

CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONS OF ORAL INTERPRETATION

Christopher S. Aspdal
University of Houston, Houston, TX

The forensic community is currently facing many difficult challenges. Many stigmas have been placed in the world of oral interpretation. The nature of oral interpretation is to educate students through the use of literature. Regardless of the literature used, students have the ability to grow from this material. However, we as coaches and judges have taken a more negative approach to this concept. Words such as *recycle* and *trite* have taken the place of more important words like *education* and *research*.

It is important for us to look at the reasons why we have taken this approach to oral interpretation and see what possible solutions we may be able to derive. Above all else, we need to remember that we are here to educate students and help them to achieve their goals (rather than ours). The following will examine some current issues facing the oral interpretation community and some possible solutions to these problems. Obviously, when looking at such a subjective event as oral interpretation, no group will ever reach a unanimous decision on how to solve these problems. Perhaps through examining these concerns, we may be able to provide for a more equal criteria for judging, and create less frustration and disappointment for competitive students.

Recycling Pieces

The question of using “recycled” material has raised many eyebrows. We, unfortunately, seem to have assumed a law in our forensic community that would prevent students from rehashing old performances. Before we go any further, it is probably necessary to define what exactly “recycling” means. When used in the area of competitive forensics, the idea of using a piece of literature that has previously been performed in competition (usually successfully) would be defined as recycling. The misconception behind recycled literature is two-fold.

Overused Material

If a piece of literature is found to traditionally be an enjoyable selection to perform, for whatever reason, then it is classified as *overused*. This is a term that suggests that the material’s value of entertainment has been worn out. The attitude of listening to a piece that we have “heard a thousand times before” essentially becomes a negative label given to the literature itself.

Unfortunately, the educational value of the literature suffers equally from this label. Students should be allowed, for the sake of education, to review older pieces of literature and learn from them. There is, after all, a reason why they have been performed so many times. Either the literature is easy to learn, is fun and exciting or simply teaches an important lesson in oral interpretation. Regardless of the reason why a piece of literature is labeled as “overused,” students should not suffer the consequences of performing literature that interests them.

National Material

The second misconception behind recycling pieces is a bit more questionable. The question is raised, if a piece of literature has been performed by an individual in a national break round, then should this piece become off limits to other students in the following years? The obvious answer to this question would appear to be no. However, all too often, it is seen on ballots and heard through the halls of universities at tournaments, that students should not be allowed to perform literature that has been “successfully” done. The belief seems to be either: (1) The literature could not possibly be improved on, or (2) The literature has “flown its course and should be laid to rest.” In either situation, the student will eventually suffer from these prevailing attitudes.

Creative and artistic endeavors are what the oral interpretation community thrives upon. By limiting students such, we stifle the creative thought process. Additionally (and very important to note), many newer students will find material that strikes their attention and spend a great deal of time and effort in preparing and presenting pieces. However, once taken to competition, these students are told that their efforts are, essentially, a waste of time, due to the “recycling rule.”

Students should be permitted to use their creative endeavors to cut and present material of any sort. There is not a specific rule claiming rights to individual pieces. This is to say that the cutting should likewise reflect the student's original work and not an "exact cutting and/or blocking" previously used. Judges should equally remove their personal views on a previously performed piece and evaluate according to the performance in the round.

It is important to note that in both instances of recycling material, many students do not necessarily know as much as we coaches do. When literature is discovered, we should encourage the educational process and allow students to grow from their performances, rather than be stifled by judging opinions. All too often, students have simply become frustrated and given up on forensics because of judgments made based on this recycling stigma. We should encourage students to do their best, and refrain from discouraging commentary.

Trite Topic

Similar to the recycling concept, another stigma falls on the realm of oral interpretation. Just as literary material is often labeled as overused, topics may be referred to as *trite* or *common*. The belief is that when we hear about a specific topic enough times, we become very tired of or desensitized to the subject and thus learn nothing further from it. Topics such as war, love, death and the infamous "gay AIDS" have been scrutinized on many a competitive weekend.

The problem with this philosophy comes in two parts. First, perhaps there *is* something new and innovative or interesting to derive from an overused topic, but we all too often miss it because we tend to tune out the performance as a whole. Secondly, students are here primarily for education. Programmed literature teaches us to utilize a full spectrum of student talents, to create logical links as well as creative cutting.

We should not assume that because we have heard "everything about a subject," that the student has. Students should be allowed to thrive and educate through their performances, and equally feel that they have accomplished just that. Stifling topics due to subject matter should be avoided. Coaches should always strive to teach their students unique and

original ideas, this is one of the great aspects of oral interpretation. However, when a student does choose to perform a "common" topic, he/she should not be penalized.

