

A Question of Oral Questions: Why Aren't Judges Allowed to Query Competitors?

Erik T. Kanter
San Diego State University

When he was expected to use his mind, he felt like a right-handed person who has to do something with his left.
-- Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

When I ran across this quotation in an impromptu round, it seemed to me very applicable to what I believe is currently a major problem in individual events competition -- not allowing nor rewarding competitors for using critical thinking, reasoning and interpersonal communication skills. While forensics experience does, and should, provide training and practice in the skills that constitute effective public communication,¹ it should also provide training and practice in the skills that constitute effective thinking, reacting and responding. Since the latter skills are not required to achieve success in competition, persons involved in individual events seldom get the chance to employ and cultivate these highly desirable talents. I propose that we should encourage individual events competitors to develop and improve the aforementioned skills, and that the best way to do this is to allow judges the option of oral questioning following an individual's performance. Questioning will not only allow for the enhancement and expansion of a competitor's communicative abilities, it will also provide additional benefits for the

¹James. H. McBath, "Toward A Rationale for Forensics," In D. Parson (Ed.), *American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1985), p. 6.

competitor as well as offer advantages for the critic/judge and for forensics in general.

In the following paper I will: first, examine both the potential benefits and disadvantages of allowing the option of oral questioning; second, show how questioning can be integrated into the judging of individual events; and, finally, propose a timetable and an agenda for integration both at the local and national levels.

Benefits of Oral Questioning

For the individual events competitor, there are numerous benefits involved in allowing oral questioning.

First, it gives competitors the opportunity to enhance their overall education. Questioning will encourage competitors to become highly knowledgeable in their subject areas, thus leading to a deeper and more thorough understanding of that specific topic. Questioning will offer individual events participants an opportunity to develop communicative skills that are highly valued by society. Questioning will provide useful career preparation by giving individuals a chance to enhance and improve impromptu public speaking skills. Learning how to answer queries succinctly and directly is a highly desired skill for professions such as education, law, politics and business.

Second, questioning will afford an opportunity for individuals to respond to their judges. The chance to answer a question will allow an immediate and direct response to any potential misunderstanding or concern that a judge may have concerning the individual's performance before the final ranking of the round.

Third, questioning provides an opportunity for further distinction between those competitors who have done significant research and truly understand and can discuss their topic area and those competitors who have been lax in terms of

research and whose knowledge of their topic area goes little beyond what is contained in their speech.

For the individual events critic/judge, there are also many advantages in being given the opportunity to ask a question following an individual's performance.

First, it gives the critic/judge a chance to test competitors when there is sufficient doubt about the individual's knowledge or understanding of their topic.

Second, it allows the critic/judge to clear up any minor misunderstandings or concerns and get clarifications prior to the final ranking of the round.

Third, it provides the critic/judge with another determining factor and justification for ranking when all other factors are considered equal.

Fourth, it encourages critic/judges to listen more carefully and critically to competitors' speeches.

Fifth, since the role of the individual events judge is as an educator/critic,² questioning will better enhance and emphasize that role in the tournament setting.

Finally, it has been argued that judges incur certain responsibilities by their acceptance of the task and that judges are obligated to provide adequate and constructive written comments to explain a student's ranking.³ Not only will competitors' responses to queries enhance the chance for more and better comments, it should also allow the ballot to be used more effectively. Space would not need to be taken up by questions and concerns that could be easily answered, and, instead the limited ballot space could be used for more useful criticism.

For individual events, as a whole, there are also many long-term benefits of oral questioning.

²John Murphy, "Order and Diversity: The Search for Judging Standards in Individual Events," In D. Parson (Ed.), *American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1985), p. 91.

³Murphy, p. 89.

First, it would provide the opportunity to produce better researchers and more highly educated and skilled participants. Although a forensics program is inherently interdisciplinary, forensics does share the intellectual concerns and pedagogical goals of the field of speech communication. Research, analysis, and effective expression are central to the mission of communication study as well as to forensics education.⁴ Thus, many of those currently involved in our discipline, as well as many of those who eventually will become involved in the discipline, have come from, or will come from, forensics backgrounds. Better educated and skilled competitors help insure a bright future for the discipline.

