

A RATIONALE FOR EVENTS TO BE INCLUDED IN I.E. COMPETITION

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A PHILOSOPHIC AND PRAGMATIC RATIONALE  
FOR INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

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AN INTRODUCTION OF PURPOSE

Fourteen years ago in the Fall, 1974, a small group of forensics educators met at Sedalia, Colo. for what they called A National Developmental Conference on Forensics. The product of their labors was a reexamination of some of the basic tenets of forensics and a series of recommendations for future reforms. One portion of their work resulted in Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective edited by James McBath and now regrettably out of print.<sup>1</sup> The first forensics conference recommended that there be a second conference within ten years to review what had happened, what was happening, and what should happen in forensics. A second conference was arranged and a larger number of forensics educators met at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, November, 1984 for the Second National Conference on Forensics. A large number of discussions and arguments resulted in American Forensics in Perspective edited by Donn Parson reflecting some small part of the conferees' efforts.<sup>2</sup> At both conferences the majority of forensics educators in attendance were primarily debate teachers and scholars and individual events were considered but were not a primary focus of effort. Recognizing the proliferation of individual events in forensics and the growth of individual events participation in the last fourteen years, some educators at the second national conference on forensics suggested a conference focusing primarily on individual events. Their suggestions and arduous efforts have now resulted in The National Developmental Conference on Individual Events August, 1988, at Denver, Colo.

One work group at this conference has as its task a consideration of rationale for events to be included in individual events competition.<sup>3</sup> I think this may be one of the most important work groups at the conference for its task in my view is nothing less than to focus on the ontological and epistemic foundations of individual events competition. Fundamentally this group should be asking why do we do what we do in individual events speaking in

the ways that we do it? Could we and should we be doing different events in a different manner or even the same events in an alternative fashion? I do not think it possible for this group to answer these fundamental questions in any definitive way. Instead, our task is to bring up these questions and other fundamental subsets of questions for the consideration of forensics educators. Once as an undergraduate I was given a final exam which was framed in the following manner. Ask a good question about the subject matter of this course and justify your question as a good question. I think this is the task of the competitive rationale for individual events work group, asking good questions and justifying these as good questions concerning the rationale for individual events. If we can ask the right questions and explain why they are the right questions, only then can we begin getting the right answers and knowing the intellectual foundations and justifications for what we are doing in individual events and/or what we should be doing in individual events.

To approach this task, I will have three sections to this paper. In the first section I will discuss what individual events are and their current status. In the second section I will forward a set of questions I consider fundamental to knowing what we are about and the ways in which we go about it in individual events. In the third and final brief division I will comment on what I think are some long delayed research needs that could help us in responding to the questions raised in the second section of the paper and conclude my brief analysis.

STATUS OF INDIVIDUAL EVENTS CIRCA 1988

Since the First National Developmental Conference in Forensics, forensics scholars have tried to have an inclusionary vision for forensics events concentrating on the philosophic rationale behind the specific events as a genre rather than merely listing the events themselves. In an oft quoted passage, the conferees concluded that:

Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. An argumentative perspective on communication involves the study of reason giving by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes and values. From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences.<sup>4</sup>

This quotation has seemed to many to amply justify the public address and rhetorical events in forensics, especially debate, but perhaps not to apply so well to other events particularly to oral interpretation events. James McBath addressed this issue in some measure in his paper for the Second National Conference on Forensics where he stated:

Public address contest events incorporate an argumentative perspective in the research, analysis, organization and development of a speech but are unique in that they also utilize a wide range of rhetorical strategies including audience analysis, language choice and delivery skills. These specific rhetorical skills are essential because the events emphasize the persuasion of audiences. Oral Interpretation of Literature events are distinctive because they focus on the human perspective from a poetic stance. The oral performance of literature requires that students understand literary analysis, history, the emotional and intellectual aspects of literature, and effective vocal and physical expression. Students must acquire knowledge of literary form and style while striving to interpret literature with the purpose of enriching the audience's understanding of the human condition.<sup>5</sup>

I agree with the philosophic underpinnings emphasis of the National Developmental Conference and with the inclusive versus exclusive thrust of their proceedings, but in discussing justificatory rationale for individual events, I think we have to become pragmatic and even controversial and deal with individual events as they exist at this time not just in the abstract.

In 1988 we have ten to thirteen basic individual events in competition. These are basically the events utilized in national competition by the National Forensics League, Phi Rho Pi, The National Forensics Association, and by the National Individual Events Tournament of the American Forensics Association.<sup>6</sup> These events fall somewhat naturally and somewhat artificial' into three categories: limited preparation events, prepared public addresses, and oral interpretation contests. The limited preparation events are impromptu, extemporaneous speaking, and, for some, argument analysis. The prepared events are oratory or persuasive speaking, expository, or informative speaking, after dinner speaking, and communication analysis or rhetorical criticism, radio speaking, editorial commentary, and sales. The oral interpretation contests are humorous, serious, and dramatic interpretation or poetry, prose, drama, and duo. Other events are sometimes offered such as discussion, congress, legal advocacy, negotiations, conflict resolution, et al but infrequently since the national tournaments of NFL, AFA, and NFA promote the ten to thirteen basic individual events as models and most tournaments copy these choices and even the rules for these choices from the national paradigms. Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results over a series of recent years verifies that these are the individual events most frequently offered<sup>7</sup> at the collegiate level and, since high schools partially reflect collegiate models, probably the ones offered most frequently for high school individual events competitors too.