Gender Specific Interpretation

Often it has been said that if a piece of literature is written for a specific gender, then the performer must be of the same gender as the character in the literature. This brings up the question of male vs. female role playing in oral interpretation. The idea suggests that students should remain true to a character at all costs, and the only way to insure that this is done is that a student must remain true to his or her sex.

The problem with this idea is that students become limited to the creative process. When a male student takes on the persona of a female, or vice versa, a certain degree of growth takes place. Students should be allowed to grow as performers and learn as much as they can about their abilities. No other forum of interpretive performance truly allows a student the opportunity to stretch beyond their limited boundaries and portray gender differences. As trite as this may sound, the fact remains that oral interpretation allows students to expand their limits and perform pieces that normally would not be considered.

As judges, we need to open our minds to the idea that oral interpretation is not acting (as I've heard all too often) and that we are therefore not limited to the boundaries set up by the stage. Gender shifts should be allowed to help students grow in their performances and learn more about themselves.

Cultural Sensitivity

When looking to the area of cultural sensitivity, we see similar parallels to gender specific interpretation. Essentially, the guiding force behind this philosophy is the same as gender oriented pieces. If a piece of literature is written for a specific race or culture (Hispanic, Caucasian, African American, Jewish, etc.) and the student is not of that background, or at least does not resemble the cultural persona, then he/she should avoid performing this literature. This idea appears the strongest when the piece directly focuses on the particular issue of race.

The problem here is that students should be encouraged to explore and study other cultures. Perhaps the best way to learn about a culture is to interact directly with the culture. So many times students have put a valiant foot forward in learning and getting involved with other cultures for the sake of learning more about their literature and performance technique. But this research comes to an end when, in performance, a coach or judge tells a student not to perform something due to the ethnic standard. “But you don’t look Hispanic . . .” or, “That was offensive, how can you say this about a culture when you don’t belong to it . . .” are words uttered to students on ballots over and over again.

If students are stifled in their performances, then so too is the educational process. It is important that we not only support, but also encourage students to expand their knowledge of other cultures. By doing so, we allow for a wider variety of performances as well as more rounded and open-minded students.

Assumed Formats

As a rule of thumb, oral interpretation events have gradually taken a path of general “assumed rules” and patterns to how specific events should be put together and judged. We seem to have moved away from the creative styles from which oral interpretation was developed and have now created general, evolutionary judging criteria. Such things as teaser/intros, social significance and performance formats have evolved from creative styles to expected norms. Judges have shifted from rewarding students for innovative concepts to “down ranking” students who fail to follow these new standards.

The major problem with these format criteria is that students, again, become limited in their creative means. If a student does not wish to follow a teaser/intro format for her prose, for whatever reason, then according to the assumed rules format, that student will probably suffer the consequences. Likewise, if a student chooses not to link a current event to his poetry program, then the same rules apply. By limiting people to assumed rules such as social significance or format structure, we begin to enforce our own personal beliefs into the individual’s interpretation, thus not allowing for individual styles and preferences.

Yes, oral interpretation is, perhaps arguably, the most subjective of all forms of competitive speech. It is difficult to argue that one will almost always place his or her personal feelings and emotions into a well performed piece of literature, this is expected. However, objective judging, when following structure style and such, should not have a strict bearing. Obviously, objective concerns like time restraints, literary merit, and physical limitations will always have a role in judging. But “personal preferences” criteria should not reflect in ranking. Yes, mention these preferences to the student. Maybe he had never thought of it before, or perhaps he will adapt to his audience. There is nothing wrong with personal preferences in how an event “should” be performed, but do not hold this standard against a performance. Simply put, judge the performance of the piece, not how it is set up.

The Great Debates

Traditionally, oral interpretation has not been the subject of ridicule. Of course educators in the past have, and on some occasions still do, argue the value of oral interpretation as an educational practice. However, for the sake of argument, we will assume the standard of oral interpretation as an educational tool.

Recently it seems that coaches and judges have begun to question many of the alternatives that oral interpretation has taken. The current shifts in attitudes as well as coaching philosophies have conjured up several heated debates (hmm . . . oral interpretation and debate, two terms seldom used together). Unfortunately, these debates seem to have developed a split among oral interpretation coaches and judges, creating a traditionalist point of view and a non-traditionalist point of view. As a result, students performing oral interpretation have inadvertently been caught in the middle.

Arguments over such topics as first person prose vs. third person prose, dramatics performed as monologue vs. dialogue and programmed poetry vs. single piece poetry have been debated for years. It is important to note, though, that when looking at these issues, traditionalists and non-traditionalists alike tend to judge with an open mind and set personal preferences aside once in a round.

