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Reframing competitive critical analyses: An argument for education-application based methods for speech writing in CA and Rhetorical Criticism.

Katherine L. Hatfield-Edstrom, Ph.D.

This project offers a contemporary exemplar that students and coaches in competitive speech, specifically in the events of rhetorical criticism or communication analysis can use to help reframe traditional notions or methods of how to write a speech for competition. I contend that the event in competition has become too “cookie-cutter” and devoid of innovation or “thinking outside the box,” which can limit the educational experience for our students. Thus, this project begins as a full critical analysis employing the theoretical framework of public memory and follows with a discussion of how a student in competitive speech could approach the event with a broader and more open notion of how to conduct an analysis. Finally, I offer suggestions to coaches and teachers in the event or the classroom for rhetorical criticism about how to guide students towards a more scholarly understanding of critical investigation and provide an exemplar that begins to re-frame the writing process of rhetorical criticism.

Keywords: Rhetorical Criticism, Communication Analysis, Innovation

Any coach or competitor who follows discussion of events, trends, or concerns about the norms of competitive speech on the Individual Events Listserve or attends discussions held at our national and regional conferences should admit that inevitably at some point throughout the year, these forums are often the space for discussions of frustration about how we are too tied to our normative practices and that speech activities often lack innovativeness. Further, that when students do think outside the box, too often the community can be resistant to acknowledge and reward that creativity. Strangely, the community seems to appreciate discussion about how we need innovation, but is resistant to actually accept the changes in practice. The debate of education versus competition historically finds itself at the heart of our community public forum discussions.

The rules of competition are in reality, very few. In essence, there are time limits and a description of the event. However the “rules” that guide our students’ speech writing and performances are convention and normative practices. These “rules” are reinscribed over and over as competitor turns coach, and so too does their knowledge of how to prepare and deliver particular events in competition. The old adage of “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it,” has become the unspoken mantra of the coaching community. Those norms are guided by what has proven to be

successful in previous experiences. I contend that this approach to coaching is overly limiting in creativity and educational growth and development. The aim of this project is to challenge our normative practices by arguing for an education-application based approach to coaching the writing of Communication Analysis and Rhetorical Criticism. This project argues for a scholarship driven approach to teaching and writing rhetorical criticism, followed by a discussion of how this approach differs from current competitive norms and what can be gained by expanding our understanding and acceptance of competitive excellence. Finally, I offer an exemplar of a critical analysis, which serves as an illustration for our students in competitive speech. I contend that teachers in communication studies can use this exemplar as an illustration of how we can encourage scholarly practices from our speech competitors.

Re-framing Critical Analysis in Competitive Speech

Our goal with this project is to provide a teaching tool for your students. First it is important to remember that too often we coach our students to pick and choose the few perfect quotations from the single journal article that will “synthesize” what the author of the perspective is arguing about their theoretical position. Many of us have heard the statement “In order to better understand X’s perspective, we will first describe the author’s three (insert the correct number) tenets of the theory” while we were judging a round of CA or Rhetorical Criticism. While I understand that this decision is typically a result of time limits in the event, here I suggest that a more fleshed out discussion of the literature on the perspective offers more depth and richness. Further, I believe that when we teach our students in the event of rhetorical criticism, we should encourage them to write for scholarship first, allowing for depth and breadth in their writing and then pair the project down once he or she has a well-constructed argument. I argue that we can do more to more fully understand the richness of the perspective by encouraging writing for the scholarship first and editing for the speech second. I suggest that writing the speech initially to a time frame or a page length limits the depth of understanding of the perspective. It can promote oversimplification and minimizing the work of the theory. Thus, my suggestion is to encourage your student to broaden their research to have a more full understanding of the perspective in general and draw from multiple sources for more depth in the description and understanding of the theory. Encouraging your student to research and write in the vein similar to a mini-review of literature will help grow their sincere understanding of the theory and offer better insight into their investigation and analysis.

Too often coaches instruct students to find a singular exemplar of the theory's use, isolate the tenets of the theory, and apply those tenets to the artifact of choice. This limits education for the students understanding of the depth of the theory as well as underscore the extent to which our discipline has been influenced by the theory. Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2001) as well as others argue that forensics is an educational activity. Given this basic assumption, I contend that forensic educators have a responsibility to prioritize the educational experience. My contention is that if forensic pedagogy is successful, our students will walk away not only with both disciplinary knowledge and growth, but competitive success. However, to achieve this success on both fronts, we need to encourage a break from some of our traditional practices and allow for the welcoming of innovation and growth. I also recognize and agree with Burnett, Brand and Meister however, in that many within the community are hesitant of change because winning in competition pays off, yet focus on education is often not prioritized.

