

**IF IT'S PROBLEM-CAUSE-SOLUTION
THIS MUST BE PERSUASIVE SPEAKING:
ARE WE SHORT-CHANGING THE ART OF PERSUASION?**

Shawnalee A. Whitney
Co-Director of Forensics
University of Alaska, Anchorage, Anchorage, AK

Every so often I think we should be taken to judge a round with a blindfold firmly in place. Those of us who spend a significant amount of time in the activity would likely be able to identify the event just by listening to the first speaker(s)--probably by listening to the introduction alone. Don't get me wrong. I think that speakers should make their topic and purpose explicit within the first minute or two of the speech in public address events. In addition, I genuinely enjoy coaching and teaching all manner of public speaking--in fact, it's probably my favorite dimension of this activity--so this is not the disgruntled voice of someone who should have stepped out gracefully somewhere back down the path of the almost two decades that I've been involved in speech and debate.

At the same time, however, I am concerned about things I am seeing in our activity. In particular, I am concerned about practices in public speaking events that seem to suggest that we may be giving in to the conventions of competition, allowing ourselves and our students to forget that the *content* and *purpose* should drive a communicative effort. Frequently, I see speeches that seem to be driven by the dominant organizational pattern and a desire to give a speech that looks like other speeches. In short, while the wide range of events available to students in competitive forensics affords plenty of opportunity for creativity, unique approaches, and fresh ideas, all too often it seems that the conventions of competition get the better of us and our students. The end result is potentially lackluster, formulaic speeches that have relatively little to do with the richly textured, highly challenging, incredibly complex art we know as public speaking.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of two significant challenges that exist in Persuasive Speaking on the competitive circuit

today: narrow topics and overly formulaic patterns of organization. I've elected to focus my paper on the event alternately known in intercollegiate forensics as *Persuasive Speaking*, *Persuasion*, and/or *Oratory*. For purposes of this paper, I use these three different labels interchangeably; my use of one label or another does not indicate concerns about or allegiance to a particular forensic organization that may use a given title for the event. For clarity, it is important to note that when I capitalize the terms (e.g. *Persuasive Speaking* or *Persuasion*), I am referring to a particular competitive event; when I do not capitalize the terms (e.g. *persuasive speaking* or *persuasion*), I am referring to the art and practice of persuasion, the body of theory and concepts, and other research that comprises the study of persuasion as put forth by scholars in communication and other disciplines across the academy.

The difficulties I see stemming from the conventions of competition are not unique to Persuasive Speaking. In fact, problems of a similar nature no doubt exist in other public address events featured in forensic competition. This paper will address Persuasion alone, however, in an effort to illuminate the problem in a focused fashion, thus providing a touchstone for exploring the same problem in other public speaking events. More importantly, this paper serves as a follow up to concerns raised about Persuasive Speaking at the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events held in 1990 in Denver, Colorado. Thus, I provide this as an exploration of where we are going, and where we have been with regard to Persuasive Speaking.

THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST...

Proceedings from the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events provide copies of two papers from the conference focusing on concerns about public speaking events. One paper considers the importance of allowing judges to ask questions of competitors in such events (Kanter, 1990), while the other explores the ethical use of evidence in public address (Friedly, 1990). While both of these papers address significant issues, one paper presented at the conference, but not included in the conference proceedings, has continued to stand out in my mind and guide my thinking about public address events in general and about Persuasive Speaking in particular. That paper, "Safe Sex and Safe Topics" (1990), was written by Captain Mike Dalby of the United States Air Force

Academy. In it he argued that students were being limited in what they could learn about persuasion because the conventions of competition steered them away from topics of a genuinely controversial nature and toward topics that were, as he termed them, "safe."

Dalby argued that competitive conventions led students to seek out topics for Persuasive Speaking that were not likely to spark any true discomfort in or discord for judges or other audience members, were not likely to significantly challenge a listener's system of belief, and were likely to be an offer the listener couldn't refuse. That is why he drew the connection between "safe sex" and "safe topics" in the title of his paper. The idea of "safe sex" is fairly noncontroversial--few people would object to the possibility of saving lives through simple procedures that listeners could enact themselves during sexual intercourse. Think of the topics you saw addressed on the circuit during the past competitive season. How many of them were truly controversial? How many of them really challenged a system of values or beliefs? Probably not many.

