

Uncertainty in Spontaneity Toward an Epistemic Impromptu

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Abstract

This paper reviews the recent argument that forensics is epistemic, suggesting that those who adopt that metaphor could serve themselves better by approaching impromptu speaking as an epistemic exercise. It draws upon Pat Gehrke's critique of debate pedagogy to form a framework to analyze impromptu as it is currently performed—and its obsession with starting from the truth, espousing all views with certainty, and adhering to a linear model of analysis. Finally, it offers several options for those impromptuers wishing to break the mold, arguing that the so-called "mistakes" made by beginning impromptuers could, with practice, lead to more insightful speeches than the current style of competition.

Introduction

James Geary (2005), author of two books about aphorisms (or what we call "impromptu quotations"), calls them "particle accelerators for the mind." He explains his fascination for the earliest, and shortest, literary form:

They make you question everything you do. Aphorisms are spurs to action. It's not enough to just read one and mutter sagely to yourself, 'How true, how true.' Aphorisms make you want to do something; admiring them without putting them into practice is like learning to read music but neglecting to play an instrument. (p. 8)

A full-career impromptu speaker will put hundreds of these assertions into practice. The current expectation in the event requires that the student select a single interpretation of each quotation, then argue for or against its accuracy. While teaching an introductory impromptu speaker this method eases the difficulty for instructors, more experienced competitors may encounter a malaise toward the event. Some consider the structure too limiting; it provides little wiggle room for considering multiple ways a quotation can be construed. Similarly, the constant arguing of linear perspectives may eventually feel like oversimplification. More than a few impromptu speakers have confessed to me that they felt like a "motivational speaker" by the end of their career. I target this paper toward those experiencing this impromptu malaise, and recommend new approaches to prevent intelligent minds from feeling constricted.

Maximizing the effectiveness of impromptu as a learning exercise will require competitors to aspire toward an epistemic perspective.

Robert Littlefield (2006) recently broke from the ranks of those debating the educational or competitive nature of forensics. Instead, he claimed that forensics, like rhetoric, is epistemic. Forensics provides experiential knowledge, forcing students to adapt to the complexities of each unique environment, from the preferences of individual judges to fellow competitors' interpretation of events. Just as in the real world, the most honest and hard-working individual may fail. What Littlefield provides is a personal philosophy for forensics, one which may not only help the community better understand the activity, but also help fledgling programs justify their existence:

In the end, I must be content with an imperfect, relativistic world where not all is good, not all are fair, not all are ethical, and not all practices are justifiable. The only way I can justify forensics is with the understanding that experience is knowledge; forensics is epistemic. (p. 13)

I believe that Littlefield's insights deserve to be taken seriously, if only as a coping mechanism for students who put forth great effort for little reward. But for those of us who adopt an epistemic metaphor for forensics, it would serve us well to evaluate the events as we teach them and consider how to better harness the metaphor. The experience of forensics is epistemic. But are our events epistemic?

Pat Gehrke (1998) reviews the theory of rhetoric as epistemic, as advanced by Robert Scott: The belief that truth stems from human interaction. Gehrke argues that we should not approach arguments as though we possess correct answers. Likewise, he does not believe we should regard those we debate against as "opponents," but rather as possessors of unique perspectives and ideas to be "constructively engaged" (p. 9). He confronts current argumentation pedagogy, highlighting four ways in which textbooks and professors have failed to connect theories of epistemic rhetoric to actual teaching:

First, argumentation texts favor a particular logical model of reasoning; a Western linear mode of logic. Second, there is an implicit assumption

of the need to know the truth before engaging in argument. Third, these texts approach argumentation and debate from an oppositional model. Fourth, and perhaps most disturbing, the critical tools of argumentation are depicted as ways to assess others' reasoning and rarely one's own. (p. 5)