With this project I urge forensic educators to take risk and push for innovation and change. This example demonstrates how the critic could cull together a more thorough discussion of the theory that offers more depth and richness. Similar to the way, scholars in rhetorical criticism would approach their own work, this strategy engages the reader, or in the competitive arena – the audience in a depth of understanding and framing for the analysis. In the exemplar case, I will use the frame of public memory to serve as a theoretical lens, whereas in competition, most students will choose an exemplar (typically found in disciplinary journals). Think of the rounds of CA or Rhetorical Criticism that you may have observed. Did the student present a theoretical position supported by the work of scholars within the discipline? Or did the student present an author(s) individual perspective and employment of a theory, (i.e. Hariman and Lucaites' (2001) four tenets of an iconic image)? My contention is that if we encourage our students to read more, understand the extent to which the perspective is being used by others engaging in this methodology, they could potentially come to a stronger understanding of the theory, which in turn could help to offer more insight in the analysis of their own project.

Further, I suggest that we need to move beyond the overly simplistic 3-point (method, application, implications) method of conducting and writing a speech for communication analysis or rhetorical criticism and to instead encourage a blending or merging of method and application. If written successfully, a student should be able to clearly identify properties of the theory while simultaneously applying them to the artifact of choice. This approach allows the artifact of choice for the project to be the star and the perspective to be the stage. The

theoretical perspective creates an environment of understanding while the artifact is highlighted center stage. This approach may break normative practices and require a commitment to risk and innovation on the part of the student. I do not contend that all students have to, nor need to abandon the way in which we have CA or Rhetorical Criticism in the past; but just as all speeches are unique and should be organized in the most logical way to present an argument, our approach offers a variation for organizing this type of speech. We need to allow competitors to choose the most appropriate style and organization suited to that particular project.

Finally, I suggest that instructors in communication studies and rhetorical studies have an opportunity to bridge the competitive learning environment with the traditional classroom/instructional setting. In fact, today, more undergraduate colleges and universities are strongly encouraging student research and scholarship. In the studies of communication and rhetoric, students may feel as though traditional research practices are more difficult to accomplish because the natural building of research teams, as often seen in disciplines such as biology, psychology, and chemistry, is not as typical.

It is my hope that this project offers fresh perspective on how to rethink and approach coaching the events of Communication Analysis and Rhetorical Criticism. I argued for innovation and an education-application based approach to the events, urged the community to be more accepting of alternative styles or organizational patterns, and finally I discussed the benefits or outcomes of this new approach for our students and the forensic community. Next I will offer a contemporary exemplar to help frame the “how-to” component of coaching using a more scholarly approach.

The following exemplar is a tool to use when helping students begin to re-frame their approach to constructing their speech. It serves not as a final speech manuscript, but rather as an example of rhetorical scholarship that could be transitioned into a rhetorical criticism or communication analysis for competition. The idea here is to encourage students to write for scholarship and then pare the project down to meet the ten-minute time constraints of competition. Too often students look for the quick and easy quotation or statement to place within their speech manuscript, and neglect the more full understanding and relevance within their own project. This approach offers the student two primary educational outcomes. First, he or she will be able to write more broadly about the project, instilling a stronger understanding of the theory and its role in explaining what the popular culture artifact is offering to the audience. And second, it helps to teach students to be more selective in determining what is

pertinent in a ten-minute speech. This selective process teaches a student to fine tune and finesse the argument that he or she is making with their project.

Bringing Home The Dead: A Contemporary Exemplar

Introduction

During the Vietnam War, images of soldiers lost overseas returning home to US military bases were a commonly observed media event. Even throughout the 1980's it was commonplace for the media to cover the return of war dead. During this era, it was considered a valuable method for helping the American public to collectively mourn those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. The public was allowed to witness the flag draped coffins lining the tarmac, symbolically representing the country those soldiers once stood and served in defense of. Both Presidents Carter and Reagan were photographed amidst the ceremonial reception and honoring of the fallen soldiers.



