

## A DEVELOPMENTAL RATIONALE

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Michael Kelley, in a 1984 description of the development of individual events competition, claims the expansion of individual events in the past twenty years has been largely repetitive. He felt any experimentation would require "a radical reformulation of what the larger forensic enterprise is about and should be about" (Kelley, 1984). In considering the individual events paradigm, this conference offers the opportunity to develop a rationale for inclusion of events in individual events competition. In this paper, it seems desirable to clarify my presuppositions about forensics competition, then explore some of the problems in the activity, and finally explore two dimensions needed in a well rounded rationale.

### A. MY CONCEPTION OF FORENSICS

My understanding of "individual events" is shaped by my experiences. I competed in both debate and individual events at both high school and collegiate levels, neither embarrassing nor distinguishing myself and learning a great deal in the process. As an undergraduate, I coached high school debate and individual events. I continued to work with forensics during my graduate school years, never having an assistantship which included forensics and yet remaining active as at least a judge for high school and collegiate tournaments.

My present position is as assistant professor and Director of Forensics for a rebuilding program with competitive and noncompetitive individual events and debate. Pat Ganer recently identified two key assumptions concerning debate: it is co-curricular and prescriptive (Ganer, 387). I agree, and would suggest (as I believe she would) these apply to all forensics activities.

Fortunately, the University of South Dakota supports these assumptions for the activity. Fortunately, for my squad did not win a great deal last year. On the other hand, I am confident that students learned more about public speaking and are motivated to return in order to continue that learning process.

In short, both as a competitor and as a coach, I tried to show interest in the educational possibilities of forensics without being excessively competitive.

### B. PROBLEMS IN THE ACTIVITY

My personal frustrations and concerns about individual events center on

students' detachment from the educational possibilities of the forensics activity as a whole. My difficulties with individual events center on several perceptions which influence participants to consider the activity as an extracurricular "game." I have segmented these perceptions into three categories: the conceptions of the events; the selection, preparation and performance of events; and the critics' responses to the performances. I have not done independent research to examine the extent of these perceptions and actions among students or professionals, nor would I consider them to be totally accurate representations of the "reality" in any given area. However, I am convinced that the following attitudes are held by a sizable number of individuals, they lead to actions, and that they are inimical to the development of forensics as a co-curricular and prescriptive activity.

Perhaps most difficult to see by established professionals is the problem presented by our descriptions of events. Too often our own unspoken preferences about the activity are taken as self-evident. Knowing that forensics should be educational, we assume that others know it, too. Occasionally, even professionals in the field get caught up in developing the activity without linking their efforts back to the underlying purposes of education. John Murphy, writing as part of the Second National Conference on Forensics, synthesizes many of the concerns about individual events in two questions: "Do they exist for any particular purpose beyond tradition? What specific educational goals are accomplished by each event?" Concerning experimental events, he continues that "all felt that these new events should have clearly stated goals and criteria to guide participants and judges" (Parson, 87-88). Such questions and concerns seem to indicate a perceived lack in much of what has been done. Concerns such as those expressed by Murphy are no doubt one important element of the genesis of this panel.

Another source of this panel's assigned topic may be seen in the discussions trying to clarify and apply a "purpose" for our activity. In the past few years, many have contributed to an extensive body of literature suggesting judging criteria for individual events. At this conference, sessions devoted to Creative Events/Original Events, Use of Workshops for Training Judges/Coaches, Standards for Evaluation/Judging and Ethical Questions for Coaches/Competitors (at least) suggest similar concern about the purpose of individual events. Development of common standards will necessarily imply one or more overarching rationales.

Despite these varied indications of a desire for agreement in (or at least clarity about) our conceptions of forensics, events are still being described by what should be done instead of what should be learned, by product-centered rules rather than process-oriented goals. For example, prose interpretation is still defined as "a selection or selections of prose material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. . . Use of manuscript is re-

quired. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction." Equivalent descriptions explain other events. All of them clarify the expected product. I searched through my stack of invitations in vain for an equivalent statement of educational expectations or goals. Is it any wonder that performances conform to the expectations of product without clear comprehension of a relationship to the educational process? Is it amazing that critic comments on the ballot simply describe what happened without making rhetorical suggestions? While valuable learning may emerge even from the purest focus on product, it would seem more likely to emerge from an explicit and intentional effort to pursue a clear goal.