In this paper, I apply these criticisms of debate pedagogy to the practice of impromptu speaking at American Forensics Association and National Forensics Association tournaments. I select impromptu because it has inexplicit rules and guidelines. It is the one event where students are literally provided seven minutes to grapple with a quotation however they choose. The expectation that every speech push a single persuasive argument is, therefore, an entirely "unwritten rule" that students have every right to break. (This differs from persuasion, where, as the name implies, the student should persuade.) Further, because impromptu is a limited preparation event, students who concur with my sentiments can nimbly react and experiment without sacrificing the time required to write and memorize scripts. For this reason, I believe that if forensics competitors truly seek to dismantle the rigidity of their activity, impromptu could be the most reasonable place to begin. My goal is to place forensicators on the road toward an impromptu ripe with experimentation and aligned with the epistemic perspective that many communication scholars have embraced.

Difficulties with Impromptu

Truly epistemic argumentation recognizes a diverse array of argumentative styles, including feminist, non-Western, and narrative-based models. As Gehrke attests, most argumentation textbooks fail to address these theoretical shifts. Instead, he states, they "generally rely upon syllogisms, the Toulmin model, or fallacies of informal logic" (p. 6). Similarly, impromptu speaking utilizes a simplified version of Stephen Toulmin's logical model. The Toulmin model stresses the "movement" from observable data, through warrants for a position, to a claim (Benoit, Hample, & Benoit, 1992, p. 227).

"Unified analysis," the structure utilized by the vast majority of impromptu speakers, hinges on movement from the data given (the quotation) to a claim (the speaker's thesis statement). The speaker then provides two warrants, or "reasons" for their claim. True to the Toulmin model, the speaker illuminates backing for his argument, in the form of theories or anecdotal examples. Impromptuers are expected by judging paradigms to repeat every major argumentative warrant, or "tag," multiple times in the speech. This technique is called "signposting," and ensures that the speech answers a question central to Toulmin's model: "How [did] you get there?" (Benoit, Hample, & Benoit, p. 227) This allows

judges to transcribe the speech easily, diagramming the speaker's utterances in a linear outline. Even less-used "three-point" structures, though mold-breaking, still emphasize signposts and a linear structure centering on a thesis statement. Impromptu, therefore, suffers from the same linearity Gehrke observed in argumentation classrooms—and limits speakers' rhetoric more than a fully observed Toulmin model.

Gehrke's second contention with argumentation pedagogy is its assumption that one must start from the truth, and argue accordingly (p. 7). Like debate, impromptu has fallen into the truth-adherence rut. Impromptu speakers are taught to always agree or disagree with their quotation. Their thesis statement is then built on this choice, and the speaker argues accordingly.

The notion that a student must "pick a side" is troubling because seldom will the student actually "know" what he is arguing. When a student develops his interpretation of the quotation, the reasoning used is what theorist Charles Peirce (1998) called "abduction." The process is as follows:

"The surprising fact, *C*, is observed.
But if *A* were true, *C* would be a matter of course.
Hence, there is reason to suspect that *A* is true
(p. 231)"

It is, literally, the process of forming a hypothesis. In the case of impromptu, *C* is the quotation, which is always a surprise, and *A* is the immediate stab at its meaning. As Peirce suggests, "The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight." But, Peirce warns, the abduction is an "extremely fallible insight (p. 227)."

Abduction is untested and unreasoned. It is, quite simply, an immediate hypothesis. When an impromptu speaker develops a "thesis," what he has truly developed is a hypothesis: An abductive, potential explanation. Yet, competitors are encouraged to speak with an air of certainty, jettisoning all doubt. In other words: Not only does impromptu force students to start from a truth; it forces students to argue on behalf of an untested truth.

Third, Gehrke criticizes the oppositional nature of argumentation pedagogy. He refers to numerous other scholars who refute the mindset that a debate takes place between two rival positions, where only one can be correct (p. 9, 10). Epistemic perspectives do not embrace such absolutism, because beliefs rely on individual experience. A student respecting the multiplicity of possible beliefs on a subject should be commended as insightful. As Toulmin (1992) explained in his book *Cosmopolis*: "Tolerating... plurality, ambiguity, or lack of certainty is no error, let alone a sin. Honest reflection shows that it is part of

the price we inevitably pay for being human beings, and not gods.” (p. 30).