However, in 1989, the day after the US invaded Panama, the first US casualties were returned home to Dover military base. The networks all used split screen coverage, allowing the public to see both the ceremonial coverage of the honoring and President George H. Bush's presence at the ceremony. During the ceremony, the President was captured in a jovial situation where it appeared he was "joking" around. This image juxtaposed against the solemn ceremony simultaneously taking place outraged many viewers. Complaints were filed, and soon after, the government sanctioned the media release of the images of war dead. The policy, known as the Dover Rule, disallowed media direct access to cover of the return of war dead. While photographs and video footage were still

captured on these occasions, the military was responsible for their release as official historical government documents. In April 2009, then newly elected President Obama lifted the ban. Obama's policy allows the families of the deceased to decide whether they would like a public (media accessible) ceremony, or if a more private ceremony is preferred. The former Dover Rule policy and now the lifting of the ban draws attention to the question of how the public attempts to commemorate the sacrifice made by soldiers.

The concept of public memory, drawing on the work of Casey (2004), as well as Hariman and Lucaites (2001 & 2003), Bodnar (1992), Phillips (2010) and others, will be helpful as a theoretical foundation since it helps to explain how a public memorializes its experiences, especially those that the public has deemed tragic or devastating. People not only remember an event based on what they were doing at that moment in relation to the occurrence, but also they remember the event based on the things that they saw and heard. The shocking and rarely seen images of war dead lined up on the tarmac draped in the American flag all have helped to narrate the experience through visual reminders of a tragedy that has taken place. This project will first describe the perspective of public memory while applying it to the images of war dead soldiers and the decision to overturn the Dover Rule. Then, I will engage the audience in a discussion of public memory and its effect on public culture and the implications of Obama's decision to overturn the Dover Rule.

Theory and Application

Public memory studies began in earnest in the 1980s and 90s (Phillips, 2004). Early on, scholars began to articulate a clear distinction between history and memory. Phillips writes of them as "opposing ways of recalling the past" (p. 2). History claims to retell the past with some sense of accurate objectivity, implying that the past has a singular existence. This assumes history involves an objective retelling of what has happened, as if only one way of knowing the past exists. Yet memory allows for and welcomes multiple ways of knowing the past and of recognizing the interrelationships between the past, present, and future. The memorializing of an event or person allows for a multitude of perspectives. Public memory serves as an interpretive process (Browne, 1995). The process by which a public is able to make sense of its experiences allows it a cultural identity unique to that experience. In addition, the sense in which representational forms, specifically photographs, serve as the backdrop for memorializing, as chronicled in the work of Lucaites and Hariman (2001), Ivie (1987), Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991), Edwards and Winkler (1997), and others will serve as the critical lens within which memorializing will be viewed.

Defining what constitutes “public memory” such that nothing else may intercede in its provenance has proven to be a difficult if not impossible task. As Phillips (2004) notes, public memory refers not to a “thing” people have in their mind, but to a complex of interactions with an environment that is mutable over time. Public memory is inherently memorable, public, and commemorative. Memories fade and return anew in different guises within our individual lives. Such is also the case in the sense of “public memory.” To be resilient in the face of such transitory possibilities, an event must convey a sense of worthiness to be recalled. The dead coming home, shrouded in the symbol of American pride, as in the case of those who “witnessed” (even from afar) the death of President Kennedy, is such an event: it may not be “there” at all times, but comes and goes as events call it forth: its staying power is a function of its memorability.

Characteristically, public memory is memorable, public, and commemorative. Memories of an event evolve and are created or born out of the people (Casey, 2004). It is socially constructed among members of a culture in a way that provides for multiple interpretations. Memories may change and/or evolve over time, whereas the retelling of history claims consistency in the way the history is told. By examining the images of the war dead through the lens of public memory we are able to investigate the rhetorical process by which a public remembers moments of significance from its history. Seeing these images allows the public to remember war, death, loss, sacrifice, patriotism, and the vast array of emotions and experiences that a public collectively experiences. The images serve as a reminder and evoke a response.

Second, it is not restricted to the private realm, but rather is a feature that is capable of being shared as a feeling, a belief, a perspective, or even as the prelude to action. As such, it goes beyond what Casey (2004) refers to as the individual or social to encompass the attitudes and recollections of others. Indeed, it participates in a collective consciousness. Images of the dead returning home allow the public a shared sense of recollection of their own unique experience with the war, regardless of their own individual level of involvement. When the media is allowed to capture these images and gives access to the public, there is a collective memory that is created in the meeting of person and image. President Obama’s decision to allow the public access to these images again ensures that the images are a source for public concern and experience. They become the vehicles by which a public conscious is created and the war and loss are acknowledged publicly.

