or consistency by competitors or judges. A common response to this criticism is that, while the process of establishing literary merit is difficult and often subjective, it is the only method currently available to separate work that has significant cultural value from work that is ephemeral.

Coaches and competitors will fight for what they believe is to be their right for where the limits of creativity lie, but what does that consist of? Creativity can be defined as, "the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination"

(<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/creativity>). Where the line is drawn is constantly argued. Oftentimes the forensics faction argues over the limits of creativity because, simply put, it affects change and not everyone likes change. Gaer said it, we want our box. "It is how we process and remember information. We utilize what we know, attaching things to those notions, and develop our brains accordingly" (Gaer, 1). As previously stated, there is a consensus that unlimited creativity is not a thing we condone in the forensics population; however, this group does not define where the limits lie and because of that, this is why controversy grows.

To classify more obvious boundaries for creativity, look at both the official and unwritten rules for D.I. AF A rules require a manuscript; however the unwritten rules in the forensics community requires it to be in a little black book. A plan to resolve this confusion would be to write them out and make them official. The problem with that is that once those unofficial rules are made official, more unwritten rules will simply take their place. The answer is not creating more rules. Leave the unwritten rules

alone and concentrate on a more productive approach. Look at the event description and create a universal agreement on what that description depicts. Leave the unwritten rules as such and let them be considered guidelines for the community. The more resources or rules this community can lean on, official or not, the more proof the competitor needs to come up with to have their performance be considered a legitimate one.

A second viewpoint for creativity in D.I. is to have the speech and debate community recognize that D.I. is simultaneously used as an analytical and interpretive event. This is done by using an interpretive piece as an argument that is stated by the competitor in their introduction. When an argument is presented in this manner it satisfies both areas of analysis and interpretation. To put this in perspective, every judge in the forensics community has seen both really good, and really bad arguments in this event. The really bad ones are usually created by a competitor first choosing how to interpret their piece then finding an argument for it when it should be the other way around.

Competitors should recognize that this creative process of how to properly create an argument is a part of the so called "formula of success" within this operation and when that is encouraged and commonly absorbed into the community, this event will be recognized that it has educational and entertainment value and the interweaving of the two are unique to it.

Finally, in regards to acting and interpreting; what do these words mean and how do they differentiate? A well known concern, controversy and constant debate in our group is the difference between acting and interpreting. There are multiple views on this item with the gap between the two ranging from something as great as; one is for drama, the other is for forensics; to an ideal as small as merely holding the book in your hands makes the acting into interpreting. I am exaggerating of course, but not by much. Holloway et al. claims that the difference between acting and interpreting is that "an actor represents, an interpreter presents. The consequence of this distinction, in performance, is essentially one of relative distance. The actor is viewed by the audience as a person to be watched, observed from the distance. The actor shows. In contrast, the interpreter is close to the audience, one of them actually. By remaining part of the audience the interpreter shares with the audience the experience of the literature. Rather than show, the interpreter suggests. The visions, the things to be seen, are all in the imaginations of the audience (Holloway et al, 44). Instead of worrying about the audience, acting and interpreting has to be an internal value. Most other definitions to be had are helpful and informational, but they are based on the audience perspective. That leaves the presenter on the short end of the stick since this is

now all about the audience instead of making it for themselves and creating their piece for their own edification as opposed to merely entertainment.

In my graduate class, I think I heard the best definition between acting and interpreting for forensics: when you are acting, you are the words, you become the words. But when you are interpreting, you become the words, but there is a conscious barrier of an argument present. Using this as a competitor's foundation leaves room for creativity when presenting in an event and it further supports the two tiered facility of D.I. being both analytical and entertaining because of the argument their piece is constructing, making this classification more meaningful to the competitor.

These are the questions we should be asking, not arguing whether or not a book helps or hinders the event. When these words are more universally defined is when this community can finally move forward in their own way to better themselves.

Am I Disqualified?

To answer the question of whether or not the forensics community can do without "the book," I turn to Cronn-Mills and Cook. Their research indicated that the community from both students and judges vastly agreed that a manuscript should be required and helps in a wide variety of areas including, but not limited to, technique, authors' intent, interpretation versus acting and helps focus on literature. In the same project, the research shows those against the manuscript believe that the script is irrelevant, that it detracts from the performance, and that it mandates students to be dependent on their script. (Cronn-Mills and Cook, 7-13). Cronn-Mills and Cook argue that the mandated rule of a manuscript would induce the students into the objectivist philosophy while the other side of the spectrum would become alienated by its own community because it is "against social norms." Another reason the group will not change their minds about this issue is because it is change. Having D.I. as a book optional event has never been done before in intercollegiate forensics and by attempting change could, for students, possibly affect their overall ranking during that tournament and, for coaches it could possibly make them loose face with their peers. So no one rocks the boat. Students like their shiny paperweights they compete for and judges want to continue on with a long-lived tradition.