Second, it helps to ensure that ethical standards are strictly followed. The potential of being asked a question should reduce the incidents of where some or much of the speech is researched and/or written by someone other than the individual delivering it. The potential for judges' queries would also make competitors more directly responsible for what they say since they could be questioned or called on it publicly and immediately.

Third, it will provide the opportunity to reward those individuals who are both excellent and ethical researchers and talented public speakers. Although the instances have probably been few, undoubtedly some of the most highly recognized speeches have been delivered by individuals who have committed ethical violations or simply never became truly knowledgeable in a topic area in which they were assumed to be an expert. Questioning could help reduce those situations by forcing competitors to achieve some level of expertise in their subject area. This would also send the message to future competitors that being an ethical, knowledgeable and skilled communicator is the way to achieve success in individual events.

⁴McBath, p. 7.

questions are allowed or not. We cannot expect individuals to pass judgment, write constructive and relevant comments, and potentially ask an intelligent question about an event that they do not fully understand or for which they do not know the requirements.

Second, the forensics community should begin educating judges about the types of questions that are acceptable to ask and the lines of questioning that would be inappropriate. This information could be included in the judging seminar before each tournament as well as discussed at national and regional meetings before the tournament season begins. It has been recommended that if a judge decides to ask a question, s/he should abide by the following three points: 1) The question should be on the subject of the speech, 2) The question should be as brief and clear as possible, and 3) The question should be reasonable.⁷

Third, coaches and tournaments must let competitors know that questioning will be available to the judge and that responses can be a determining factor in the individual's rank. While I see nothing wrong with judges being allowed to ask questions immediately, that information should be listed in the event descriptions and tournament rules so that competitors will not be surprised or able to argue ignorance when posed with a question following their performances.

Fourth, it must be made clear that by no means is questioning mandatory and that questioning should only be employed when the judge feels it is warranted. The question should be a useful tool, but not an overused one. A question should only refer to material that the judge is either confused or unclear about and that is important in the determination of the individual competitor's rank. I would expect that certain judges would ask questions frequently while many others seldom or never at all. Some may find questioning useful, others unnecessary or even

⁷Donald W. Klopff & Stanley G. Rives, *Individual Speaking Contents: Preparation for Participation* (Minneapolis, MN: Burgess, 1966), pp. 67-68.

bothersome, but at least it will be an available option for those wishing to take advantage of it.

Fifth, it must be requested that judges ask questions that can be answered in a limited period of time. The entire process of questioning and response should seldom exceed a minute and should rarely ever exceed three minutes.⁸ I would not necessarily mandate that a judge be limited to only a single question; that would simply create more confusing multiple-part questions. The only requirement should be that the entire questioning process be handled expediently.

Finally, it must be emphasized that questioning does not mean debating or interrogating and that unless confusion arises there should be no oral comments about a competitor's response by the judge. There also should be no cross questioning. Additionally, when a competitor has finished the response no further exchange should take place.

Agenda

With the elimination this past year of allowing questions following a Rhetorical Criticism at NFA Nationals, neither of the national tournaments currently allow the option of oral questioning in any individual event. While public address events would seem the more likely choices to allow questions, I believe every individual event should permit them. Public address events involve rhetorical, research, analysis and organization skills to emphasize the persuasion of audiences.⁹ As a judge is considered a member of the audience, they should be allowed to question and orally address their persuader if they feel a query is called for. Oral interpretation events also can lend themselves to questions. Since the

⁸This assumes a round where there is a single judge. Final rounds and elimination rounds at National where multiple judges are involved would increase the time needed for questioning.

⁹McBath, p. 11.

Finally, the experience of responding to queries will enhance and expand a competitor's overall education in communication and improve skills needed in many speaking situations. This is highly desired since individual events tournaments are educational laboratories for increasing the understanding of, appreciation for, and skill in the art of public speaking.⁵

Disadvantages of Oral Questioning

While the potential benefits of allowing questioning are numerous, there are some potential disadvantages which must be considered.