Finally, public memory is inherently commemorative. The term public is meant to distinguish it from anything that may take place in private. Casey (2004) argues that public discussion with others is possible and vulnerable to scrutiny and debate and further contends “one can speculate that traumatic public events such as the Trade Towers disaster require the almost instantaneous installation of a new public memory, this time, a public memory of the victims regarded en masse” (p. 26). It is not necessary for words to be spoken in order to invoke a reaction that recalls an event, in the case of walking along the Vietnam Veteran’s wall, we need not speak the names of the dead to participate actively in commemorating their sacrifice. As such the interaction of the images from war, and the meeting of person and image can invoke a powerful reaction, as would a conversation, song, or speech about the event. These images can evoke a strong emotional response that allows for the public to commemorate or honor those who have lost their lives for the country and/or a cause. The images of war dead serve as a visceral reminder of that sacrifice. There is an undeniability of the loss that is captured when the public sees coffins draped in the American flag. These images are inherently commemorative.

Kosalka (1998) writes, “public memory is a powerful force. It is the essential nature of man to interpret his identity and what he wishes to be in terms of his appropriation of the past. A communal identity then is built on the language of symbols that are inherent in public memory” (www.lemingland.com/pubmem.htm). People are more than beings in time and place; they are also social beings whose very identities are constructed or conceived in the presence of others. Collectively, a public relies on common symbols, created from the past and brought together in order to inform the future. These symbols have multi-dimensional significance. Symbols offer more than a sign or indicator, but rather conjure an array of feelings, memories, beliefs, and attitudes. The power of a symbol is found in its ability to help construct a cultural or public identity. Yet only through interpretation and understanding of a culture and its potential future can the symbol take on meaning or significance.

Discussion and Implications

Bodnar (1992) argues that the creation of a public memory occurs as a result of the combination of “fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society” (p. 14). Because public memory is one way that society organizes and makes sense of its experiences, this perspective offers an argument about how to understand and know that reality. It is an ideological system that is constituted by symbols, values, beliefs, language and the creation and retelling of stories that emerge as a mechanism of sensemaking. The construction of public memory is

both a cultural and textual practice. In fact, when memorializing occurs, a textual interpretation of the memory takes place (Browne, 1995). Browne further argues that public memory is a “site of symbolic action, a place of cultural performance, the meaning of which is defined by its public and persuasive functions” (p. 237). As the American public remembers and attempts to cope with the aftermath of war, images such as the caskets lined up in rows on military airbase tarmacs are employed to trigger our public memory about what has happened as a result of the war. Public sentiment regarding the war is formed, shaped, and debated based in the interactions that the public has with these images and then subsequently with each other.

Collectively, individual realities or ways of knowing the world become socially patterned. Each response is individualistic in that each person responds to and comes to know an image in distinctly different ways. Yet common responses or patterns emerge as a social reality. Public memory is what the past leaves us as an imprint or impression on us and in us. These imprints help to construct and place limits on how we come to know the world (Bodnar, 1992). The focus should be on the “process of constituting the memory as well as the implications of the product for future audiences and uses” (Mandzuik, 2003, p. 274). Public memory helps to inform our future by informing our perceptions of the past and present. Casey (2004) argues that public memory is “bivalent in its temporality” (p. 17); it neither privileges nor denies the importance of time and space. Casey distinguishes between what constitutes public memory and individual, social, and collective memory. Individual memory simply refers to the individual who experiences a memory of no particular consequence. Social memory is that which is shared by a group tied together by a common trait such as geography or kinship (Casey, 2004).

Further, a public memory is socially constructed out of a specific moment in history, often a result of a crisis. As we learn from the scholarship of Hariman and Lucaites (2003), Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991), Casey (2004), and Edwards and Winkler (1997), the study of public memory attempts to identify the significance of a culture’s history. Cultural scholarship about such events attempts to make sense of the experience a culture has as it relates to crisis situations. Scholarship on public memory has focused its attention on events such as the Vietnam War, the attack on Iwo Jima, and the 9/11 attacks. These events are memorable moments within a culture’s history. They are moments of crisis that pose a challenge for the members of the public. A public memory of the event helps citizenry make sense of the crisis and the future of a people after the event.