The problem, as Dalby saw it, was that persuasion in the "real world" was not so antiseptic, not so cut and dried. To persuade people outside a round of competition often one must overcome deep-seated objections and give consideration to the listeners' beliefs in far more complex and challenging ways than we generally see in competitive rounds. I will grant that competitive speakers have only 10 minutes in which to present an argument as to why the audience should act in a certain way or embrace a particular belief, but that does not relieve forensic educators of the responsibility to teach the full range of possible approaches to persuasion and it does not absolve speakers of the necessity of mastering those skills.

Mike Dalby was trying to remind the forensics community that speakers must not be afraid to address controversial issues. A complete forensic education should prepare a speaker to address the widest possible range of topics, issues, and so on. Moreover, forensics pedagogy should provide speakers with the ability to address such issues in a manner that is effective and appropriate to the topic, the audience, and the occasion at hand. Mike Dalby was encouraging us to be mindful of the fact that sometimes, the topic, the audience, and the occasion are more complex than a round at a tournament. I think he was right and the resolutions

passed at the 1990 conference indicate that many other conference attendees agreed with him as well.

While not all resolutions addressed Persuasion specifically, those who attended the conference endorsed fourteen resolutions focusing on problems in a broad category labeled *Public Speaking*. While conference attendees weighed in on a wide range of issues through resolutions, the Public Speaking category featured more resolutions than *any* other dimension of the conference.¹ Clearly, this area of forensic competition and forensics pedagogy continues to be of concern for many of us. Despite the fact that many of us seem to share concerns about public address events, however, practices in these events on the competitive circuit seem to become more entrenched with each passing year. Sadly, if I were to run into Mike Dalby today, I would have to report that I have not seen much change in Persuasive Speaking in response to the concerns he and others raised at the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events.

There are dimensions of forensics that seem so commonplace that we may come to think of them as certainties. It has almost become a certainty that once the season starts the charges of what is and is not a *trend* will be widely bandied about on the ie-1, a listserv devoted to the intercollegiate

¹ Those who attended the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events in 1990 in Denver, Colorado, endorsed a total of 65 resolutions on six different topics. The previous two conferences of a similar nature, the 1984 National Developmental Conference on Forensics and the First National Developmental Conference on Individual Events held in 1988, itemized over fifty issues of concern (Porter, 1990). Many of the concerns raised through resolutions endorsed at those conferences continue to be topics of discussion, the subject of forensics research, and so on even 13 years after the first conference. Those who wish to review the specific areas of concern from each of the conferences are encouraged to seek out a copy of the proceedings from each of the three conferences.

As noted in this paper, 14 of the 1990 resolutions focused on concerns about Public Speaking events. The remaining categories broke down as follows: concerns about New Programs received 9 resolutions, Oral Interpretation featured 12, Training Practices for coaches & judges received 10, the Hierarchy of the forensics community & its organizations had 12, and the Educational/Competitive Duality of forensic activities received 8.

individual events community and generously overseen by the forensics program at Cornell University. I have to admit that I cringe when I read a post to the list discussing "the current trend in (fill-in-name-of-event)." The claim that a particular practice, type of topic, type of piece, and so on is a trend is often based on the fact that one person saw this particular practice in a particular round. While the ie-1 is a great place for diverse discussions between new students, experienced students, former competitors, coaches, and so on, we need to be quick to remind list subscribers that one speech *does not* constitute a trend. That said, the problems I put forth in this paper are based on judging many rounds of Persuasive Speaking, reviewing videotapes of the final round of the event from national tournaments, and reviewing compilations of winning speeches such as *Championship Debates and Speeches* and the manuscripts from past tournaments of the Interstate Oratorical Association.

On the other hand, this paper is not a statistical analysis of practices in Persuasive Speaking. I have not counted the number of times I've seen a particular organizational pattern, nor have I done a content analysis of each speech I've reviewed to come to the conclusions I offer here. In addition, the problems I cite may not be evident in all rounds of Persuasive Speaking across the country. Nonetheless, I believe we should keep these issues in mind as we judge and as we teach forensic competitors in order to strengthen our activity. Specifically, I believe there are two key challenges facing Persuasive Speaking at present in competitive forensics: (1) the narrow focus of topics in the event and (2) the limited number of organizational patterns in use.