Just as the individual events offerings have become fairly routine and standard, the rules for the events have become fairly well formalized as well. In the limited preparation events the speaker gets one to three topics to consider

in impromptu then a minute or two to think and five to seven minutes to speak. In extemporaneous speaking the speaker gets one to three topics to consider, one half hour to one hour of preparation time, then five to seven minutes to speak on the chosen subject. In the prepared events the speaker prepares a speech and delivers it as best she/he can in an organized, fluent, persuasive manner. Expository speakers usually utilize visual aids somewhat distinguishing their informative purpose in conversing for eight to ten minutes on some topic of relevance and interest. Persuasive speakers are to focus on language choices and organization and style in addition to good delivery as they attempt to reinforce or change the beliefs, attitudes, values, or even actions of their audiences in eight to ten minutes. After dinner speakers are to entertain their audiences for eight to ten minutes somehow keeping their speeches relevant to a theme and simultaneously in good taste. Rhetorical critics or communication analysts in the amazingly brief space of ten minutes or so are to develop a set of evaluative rhetorical criteria and then to apply them to a rhetorical artifact. In the interpretative events the appropriate kind of literature is to be introduced and developed in eight to ten minutes as the interpreter utilizes his/her voice and nonverbal reinforcement to express the meaning of the selection/s to the audience.

#### QUESTIONS CONCERNING INDIVIDUAL EVENTS CIRCA 1988

Having discussed the status of individual events circa 1988, it is time to ask some fundamental questions about these events and their values assuming as most do that the purpose of individual events is fundamentally educational. Students learn life skills in individual events as thinking, writing, organizational, linguistic, delivery, and other skills almost ad infinitum are developed and sharpened. The theory is that communication classes in rhetoric and public address and oral interpretation reflect/teach theory and practice that are necessary and essential to life and that forensics individual events competition, in turn, serves as a laboratory for the theory and practice of communications classes. The mere asking of these questions may be controversial and the myriad of potential answers to the questions are certainly a matter for disputation, but a task force seeking the rationale for individual events activity should, as afore asserted, at least ask some of the right questions and explain why they think they are the right questions.

Question number one I think is how valuable are individual events in comparison to debate? We sometimes avoid this question by responding in advance that debate and individual events are supplementary and complementary to one another. In the ideal program, both are offered. In the ideal student experience, the student does both. This answer is fundamentally sound, I think, but it ducks the question. Time spent participating in individual events or coaching individual events is time not spent in participating in debate or coaching debate. McBath claims that forensics "trains students in research,

analysis and critical thinking skills through discovery of lines of argument and their probative values. Students learn to identify facts, derive the underlying values, and then to utilize this information in formulating reasoned decisions."<sup>8</sup> Is McBath really talking about forensics in general or is he emphasizing the specific training of debate within forensics? Does individual events training do as much for research skills, evidence and logic/reasoning skills, and/or other skills as does debate? This is a question that real forensics educators in a time of diminished time and resources really must ask themselves and a question fundamental to any real rationale for individual events in the forensics spectrum of possible activities and the priority for activities. This is a very realistic question when more forensics programs are starting to offer only individual events competition and when some students are specializing in individual events and even in some particular types of individual events.

The second question concerns which are the most valuable individual events? The answer to this question implies answers to other questions such as which events should be offered when some but not all events can be offered and which events should be offered in conflict with others if there must be conflict patterns? It also gets us into questions of whether the limited preparation events are as valuable as the prepared events and whether public address/rhetorical events are as valuable or more so than the interpretative events and also into an analysis of whether or not the skills and abilities sharpened by some events are repetitive of one another and hence duplicative educational values rather than supplemental or reinforcing educational values.

There is a lot of general theoretical material responding to these questions and much anecdotal opinion evidence. Wayne Thompson's 1967 classic on Quantitative Research in Public Address and Communication<sup>9</sup> gave some information as to the values of public address and communications in various forms. Research since that time has verified the values of various kinds of speaking in various forms before varying audiences. There are many testimonials as to the values of individual speaking and interpreting from coaches and former participants. Still, it is sadly the case as it was fourteen years ago when Project Delphi was done in conjunction with the First National Conference on Forensics that "Forensics needs hard evidence regarding the transfer value of forensics participation to the world beyond academia."<sup>10</sup> We especially need comparative values data so we can know what is relatively more valuable or, put another way, which forensics events are more equal than others. We need to know if limited preparation events are worthwhile at all or relatively worthwhile and for what? We need to know if the public address events or interpretative events duplicate one another's educational values. We need to know which events supplement, reinforce, and/or complement one another. Only if

such information is available can we really justify what we do.