The first, and primary, problem that questioning potentially creates is the time factor. Tournaments are frequently hindered due to the lack of available time. Rounds often run overtime, causing late nights and two-hour delays in awards assemblies. The work group on individual events at The Second National Conference on Forensics noted that the tight schedules of many tournaments pose problems for adequate criticism by limiting time for ballot writing and judge-contestant interaction.⁶ Time is a major concern. I would argue, however, that allowing the option of oral questioning would lengthen the time of a round negligibly or not at all. Many tournaments allow an hour and a half between rounds. Questioning could potentially extend a round anywhere from 0 to 15 minutes. Assuming a worst-case scenario of an additional 15 minutes, rounds would still be able to be completed in the hour and a half time block. Upon closer inspection, though, it seems that the time needed to ask questions is already currently available, and we are simply not taking advantage of it. It has been my experience that much more time is lost because of multiple entries and not having

⁵Murphy, p. 90.

⁶Ibid., p. 88.

speakers available than in not having enough time for the speeches themselves. Frequently, there is more than enough time between speeches (when a judge is waiting for a multiple entrant) that could be used for questions. Questioning is certainly more productive and educationally rewarding than staring at the walls. Tournaments can and should make better use of the time available. Thus, I do not believe that the time factor is an extremely valid or significant argument against the option of oral questioning. Questioning may add little or no time at all to a round, and, even if it did mean adding 10 to 15 minutes to a round and an extra hour to a tournament, the potential benefits for those involved in individual events would far outweigh the minor extra cost of time.

A second potential problem that questioning could create is the abuse of the privilege by certain judges. Unfortunately, not every judge who walks into an individual events round is qualified to judge that event. Assuming the judge does not have the experience to critique the round, obviously that person would not have the experience to ask appropriate questions. There also is the concern that judges may use questions as a tool to embarrass or intentionally degrade a competitor. Unfortunately, some improper questioning is inevitable, just as some unethical and inappropriate judging is inevitable. All we can do is address those situations when they arise and assure competitors that any unethical judging or questioning will be addressed immediately and appropriately.

Integration

I believe that questioning can be smoothly integrated into the judging of individual events if specific steps are taken and certain procedures are followed.

First, tournaments should hold a brief judging seminar before competition begins so that all judges will be familiar with the events that they will be critiquing. This is primarily for hired judges and really should be taking place whether

oral interpretation of literature requires that competitors understand literary analysis, history, the emotional and intellectual aspects of literature, and effective expression,¹⁰ students should be able to respond intelligently to queries concerning those aspects of their performance.

While I eventually hope that questioning will be both allowed and accepted during judging of every individual event, I realize that some may feel that such immediate integration would be too drastic. Thus, I propose that the following steps be taken so that questioning can be smoothly, but eventually completely, integrated into individual events tournaments.

First, I would like to see a work group put together at the national level to discuss and debate the best way to integrate questioning into individual events tournaments.

Second, I would reiterate that questions could be of value in all individual events, including interpretation events, but are especially necessary in two events in particular: Rhetorical Criticism/CA and Extemporaneous Speaking.

Third, before questioning is accepted at local tournaments it will have to be integrated into the two national tournaments. As a first step, I'd like to see questioning allowed in all elimination rounds at NFA and AFA Nationals. Assuming that individuals who make "out rounds" are the best speakers in the country in a given event, they should be highly knowledgeable about their topic and very qualified to field questions concerning their program. Also, time is not a major factor by the time elimination rounds at Nationals come along; thus, the time factor would essentially be eliminated. Finally, theoretically some of the highest qualified judges available are judging elimination rounds at Nationals: judges and coaches who have extensive experience and are some of the most prominent individuals in

¹⁰Ibid., p. 11.

the field. I'm confident that very few people would feel that these individuals would be unable to ask a necessary and appropriate question.

If integrated at both national tournaments, eventually the concept of allowing oral questions would trickle down to other regional and local competitions. Since one of the primary goals of regional and local tournaments is to get competitors ready for Nationals, allowing questioning would be mandatory preparation and practice for those who might eventually succeed at the national level.

Finally, after adequate experimentation, I would like to see the option of questioning included in all rounds at every individual events competition.

Summary

After examining the pros and cons of oral questioning, it appears that the option of judges' queries brings with it many benefits that could enhance individual events competition, both for the competitor and for the critic/judge. Questioning can be smoothly and easily integrated into the judging of individual events and should be done so as soon as possible to ensure that the individual events experience is the most intellectually challenging and educationally worthwhile endeavor it can be for all of those who take part in it.