

Abstract: The author will present her personal and frank ideas of what she sees as a dangerous trend in public speaking events. A loose analogy of forensics to a swinging pendulum will first be explained. Then the author will explain what she sees as the current state of public speaking events, and finally, an attempt to predict some outcomes for the future of public speaking events and some suggestions for our consideration. The aim of this paper is to make us think: where are we in this quest for excellence in public speaking events? How did we get to where we are and where do we go from here?

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING: THE PERFECT PENDULUM SWINGS

M'Liss S. Hindman

Speech Instructor and Director of Forensics
Tyler Junior College, Tyler, TX

Forensics has been an overpowering part of my life for over thirty years--twenty-three of those as a coach. Even though I have not quite reached the mid-forties, one of my colleagues in Texas last year announced that he and some other younger coaches had determined that I was the reigning Grandmother of Texas forensics. Why or how did they determine that title? Amidst the current, active coaches in this state, I have coached at the college level for the longest amount of time. Did this revelation make me feel old? No, it just made me feel weird; because I still internally see myself as about 28 years old, still out to conquer the world and "slay the dragons," etc. What does my personal longevity have to do with this panel's topic of New Directions for Public Speaking? Well, I hope that it gives me a bit of credibility to discuss what I see as a dangerous trend in this wonderful art of public speaking. Mostly today I intend to share my observations and my gut instincts honed from these thirty odd years in the business of competitive speaking events. First, I will present a loose analogy of forensics to a pendulum swinging. Next, I will explain what I see as the current state of public speaking events, the bright, beautiful

spots, as well as the warty areas. Finally, I will attempt bravery and predict some outcomes for the future of public speaking events and some measures that we should possibly consider. The aim of this paper is to make us all think about where are we in this quest for excellence in public speaking events? How did we get to where we are and where in the heck do we go from here?

Most of us have heard the analogy of either various things in life or life itself to a swinging pendulum. For instance fashion trends. What is trendy in fashion today was in fashion back in the late 60s and early 70s. The pendulum has swung back to where it was before--for better or worse, depending on your prospective of bell bottoms or wide legged pants and nylon shirts and blouses. It is my belief that our field of forensics can loosely be identified with the pendulum theory: to the far left is mediocrity and to the far right is excellence. I believe we are currently at the apex of the pendulum's right swing and that it is about to come crashing back to left to the doldrums of mediocrity if we as educators in the world of forensics do not come up with tactics of how to perpetuate the pursuit of excellence once again.

For the vast majority of my professional life, I have seen forensics grow and improve. Speakers became more fluent, wittier, and have developed a lively sense of ease and naturalness in delivery. Topics improved greatly over the years together with the vast majority of speakers choosing topics of depth and significance. I have been fascinated as school program after school program began to turn out accomplished orators. Regularly, my comments to my colleagues of "I just judged the best round of Persuasion (or whatever the event) that I've ever heard" became embarrassingly redundant. During the last five years or so I found that I began to expect every round of competition to be near *perfect*. I expected every student to know not only the basic skills of orators such as: how to stand up front in the middle of the room, to have an introduction with a preview, to develop 2-4 points, and to have a conclusion which summarizes the main ideas; but also to know and practice the finer skills of public speaking: how to make eye contact effectively with every person in the room, to include witty comments even within a relatively dry topic, to use movement and gestures effectively, etc. And obviously I was not alone in my expectations.

I have had dozens of conversations with colleagues who made statements that they clearly were expecting near perfection as well. And I have read dozens of ballots--and you have as well, I am sure--from our colleagues who were almost bitter when they judged one of our students who did not fit this image of a perfect orator. Comments like "your speech topic has possibilities, but you have a long way to go before it is effectively developed" or worse "your topic has potential and perhaps you do, too. Work more on your organization, your delivery and your sense of significance before the next competition." What is worse still, I admit that I have prevented my own students from going to tournaments by telling them that their speech was not quite ready yet, when what I really meant was I didn't think they were ready for the wolftap of forensic competition where, by the luck or fate of the draw, your student may fall victim to the pen of the super sleuth of oration--the judge on your circuit who will list every single mistake that the student may make and will never include any words of encouragement. By my own actions, I was tolerating this perfection craze. We are guilty of defining perfection too narrowly.