CHALLENGE NUMBER ONE: THE RANGE OF TOPICS IS OVERLY NARROW

Persuasive Speaking seems to continue to feature what Dalby referred to as "safe" topics. In other words, competitors seem drawn to or are encouraged to seek out topics that are not terribly "controversial." Such topics generally do not call for a significant change of attitude or course action on the part of a listener, and as a result the speeches are not always as challenging as one might hope and there is a certain "sameness" to many of them.

Why are students and coaches drawn to such topics? Why do forensics folks watch television reports such as prime time news magazines like *20/20* and *Dateline NBC* hoping to find the disease-of-the-month, the problem-of-the-week, and hoping that it can be solved by simple steps that can be taken by almost anyone? If Stone Phillips, Jane Pauley, and the other folks at *Dateline NBC* can explore a problem, explain its causes, and present us with workable solutions for three to four different issues during the course of a one hour broadcast, surely members of the forensics community can do the topic justice in 10 minutes!

Perhaps the forensics community has been drawn to "safe" topics for the same reason that they are so popular on news magazines--viewer appeal. Television programs (and print sources that provide topics of a similar nature) survive only when they have viewers or readers. In competition, speeches are seen as "competitive" when they are endorsed by judges on ballots. Consequently, just as news media may shy away from topics they think viewers will not like, students may have a sense of fear judges may rank persuasive speeches on the basis of their personal beliefs or their ability to enact personal solutions. This fear can lead students to select "safe" topics, those with a broad-based appeal and individual solvency, and shy away from topics that cannot be solved or acted upon in a simple fashion, thus limiting the need for more challenging and more complex forms of audience analysis and speech construction.

Have your students received ballots that had comments such as "how does this effect me?" Have such comments played a role in the judge's decision? While it can be difficult to divorce oneself from personal beliefs and motivations, a judge need not believe the speaker with his or her "heart of hearts" in order to evaluate the speaker's effort in terms of content, organization, and delivery. The judge need not change his or her personal attitudes or behaviors as a result of hearing the speech. In short, the task a judge faces is to effectively evaluate the persuasive effort within the parameters of the event guidelines, standards of sound, ethical persuasion, and so on, not on the basis of how the topic effects the judge as an individual. This argument corresponds directly with a resolution from the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events which reads: "Tournament directors inform and encourage judges to set aside personal opinions regarding subject matter in public address events"

(Public Speaking, Item 5), but it does not seem that this resolution has been enacted across the forensics community.

One might argue that selecting "safe" topics because they have the broadest possible audience appeal, because few people object to such topics, and because they are unlikely to "offend" the personal sensibilities of a judge reflects sound audience analysis. After all, the audience one addresses at tournaments changes from round to round and may include anyone from a college professor to a lay person. Moreover, altering a prepared speech to adapt it to a particular audience poses significant difficulties for the speaker, particularly when he or she has had virtually no chance to investigate the nature of his or her audience. But the implication is clear--if students are limited in the range of topics for Persuasive Speaking by overarching considerations like "how can the judge, as an individual, solve this problem" we are teaching students a very limited form of persuasion.

The question then is what do we want Persuasive Speaking to be? Do we want the event to be the presentation of an argument that encourages a change of attitude or course of action aimed at the broadest possible audience? If so, we may be succeeding. If, however, we want students to learn about persuasion in a broader sense, I believe we are falling short and we have not yet followed up on the concerns expressed at the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events.

I am not arguing that students must seek out the most controversial topics available in order to learn about the process of persuasion, but I believe the conventions of competition continue to drive the process of topic selection and we must find ways to expand the field of topics that can be competitive. We need to repeat the call for judges to set aside personal opinions regarding subject matter in Persuasive Speaking and, as coaches and judges, we must respond to that call.

CHALLENGE NUMBER TWO: LITTLE VARIETY IN PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

The type of persuasion seen on *Dateline NBC* and *20/20* is affectionately referred to by some as "info-suasion" on the forensics circuit and it is just as common at forensics tournaments as it is on prime time television.

Reports and speeches of this type generally (1) inform you of a problem you never knew existed, while at the same time explaining the significant risk you and your loved ones face as a result of the problem. In addition, they (2) explain the causes of this significant problem, and finally (3), they offer simple steps anyone can and should take to ameliorate the problem. Most of us know this organizational pattern as problem-cause-solution and it is a perfectly legitimate approach to structuring your ideas in a persuasive effort, but it is *not* the *only* approach.