This turns out to be a very long analytical process for a simple "yes" or "no" answer. I decree that because the official rules, the unofficial rules, and the community's overall expectations all agree that a manuscript is required and that "the book" is the manuscript; D.I. or any other unlimited prep event cannot be book optional. It bends too many rules, upsets too many expectations, and it crosses over the line of creative freedom into rule breaking.

The actual presence of that little black book (the manuscript) in itself sets up an entire mindset to everyone in that room during rounds. For the entrant, it starts them off in the correct mindset for what this competition is all about; education, competition, and interpretation. The book in hand lets that student know for themselves just how ready they truly are for this tournament; how well they know their pieces, if their argument fits with their program, and so on. Students learn how well they depicted their interpretation to the audience and how that compared to what they have in their book. It becomes learned to see that difference and then improve it.

The instant they open their script, a switch is thrown stating to the competitor and everyone else in the room that the contestant is here to perform to the best of their ability and that they will compete for every second of their allotted ten minutes. When the book is closed, they are themselves. When that book is opened, however, a new person, character, physique has been borne that is here to win, to dominate.

On top of this, the book assists everyone visually see where the competitor ends and the character begins. Time starts when the entrant opens their book and when that happens they are expected to be in the piece and not themselves. This is where the fine line of acting and interpreting are in a constant balance. Judges do not want students to act, but they do not want them to be deadpan either. The presence of the book can assist in the precise moments of who is who and when.

For the audience, the manuscript has several factors. It tells them that this event has, to some extent, been prepared and that this is a narrative of interpretation that has an angle of the author's intent. It also assists with transitions between settings, times, characters, and instances where merely a pop or voice fluctuation would not be sufficient. Most importantly, to the audience, it is giving credit where credit is due in saying that while this is someone's work (possibly their own), it is an opinion of argument that is meant to be controversial and discussed.

The girl in the fictional narrative at the beginning of this paper in my tournament would be disqualified. If she wanted to give a speech and not give some form of proof of where she got her information, there is an event called impromptu, have at it. Unlimited preparation events are classified as such for a reason: there is an expectation that a competitor participating in these events prepare. As proof of that preparation, the manuscript is particularly required to visually show to the audience and subconsciously prove to the participant themselves that they have something ready and they have thought about how they are to present their argument with their piece(s). To lack something so visually required would throw off everyone into an unknown variety of

reactions. Judges might think the competitor came unprepared, the participants' challengers may consider them easy prey since they did not follow social norms and expectations. Exact reactions are unsure and somewhat unsettling since they are unknown. But be reassured, they would most likely be negative reactions. The book should remain. Cry, scream and gnash your teeth all you want, I predict that this notion will not change because there are too many factors from too many angles supporting the need for a book.

Work Cited

- AFA-NIET. "Description of Events." 2006-2007 <http://www.mnsu.edu/spcomm/nietiniet.html>. Last access May 14, 2008.
- Allen, Mike, Sandra Berkowitz, Steve Hunt, and Allan Loudon. "A Meta analysis of the Impact of Forensics and Communication Education on Critical Thinking" *Communication Education* 48 (1999): 1-13.
- Cronn-Mills, Daniel and Jeff Cook. "Survey Opinions in Using a Manuscript in Oral Interpretation Events." *Speech Communication Association* (1995): 1-18.
- Endres, Thomas G. "Maintaining Integrity in Forensics Interpretation: Arguments Against Original Literature." *The National Forensic Journal* VI (Fall, 1988): 103- 112.
- Gaer, Dave. "Formulaic Forensics: When Competitive Success Stifles Creativity." *The National Forensic Journal* 20. 1(2002): 54-56.
- Holloway, Hal H., John Allen, Jeannie Rice Barr, Thomas Colley, Carolyn Keefe, James A. Pearse, and James M. St. Clair. "Instructional Practices Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition." *The National Forensic Journal* 1 (Spring 1983): 43-58.
- Keith, Green. "Original Material in Forensics Oral Interpretation: A Violation of Integrity" *The National Forensic Journal* 6 (Spring, 1988): 69-72.
- Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_merit. Last access May 14, 2008 Updated daily.
- www.Dictionary.net. Last Access May 14, 2008. Last update May 12, 2008.
- VerLinden, Jay, "The Unwritten Rules in Public Address" *National Communication Association* (1997): 1-18.