However, recent arguments have developed over the actual validity of students' performances. Questions such as "how far can we stretch the boundaries of oral interpretation" and "what qualifies a piece as having literary merit have developed?" These issues have taken a harder course in separating traditionalist and non-traditionalist opinions. It is essential that we address a few of these major debates and see the logical arguments taken on both sides. It is important to realize that we will not be able to reach any obvious conclusions to these issues in one sitting, but perhaps we may be able to gain a greater understanding of this split in attitudes and mend a few of these problems.

Acting vs. Interpretation

Perhaps one of the most frequent criticisms seen on ballots recently is the question of what defines the line between acting and interpreting literature? Certainly a book in hand does not solely justify oral interpretation, so we must look further into this argument. Probably the strongest argument defining the line between acting and oral interpretation is the creative motivation behind movement or the absence thereof.

Many traditionalists would argue that the basic premise for oral interpretation over acting is movement. Simply put, when interpreting literature, one should use one's voice and facial expressions to suggest emotions and character development. The art of movement suggests a stage. Interpreters should not freely move around, this is the nature of acting.

The antithesis of this would be the argument of blocking an interpretive performance. Non-traditionalists would argue creative motivations. As said, "We have progressed from basic standing, to allow a performer to utilize his surroundings and allow movement to set a scene." A performer may be able to express more emotion, or portray a greater feeling for the piece through "creative" blocking.

In either instance, movement has developed into an assumed "norm" by many. However, the debate continues over what is considered too much movement and what is acceptable.

Written Material

One of the greatest debates currently facing the forensic community is that of the use of written material. Many would argue that the use of written material promotes a lack in educational standards. Oral interpretation was originated to promote research and further study and reading from various outside authors. By performing one's own work, students fail to learn the value of adapting to different authors, as well as audiences. What this means is that when written material is performed, there is no room for interpretation, simply because the author is the interpreter. The search for creative interpretation and adapting to other authors becomes irrelevant, because the performer "already knows how the piece should be performed."

Essentially, a student can simply sit down and write all performed material, and the idea of research and learning through others is thus nil. Students should strive to find material for performance, whether new or old, and not take the easier approach of writing whatever they want.

On the other hand, written material promotes an interest in creative writing. Students are permitted to express their own opinions and emotions through the performance of their personal written words. Often times students will find a topic which they really wish to perform, but material is rare. Writing material provides a means of expressing views and ideas that may not have been addressed before. As we've seen with the "one piece" ruling on Programmed Oral Interpretation, written material does have some validity and should be considered as such.

Acceptable Language

A large question being raised now is that of what is acceptable language in performance pieces. The idea of using offensive language has always been a subject of controversy for many. A great many people feel that the use of harsh language is simply unacceptable and unnecessary. The following arguments show both sides of this issue.

Language allows us to hear the voice of the character. True emotions are expressed through words, often times harsh words. Oral interpretation allows the student one venue, and that is expression through words, thus

interpretation. Therefore, as interpreters, a student must rely upon every avenue possible to enable him to express these emotions. One of these alternatives is through “foul” language. Others argue that this is just the way people will often times express themselves in “real life” and oral interpretation should reflect reality.

All too often, however, students feel that the use of language is a right and not a privilege. In other words, students take advantage of this use of expression and take it to an inappropriate level. This is what we refer to in the forensic community as “shock value.” The attitude is that a student feels he has the right to use the language, thus forgetting the purpose behind this venue. Language becomes offensive and uncalled for because it is used inappropriately. Still many argue the logic that foul language is not acceptable in other realms of forensics like debate and public address, so why does it suddenly become acceptable for oral interpretation? In either instance, we are led to the question, should we cut out all questionable language since some students take advantage of this privilege? And if we do this, where do we begin to censor what is and isn’t questionable language (a long argued debate in and of itself)?

After all the discussion, we still seem to be left with the question, what do we intend to do to “clean up” oral interpretation. Above all else, we must understand that we are educators, and students look to us for guidance in all aspects. We must encourage success through knowledge, rather than through competition. Whether the student is a member of your team or someone else’s, the primary goal for all of us should be to educate. Trophies and awards are nice--this is the nature of competition--but if this is our only focus, then we have not succeeded.

It is important to collapse the differences within our community so that students may have the opportunity to grow as performers. When we remain stagnant in disagreement, then students will remain stagnant in the learning process. If a performer is told weekend after weekend that his piece is wrong due to personal issues rather than logical reasoning, that student will never grow, or worse (as seen many, many times) become frustrated and simply quit.

Let us challenge ourselves to bring a standard of equality in performance. Avoid the personal preference judging philosophy as best as possible, and

encourage students to strive for excellence, and more so, to educate through performance.