The notion that other sides should be attacked, rather than thoughtfully contemplated, has also been adopted in impromptu. Before speaking, impromptuers do not witness each other’s speeches, which prevents direct refutation. However, students still refuse to consider any viewpoint beyond the solitary, linear argument they construct. Consider a student, in an impromptu round at a national tournament, using one of the following claims:

- 1) “While most of the time, *X* perspective is true, I will argue that we should be mindful of *Y* perspective.”
- 2) “In my *personal experience*, *Y* perspective is correct.”
- 3) “While my first instinct was to argue *Y* perspective, I hit a snag and realized *X* perspective must be correct.”

In the first example, judges would chastise the student for conceding that other arguments are more often true than their own. In the second, one could expect a judge to trivialize the student’s use of personal experience as evidence; impromptuers are expected to speak in universals. In the third instance, the competitor has conceded that their first hypothesis failed, and that they had to restart with a different one. As a student groping for truth, this speaker has the potential to grapple with the multifaceted nature of the quotation. However, the student has acknowledged an alternative viewpoint, and will likely suffer as a result.

When students feign omnipotence in their arguments, they reject the linear Western model to which the competitive framework otherwise adheres. In order to differentiate his model from classical logic, Toulmin included qualifiers that specify degrees of certainty. He also implemented rebuttal statements, which offer possible circumstances in which a claim could fall through (Benoit, Hample, & Benoit, p. 232). In suggesting these as possibilities in structured (or unstructured) argumentation, Toulmin reinforced the view that faux-confidence need not infiltrate debates. However, these statements are not tolerated in impromptu rounds. Instead, forensics educators teach students that any argument supported by three or four interesting examples can be advocated with complete certainty.

Finally, Gehrke fears that the three previous concerns leave students in argumentation classrooms without the capacity for self-reflection. He finds that textbooks focus on deconstructing what others say, rather than one’s own arguments. Students, rather than examining their own identity, instead are taught to combat the “influences” of others (p. 11). Gehrke stresses the risk this creates: “Focusing argumentation and critical thought away from

the self impedes the consideration of how arguments represent and construct the self” (p. 12).

Impromptu provides students with a remarkable opportunity to identify their own beliefs. Many competitors spend their entire college careers examining assertion after assertion, contemplating what each means to them. They call upon their knowledge base to determine how they will respond to the quotation. Then, they spend as long as six minutes considering the subject, actively, in front of an audience of other critical thinkers. After four years of this, students should walk away with not only the capacity for producing eloquent sophisms, but also the humility to recognize how many different ways a simple pithy statement can be understood. Impromptu, in other words, could be a powerful tool in identity construction.

Obviously, teaching students to say everything with complete confidence, and quickly, has practical benefits. Williams, Carver, and Hart (1993) stressed impromptu’s ability to help students “move intelligently from the classroom to society,” providing them with the sort of “practical experience” they will need in job interviews (p. 29, 30). But Gehrke contends that argumentation instructors should resist the urge for this business-minded pragmatism:

As teachers of argumentation we need to be careful to avoid the temptation to “sell” our discipline as a “product” that will enhance organizational “output” or personal career “performance.” These industry terms subvert the existential motivation to self-critique and return argumentation to the role of a tool for domination or suppression of others. (p. 39)

As impromptu instructors, we have the fortune of teaching students willing to place their hearts and minds on the line in front of an audience. We should seize this opportunity to create generations of critical thinkers who do not succumb to the buzz-word mentality that simplifies all ideas into easily transcribed “tags.” It is time to move toward an impromptu that is open-minded, situational, and tailored to each individual competitor’s experience.