The way in which we publicly remember or memorialize events and/or people in history is often directed by the media images that emerge as symbolic representations. Fry (2002) notes that “how and what we remember about things and events is a function not of our individual, isolated consciousness but of shared consciousness. We are directed through the framework of society to remember certain things in a certain way” (p. 108). For instance, we come to know the experience and trauma of the Vietnamese people through our interaction with the iconic image of Accidental Napalm Attack. It is precisely the way that images are used in the public sphere that, as Edwards and Winkler (1997) argue, reflect not only the individual’s values and attitudes, but also those of the broader society. Images have cultural salience (Edwards & Winkler, 1997). Remember that iconic images emerge out of the cultural manifestations of a public and transcend both time and space. In fact, Olson (1987) defines icon as “a visual representation so as to designate a type of image that is palpable in manifest form and denotative in function” (p. 38). Iconic images in this sense help to construct a public memory by serving as visual representations of the experience. Denotatively, the images of war dead have come to represent various aspects of the aftermath of war for the American people. Iconic images are then used to serve a specific function in the way the public commemorates an event. As a function of public memory, iconic images also motivate social action by the public. These images have the power to motivate the public to respond to war as a public, inspire political and public discussion about war, and provide a forum for public mourning.

When we publicly commemorate our histories by highlighting the events through public display, we not only acknowledge our past, but also make suggestions for the future. Similarly, the images of the war dead allow for another powerful public moment in the aftermath of war. Zelizer (2004) argues that photographic images become vehicles of memory. Photographic images have the power to illuminate and depict what is real. Each is a snapshot of a moment in time, with the power to memorialize the event. Images such as Accidental Napalm Attack, a firefighter emerging from the Oklahoma City federal building carrying a small child draped in his arms, and the Twin Towers billowing with smoke prior to their collapse, will forever remain ingrained in the public’s memory of the atrocities that occurred in each of those moments in history. Zelizer argues that “often photography aids the recall of things and events past so effectively that photographs become the primary markers of memory itself” (p. 160). The cultural practice of storing these images allows the public to memorialize the event. Zelizer (2004) argues that, in modern societies, museums, galleries, television and Internet archives serve to “freeze, replay, and store visual memories for large numbers of people” (p. 161). These images defy the constraints of public policy and allow for the public

recognition of loss at the hand of global conflict. They allow the families, friends, and citizens of this country to commemorate, grieve, and more fully understand the magnitude of the sacrifice being made. The image is powerful. It has stay power. It changes the individual, and ultimately changes the public. The lifting of the Dover Rule allows us to meet these images, to experience them firsthand and to collectively come to terms with our loss.

President Obama's decision to overturn the Dover Rule allows for a meeting of witness and loss. It also allows for the meeting of public and sacrifice. When Americans are allowed to see the images of war dead returning home, it garners a collective response that publicly commemorates the sacrifice and loss experienced. This essay critically examines the theoretical framework of public memory and its use for understanding the implications of Obama's Dover Rule repeal. It helped to explore how publics publicly commemorate sacrifice. The St. Petersburg Times (2009) cites John Ellsworth, president of the Military Families United as suggesting that "some people want to celebrate the lives of their fallen, and share their fallen hero with the American people, while others want to hold them a little closer to the vest and keep it private. We should respect that. It shouldn't be up to the government to hide these images to the public" (¶6).

Concluding Remarks

This project aimed to position our pedagogical approach to teaching and coaching the events of rhetorical criticism and communication analysis at the center of a scholarship focused discussion. Our students are the future of our discipline and have the potential to begin their scholarly contributions at an earlier stage of academic tenure. The events of rhetorical criticism and communication analysis offer a unique opportunity for practicum of the methods we employ as rhetoricians.

We have a responsibility to teach our students how to be great speakers, but also how to be great critics. Helping them to understand the depth of the theories they see informing their projects and being able to articulate that understanding to their audience will help them grow as young student/scholars. In an era when forensic competition is constantly being challenged by budgetary constraints, it is even more important to help our students more fully grow in their knowledge of communication theory. Our role as coaches is to provide the tools necessary for our students to understand the complexity of the game, knowledge to master the practice, and willingness to take risk...all in the pursuit of excellence.

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