Now, please don't get the wrong impression. No one in this room or at this conference loves forensics any more than I do. And I will admit that I am as competitive as the rest of you. I also strongly believe in the pursuit of perfection. I believe strongly in what we do as forensic educators. I feel that one of our principal aims as forensic educators should be to help students strive for perfection--to become the very best orator that he or she can become. I even dare to repeat what my sports competition crazy husband's favorite quotation is by Vince Lombardi, the legendary Green Bay Packer coach of old:

"We must strive for perfection. In striving for perfection, we may never attain it, but in the pursuit of perfection we will attain excellence."

That's not a bad motivational motto for any of us--in any of our endeavors--but here is where I feel we have gone wrong in public speaking events. In our pursuit of what we have grown to accept as being "perfection," we have become convinced that there is only one way of doing events correctly. Instead of setting up general models by which we can show our students what a good speech is or what effective delivery is,

we have created a cookie mold by which we seek to stamp out nearly identical speakers. Oh sure, there are differences in our speakers - just as there are differences between any two cookies in a batch. One may have a few more chocolate chips, one may be plump, while the other is flat, but the taste . . . is identical. And our tournaments have become giant cookie factories where we present our current batch for examination and approval, hoping that few or none will be rejected to the crumb heap.

Now, don't take my cynical analogy the wrong way. I am all for competition. I value competitive forensics. After all, creating opportunities for students to showcase their abilities in a tournament setting is much of what forensic activity is all about. Tournaments can be a great motivational factor to encourage our students to work. The danger is that we have let the tournament setting become "*the end*" and "*defining setting*" and we are forgetting about the real world applications of forensics--the skills that our students can use every day of their lives, long after all of their national eligibility is used. And one of the severest dangers in the quest for perfect orators is that many of our colleagues have succumbed to the temptation of writing the speeches for their students. "After all," they probably reason, "I have a hard enough time preparing the student in all of the intricacies of perfect delivery--I don't also have time to teach them how to find a topic, how to research a topic, and how to write it before competition starts in September." And yes, come on, admit it. Don't we expect to see cookie cutter perfect little speeches in the earliest of tournaments? I remember, not so many years ago, that we were into the spring semester before the majority of students had their speeches totally memorized--many used some notes or had to stumble through several memory glitches. During the past few years, we, as coaches and judges, have grown to expect perfectly memorized speeches by the end of September! And after we critique a speech one weekend and suggest major changes in its development, if by some quirk of fate we are selected to judge that student during the very next weekend's tournament, we expect to see that student with the completely revamped speech, completely re-memorized. I admit it. I have asked this impossible task of some of my own students before. Are we for real? Who has that much time--even if they didn't have classes, a job, and other responsibilities besides forensics?

This quest for perfection in all elements of public speaking has gotten out of hand in my opinion. Even in the lower preparation speaking events, we

read snide comments on ballots about students who don't have at least five documented quotations in Extemporaneous Speaking and at least two esoteric examples in Impromptu. Get real. For the majority of beginning college speech students, it is an accomplishment to deliver an Extemporaneous or Impromptu speech with clear organization and no notes. Why are we insistent on all of the other perfection trappings for each and every competitor? I shudder to remember that within the past five years, I have discouraged students from entering those events, because I knew that they did not have the academic background to furnish them with the esoteric examples or I didn't have the funds to furnish their files with the impressive journals and magazines. By the way, whatever happened to the credibility of Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News and World Report any way? Why aren't they "good enough" sources any more?