A Toolbox for an Epistemic Impromptu

I have identified how impromptu is restrictive and fails to meet its full potential as an inspiration for self-critique. What I provide is not a rigid alternative structure, because, like Gehrke, I believe that a prescriptive antidote “would betray the very goal of this project” (p. 32). Instead, I advocate several possible alternatives and encourage competitors to develop and construct their own. Many of these propositions refine the so-called “mistakes” speakers make when they begin their careers. Here I suggest that a speaker who actually practices and develops what we currently regard as off-limits could even-

tually deliver deeply insightful and inspiring speeches.

Embrace a Narrative Structure

Impromptu speaking already relies upon anecdotal evidence; most speeches are driven predominantly by stories. As such, converting to a narrative-driven structure would not be a challenging stretch for most students. Rather than adhering to a rigid, signposted format of data, warrants, and a claim, this would be based instead upon the format that drives many of the most famous speeches in history. R. H. Stephenson (1980), in his search for an ideal method for analyzing quotations, drew upon a type of rhetoric typically ignored by forensics as an activity: Epideictic. As he explains, "this form of oratory... was assimilated by the ancients to the genre of literary prose and the literary statement of general truths" (p. 13). Because the aphorisms students analyze lack specific content, the student cycles through a series of stories that illuminate the multiple issues it raises.

Gerard Hauser (1999), in his examination of epideictic in Athens, suggested that the teacher-persuader in this type of speech "presents the story of individuals and deeds worth imitating," interpreting values to the audience along the way (p. 17). The epideictic impromptu speaker would work from one narrative episode to the next. The challenge would lie in creating smooth and eloquent transitions between each story, such that the audience witnesses the speech as a concrete whole rather than a choppy series of assertions.

Don't reveal the Destination

Gehrke notes that many Chinese speakers who develop English as a second language do not state their argumentative thesis until the end of an oration (p. 24). Impromptu competitors should not be criticized for opting to save their central theme until their conclusion, as this would allow for a speech that builds to a point of culmination—rather than a speech that continually tries to justify itself.

Alternately, students could be encouraged to create a speech that refutes itself—a speech that, in the spirit of epistemic rhetoric, considers multiple sides before settling on a position. Adopting this style would better reflect the way people actually communicate; as Gehrke notes, traditional Western structures "can never completely account for the logics of discourse, the multiplicity of ways involved in the arguments of the everyday" (p. 23). He suggests that students in debate switch sides mid-argument to understand the fallibility of each perspective. Impromptuers, who are not tethered to a single position, could go a step further than their forensic peers in debate. Epistemic speakers would weigh several perspectives on a quotation before settling on one—or better yet, settling on none. The self-refuting im-

promptuer could become a manifestation of multifaceted argument. For a speaker to state one case and in the same breath state another does not merit condemnation. If considered thoughtfully, it could show that the student appreciates our world's uncertain and untidy nature. By adopting these strategies, students could abandon the imaginary certainty that currently leaves a "motivational speaker" aftertaste.

Consider the Type of Quotation

Marjorie Garber's (1999) assessment of how writers utilize quotations noted that, "Quotations are inserted into a borrower-text as precisely what their authors did not claim: a ground of fact" (p. 666). Similarly, impromptu speeches almost universally regard the quotation as a truth-statement; a great deal of emphasis is placed on interpretation, or what the point the author "intended to make." This fails to recognize that not all quotations are meant to be taken as statements of truth. By considering the different styles quotations can adopt, speakers can adapt their speeches to reflect each situation.

Literary theorist Gary Saul Morson (2003) has created a schema for analyzing quotations, noting that they tend to adopt one of two major forms: The dictum and the aphorism. Dicta, he notes, are statements that attempt to close off a philosophical debate; they are declarations that "aspire to absolute clarity" (p. 417). Aphorisms, on the other hand, are not meant to be taken as something to be agreed or disagreed with. They are open-ended philosophical statements, designed to provoke deeper thought on an issue (p. 421).

Fellow theorist Kevin Morell (2006) noted another scale by which aphorisms can be critiqued: Creative versus destructive. Creative aphorisms have an optimistic nature and encourage constructive thinking; destructive aphorisms aim to shut down a line of thought (p. 373). Grappling with these questions of form before diving into analysis could provide students with new angles and perspectives for considering the quotation.