The third question may not be a single question at all but a whole series of interrelated questions. It is basically are we doing at all well that which we do or could we and should we be doing individual events differently and better? Are the rules for our events which have started to become pretty rigid and set the best rules we could have? Is it right to give one half hour preparation time in extemporaneous speaking or in the real world would a speaker have one hour or a day and does this make a critical difference? Is it realistic to have a communication analyst establish criteria and apply those self same criteria to a rhetorical artifact in ten minutes or should this be done in twelve minutes or maybe fifteen minutes? Why have oral interpreters reading only one genre of literature at a time and almost always doing others work versus doing multiple genres simultaneously and their own works? Why the conflict patterns we have in individual events? Do we get in events that really supplement and/or complement each other into our patterns of conflict? How about the ballots we utilize and our relative inattention to oral critiques? Is the kind of feedback we are giving competitors really the most educational or could it/ should it be done another way? Finally, perhaps, within this panorama of questions why competitive individual events in the first place? Perhaps some events would be most educational if done noncompetitively in public forum/speakers' bureau or in festival form. Some critics have argued that interpretative events are much better done in festival than in competition. Are they right or are their adversaries on the competitive side correct? We must ask ourselves not only what to do among the many possibilities for individual events. We must also ask ourselves how best to do what we do. Have we done so and are we doing so? That is the third question.

The fourth and final question concerns other individual events. What else could we do/should we do in individual events competition? This question also involves a concomitant consideration of what must go if something is added since we are at a point, most agree, where if something is added to what we do something else must be removed. In line with the shift in communications from rhetoric and public address to interpersonal communication and mass media some have suggested contests in individual events with orientations such as conflict resolution, negotiation, discussion and conference, radio and television address, et al. Some have suggested speaking that directly reflects real life advocacy such as trial speaking, legal negotiation, political campaign address, editorial commentary, preaching etc. How much should we experiment in these new fields? What should become of traditional events while we are experimenting with new events? How can we justify what we are doing as most valuable to students and within our realm as communication specialists who wish to be considered as up to date as possible? What criteria should be utilized to justify a new event replacing an old in individual events competi-

tion?

# SEEKING TO JUSTIFY INDIVIDUAL EVENTS COMPETITION: AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

Other interrelated questions about individual events might well be asked. Probably some key questions have been missed among the four questions forwarded in this paper. However, if we could get answers to the four questions of this paper, I think we would be well on our way to establishing the ontology and epistemology of forensics individual events competition. We would be well on our way to justifying what we do and the ways in which we do it. The key to answering these four questions is to start with philosophic debate and to define the issues. This started with the First National Developmental Conference in Forensics. It continued at the Second National Conference. It continues here at the Denver Developmental Conference on Individual Events. Next there just has to be more qualitative and quantitative empirical research. The Delphi Project at the First National Developmental Conference in Forensics set a preliminary research agenda which has long been neglected and gone mostly unfulfilled. In a fine article that has not received nearly the attention it deserves Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal expounded upon this agenda and set out some possibilities for research and criteria to balance research with the educational and competitive goals of forensics tournaments.<sup>11</sup> After our philosophic arguments here, forensics scholars must get busy experimenting with individual events tournaments and individual events rules, formats, conflict patterns, et al. Only in this fashion will we be able to do what we should be doing in individual events. Only in this fashion can we justify what we do and how we do it to ourselves, to our students, to our colleagues, and to the outside world. If we ask the right questions and start seeking the answers we can truly create a philosophically and pragmatically justified rationale for competitive individual events.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>McBath, James, editor. Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective. Skokie, Ill.: The National Textbook Co., 1975.

<sup>2</sup>Parson, Donn, editor. American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from The Second National Conference on Forensics. Annandale, VA.: Speech Communication Association, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>This work group is listed as tenth but provides the rationale for many of the other nine groups listed: 1 Standards for Evaluation/Judging of Individual Events 2 Role of Research in Individual Events 3 Tournament Management Practices 4 High School-College Connection in Individual Events 5 Use of Workshops for Training Judges/Coaches 6 Creative Events/Original Material in Individual Events 7 Role of Graduate Assistants in the Individual Events Program 8 Administrative Support/Publicity and 9 Ethical Questions for

Coaches and Competitors

<sup>4</sup>McBath, Forensics as Communication, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>In Parson, American Forensics in Perspective, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>The national tournaments are not exactly alike. There is an overlap however as to the basic events and the rules are very similar.

<sup>7</sup>Editions to the early 1980's edited by Jack Howe. Recent editions edited by others.

<sup>8</sup>McBath in Parson, American Forensics in Perspective, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Thompson, Wayne. Quantitative Research in Public Address and Communication. New York: Random House, 1967.

<sup>10</sup>McBath, Forensics as Communication, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup>Edward J. Harris, Richard Kropp, and Robert Rosenthal. "The Tournament as Laboratory: Implications for Forensic Research" National Forensic Journal (Spring, 1986) 13-22. This is an excellent article reinforcing that theory must be buttressed by research into practice and that in turn research on practice must reinvigorate and modify theory. This applies to forensics as much, if not more than to other areas of communications research.