Bottom line, our *current narrow definition of "perfection"* has resulted in two calamities: (1) the "sameness" of forensic orators. Speakers using the same basic organizational patterns, the same triangle shaped walking pattern, the same genuine smile, the same type of medical or technological topics. The second (2) calamity is that we have discouraged too many students and perhaps too many programs from even attempting to compete. My "slap" to the face reality came while sitting in a business meeting of one of the six forensic organizations I belong. One of my colleagues, who we would probably identify as "not-very-serious about the activity" because she only travels her squad to one or two tournaments a semester, stood up in the meeting and berated us for treating her students so rudely and unprofessionally. How had we behaved? By writing such comments as: "not a competitive topic," "you're not using a winning format," or "this topic will never go anywhere."

At first, I admit, I just hung my head a bit and thought, "yes, those are tacky comments to make, but we are trying to make our students the best that they can be." I rationalized, "We are just trying to educate these students to try harder, to strive for perfection." But several weeks later, I woke up to the reality. We have made *competitive forensics* into an *elitist sport*. By writing those sorts of comments we had essentially told that student, "You are not good enough to play in our ballpark. Go home." By rewarding sameness--the students who best fit the perfect cookie mold for how a speech should be done--we have discouraged hundreds of students

who sadly come to the realization that they will never attain that level of perfection.

I am still not advocating doing away with competition. I am advocating that we take a long hard look at our standards of excellence. And that we take a longer, harder look at what we write on the ballots. Every student who walks into our room to be judged may not have as their goal to be in the finals of AFA or PRP at the end of the year. We must be less jaded. We must not forget the value of constructive criticism for educational purposes. We dare not continue to teach our students to be *forensic specialists* instead of teaching them life skills as well.

Over twenty-five years ago, George W. Ziegelmueller was the Conference Director for the 1972 National Developmental Conference on Forensics. In speaking about the evolution of forensics and forensics education, George remarked as to how diverse the current American forensics scene was. He stated:

"The activities programs may be competitive (tournament oriented) or noncompetitive (audience oriented) or a combination of both. I protest that we have let the tournament oriented strain completely take over our field and have forgotten our roots of communication as an audience centered activity, thereby the necessity of having all public speaking events being audience oriented."

Tennyson once wrote, "Charm us, orator, till the lion look no larger than the cat." That indeed is a great skill to attain. But if we're not careful the lions are going to eat us. Directors of forensics will become discouraged, students will drop out of programs, programs will fade from existence. The pendulum is moving. Is it headed toward excellence or toward the mediocrity of sameness: greatness, but with no lasting substance? Thomas Mann remarked that

"[t]ime has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols."

This is also true with the pendulum of forensics. There will be no thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the approaching moment of its demise. It is only we mortal coaches who can ring the bells and fire off our pistols to make the necessary changes in our attitudes and those of our colleagues. We must treat forensic competition as the learning tool that it should be. As Sheryl A. Friedley spoke at a Speech Communication Association convention panel in 1992:

" . . . forensic educators (must be) able to capitalize on . . . diversity--diversity in the myriad of skills forensics develops, diversity in the students forensics attracts, and diversity in various outlets the forensic community provides for competitive success as well as community service. If forensic educators fail to emphasize this diversity both to students and administrators, this activity may well limp, rather than leap, into the 21st century."

Perfection is a great goal, but it should not become so narrow of a goal that we neglect all of the odd cookies out there that have an unique taste of their own. These odd cookies, these students, are worth evaluating on their own merits, not being summarily rejected because they don't fit the customary perfect mold. And if you are not totally sick of analogies by now, this grandmother would like to remind each of us that time is ticking, the pendulum is swinging--only we can direct its course. There is no one "*perfect*" mold for public speaking events. Only we can truly define what forensic excellence is.

Works Cited

Friedley, S. A. (1992, November). Diversity: Key to forensics success in the 21st century, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, IL.

McBath, J. H. (Ed.). (1975). Forensics as communication: The argumentative perspective. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company in conjunction with the American Forensics Association and the Speech Communication Association.