Likewise, a specific consideration could be made for proverbs: What Geary calls an aphorism without identity (p. 14). Impromptuers frequently receive proverbs, which are so socially pervasive that students can likely remember hearing them before the round. In this situation, the student could engage in an actual rhetorical criticism: They could question why, exactly, this statement has become so popular (or so cliché), and whether that reflects positively or negatively.

Finally, students can, when it applies, recognize an author's context. Certainly, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely" can receive the standard treatment of interpretation, agreement, and application. But a competitor who acknowledges the time period or experiences of Lord Acton can provide background

and perspective on why he made this utterance, unearthing ironies and inaccuracies in the process.

Ask, “What Does This Quotation Mean to Me?”

One of the worst taboos in impromptu speaking is the personal example: the explanation of how a friend, family member, or speaker dealt with the situation in the quotation. I suggest that forensicators reevaluate the absolute rejection of a personal dynamic in the event. In other events, such as After-Dinner Speaking, competitors often receive accolades for delivering speeches that relate to their personal life or plight. In impromptu, permitting students to express what the quotation, or their analysis, means to them would help to eliminate any disconnect between speakers and their speeches.

People have unique and personal reasons for their beliefs. Near the end of a speech, a disclosure of biases or personal experiences would shed light on *why the student argued the way he or she did*. Not only would this disclosure give the audience insight into that student’s social reality; it would aid the student in discovering an identity. Perhaps the student could concede that certain arguments were hasty and not in line with more deeply considered beliefs—helping students, with practice, to link their speeches more closely to their actual worldview.

Build Your Own Structure

I concede that many of the aforementioned ideas will fall into some type of framework. Some semblance of signposting will be necessary, alongside theoretical and anecdotal examples to ensure that judges do not perceive students as merely rambling. Likewise, the event’s limited preparation time virtually forces students to have a mental plan for guiding the process of invention. But structures need not be cookie-cutter. Forensics educators can present a smorgasbord of argumentative styles and help students create “Frankenstructures” of their own.

Every student sees the world differently; every student brings a different outlook to the table and has the potential to create a structure that reflects his or her unique perspective. While some will contend that unified analysis and similar structures should remain the universal standard, the belief that they serve each student equally is unfair. Many students are too contained by the structure, or do not think in Western chains of logic. To hold those students to unwritten rules is irresponsible. Similarly, arguing that educators should adhere to these structures simply because they are easier to teach underestimates students’ abilities, particularly those who have already developed the skills unified analysis has to offer. As educators and judges we must help students invent the structures that suit them the best, and never condemn them for attempting something out of the ordinary. Breaking speech paradigms re-

quires extraordinary courage for students. Those who experiment deserve open-minded ballots so they are not dissuaded from future attempts.

A caveat: Even upon hearing suggestions for alternative structures, many students will still feel that unified analysis remains their best fit. I do not intend to condemn students who, upon reflection, make that decision. However, I still contend that within that structure’s confines, students should strive to acknowledge opposing ideas and express genuine uncertainty—because any hypothesis generated in a minute has not received the reflection required to justify forthright conviction.

Throwing Away the Ladder

In his first major work, *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (2003) commented on his aphoristic methodology:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (*TLP* 6.54)

Impromptu speaking can serve a similar role: Every quotation a speaker receives can act as a rung on a ladder toward greater understanding. Students can grasp how much knowledge depends upon circumstances and how each individual’s story influences what he believes to be true. Just as how Littlefield argued forensics can be justified on the “philosophical level” (p. 1), so too can impromptu.

As entrants in one of the largest events in forensics, an event that is in no way immunized against judging subjectivity and poorly chosen quotations, impromptu speakers with a strictly competitive perspective have set themselves up for disappointment. Speakers who view their event as a philosophical journey will instead perceive their successes and failures as a bittersweet aspect of the conversation they chose to join. Our duty, as educators, is to let these experimenters thrive.

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* Internal numbered citations refer to paragraphs, rather than pages.