The proceedings of the Second National Developmental Conference on Individual Events endorsed a resolution calling for judges to set aside personal feelings and beliefs when evaluating organizational patterns in public address events. The resolution reads: "Tournament directors inform and encourage judges to set aside personal opinions with regard to organizational patterns such as problem-solution (Resolutions Section, Public Speaking, Item 6). While the proceedings do not indicate a rationale for the resolution and my memory of our discussion on this issue has faded, it seems entirely appropriate for coaches and judges to comment on organizational patterns. Comments such as "I am so tired of hearing problem-solution speeches" are inappropriate because they are not constructive, but comments regarding the interface between content, purpose, and appropriateness of structure seem completely in line with forensics pedagogy.

My concern regarding organization is that what we see in rounds suggests that students are learning only a very limited number of approaches to structuring persuasive arguments. Most of the speeches in Persuasive Speaking as a competitive event follow one of two organizational patterns: problem-solution and problem-cause solution. While both of these approaches are perfectly acceptable, they are just the tip of the iceberg. There are *many* different ways to organize a persuasive message. A brief review of several nationally recognized public speaking texts (Ayres & Miller, 1994; Jaffe, 1998; Lucas, 1992; Osborn & Osborn, 1997; Zarefsky, 1996) reveals a wide range of approaches to the organization of persuasive messages including: categorical organization, criteria satisfaction, negative method pattern/refutation, sequential design, statement of reasons/topical ordering, comparative advantages/compare and contrast, residual reasoning, proposition-to-proof, Monroe's motivational sequence, problem-solution, and problem-cause-solution.

As forensics educators, we must help our students understand *that the purpose and content of a message calls forth or demands an appropriate organizational pattern*. There are persuasive messages that do not fit into the problem-solution and/or problem-cause-solution pattern that seems to be the hallmark of so many competitive speeches in Persuasion. Students should not shy away from topics because they do not conform to those particular patterns, rather coaches and judges should remember that there are a wide range of approaches to the art of persuasion and that forensic competition should reflect the diversity of approaches available for structuring such messages. Employing a particular organizational structure *solely* because it seems to fit *competitive convention* denies the vast body of theory and persuasive strategies that are available to those who seek to persuade others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public address events have the potential to provide forensic competitors with a wide range of experiences relevant to the effective construction and delivery of messages. I believe we must continue to use the tools at our disposal to encourage our community to embrace a variety of approaches to public speaking events--in this case, Persuasive Speaking.

As teachers, coaches, and judges, we must encourage students to think about their choice of topics and their use of organizational patterns. We must help them see the importance of seeking out topics that seem important and interesting, not just those that meet the current conventions of competition. We must use public address events in general, and Persuasion in particular, to introduce students to the full range of public speaking experiences. If we use public speaking experiences to engender critical thinking about topics and approaches to expression, we are one step closer to the kind of forensic education that helps students "become more mentally aware of their choice-making processes" (Aden, 1991). If we introduce students to the full range of approaches to persuasion, they will have "a firm theoretical foundation from which to build and refer as needed" (Schnell, 1992). To limit students' experiences solely to what is perceived as competitive short changes students, forensics education, and the art of public speaking.

As judges, we must use the ballot to reward creativity and encourage students to explore a wider range of topics and organizational patterns. Judges should not punish speakers who employ problem-solution or problem-cause-solution solely because they employ a particular organizational pattern. Nor should we reward other patterns of organization simply for their difference. Instead, we should evaluate the marriage of *topic, content, purpose, and organization*, rewarding exemplary persuasive messages regardless of perceived conventions or trends in a particular event. After all, the conventions became convention through repeated use in competition and they may be changed through new modes of practice.

In order to evaluate our progress on the issues explored in this paper, members of the forensic community should undertake research that may give us a clearer indication of the diversity or lack of diversity in topics and organizational patterns in Persuasive Speeches in competition. Similar research may be applied to other events in order to access how well we are using forensic competition to teach students about a wide range of types of and approaches to the art of communication.

Standards exist in our forensic event in order to enable us to comparatively evaluate student performances in terms of content, organization, and delivery. Thus, it is not surprising that we would likely be able to identify the event we were judging even if blindfolded. Based on the potential for a wide range of topics and the existence of many different approaches to persuasion, however, we should expect to hear a diverse range of speeches in each round we judge. As forensics educators, we must remind ourselves of the range of options available in persuasion and encourage our students to expand their horizons and challenge themselves and the "boundaries" of the event by looking beyond the one or two approaches to Persuasion that seem most common on the competitive circuit.

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