Given such an emphasis on product, the selection, preparation and performance of events seem likely to be altered. In the selection of events, there has been a continuing (and perhaps growing) isolation and specialization. Many competitors and some professionals now shy away not only from every conception of debate, but from participation in extemporaneous or impromptu speaking. Some go even further and participate primarily or exclusively in either interp or public speaking events. With the advent of a wider number of events and a carefully developed schedule at many tournaments (including Nationals), students can participate in up to four interpretation events (and they could effectively compete in five with a permissible double entry in duo drama) without ever being exposed to a traditional speech. This past year, participants might compete with up to five prepared public speaking events and not enter extemporaneous speaking, impromptu or any interpretation event. Recently, I noted a growing use of "preference" forms for judges, allowing them to opt out of various events. The extent and effects of such exclusive focus have not been considered, as far as I can tell. I would argue that at the very least, it limits conceptions of forensics and restricts the educational possibilities.

In addition, a firm focus on "product" would seem to be ideally suited to encourage students to prepare by taking successful performances as models and copying them, with minimal consideration of the educational implications of such communication. There are persistent stories and on-going professional concern about cuttings and speeches being substantially prepared by others and handed to competitors. Consider one blatant case. A talented individual was given a cutting previously done by an "interp god" and rehearsed every nuance of performance. In competition, he introduced the selection with careful credit to the selection's author and the aforementioned "interp god," and proceeded to perform in a fashion as close to the winning performance as possible. By explicitly mentioning both sources, the performer no doubt hoped to avoid charges of plagiarism. The competitor was outraged when the skillful, carefully copied performance that had been among the most successful in the nation only the year before received a low ranking, justified by the critic's com-

ment that originality was preferable. Clearly, in this instance neither the "interp god" nor the competing disciple valued the educational process of forensics as I understand it.

Even when students participate in a wide variety of events and their creation are unquestionably their own, the emphasis on product emerges in several other areas. First, many talented individuals continue to perform the same speech or selection at tournament after tournament throughout the year. While I grant some educational benefits in development of a performance, a likely outcome is that the learning curve flattens out for nearly everyone -- competitor, other students and critics alike. Repetition even after winning several times seems especially suspect. Another reflection of the product mentality is cross-entered students merely showing up to perform and then hurrying off to perform elsewhere. Obviously, such students are limited in understanding the critic's conception of the dynamics of the whole round and cannot appreciate the performances of other competitors. Finally, when time constraints and tournament ballots limit opportunities to learn from the interaction of other competitors and the critic in a round, and when the most important response is considered to be the rank and rating on the tabulation sheet, a performance orientation has taken over and diminished the activity. There is a continuing effort to encourage critics to provide "comments to explain the student's ranking" and "constructive suggestions for improving the performance of the student" (Parson, 89). However laudable this goal, until the conditions of the tournament format are altered to emphasize the developmental process of communication, I suspect there will be a continuing need to remind even the most capable critics of this obligation.

Recognizing these and other criticisms describe some participants all of the time and perhaps all of the participants some of the time, it is important that the events chosen for inclusion accentuate the positive and minimize the negative aspects of the activity. Particularly with the introduction of new events, the forensics community has the opportunity to carefully develop laboratory experiences which will maximize the opportunities for productive learning. The following section clarifies two topics needed for a developing rationale of individual events.

### C. TOWARDS A RATIONALE FOR INCLUSION OF INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

Agreement is widespread that forensics activities should be educational. The first National Conference on Forensics defined forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people" (McBath, 11). The definition was confirmed at the Second National Conference (Parson, 9). Unfortunately, I suspect that there is little agreement on an exhaustive definition of "educational" and perhaps even less agreement among participants on

the means of achieving balance among varying conceptions of education. When we add in the questions raised by "game strategies" arising from competitive motivations, there is even further grounds for conflicting approaches. So in building a rationale for events, it should be important to first clarify what "education" will be advanced.

One recent analysis of varying types of education found in forensics at the high school level emerges from a content analysis of interviews with high school debate coaches at the 1986 National Forensics League National tournament. Dayle Hardy-Short and Brant Short found four clusters --intellectual skills, communication skills, life skills, and college preparation skills (342). Making the necessary transitions to account for the shift in educational level, these four categories seem able to account for all of the advantages listed in James McBath's "Rationale for Forensics" in *American Forensics in Perspective* (Parson, 6-9). The agreement and enduring elements of this rationale seem to provide good reason for carefully applying it when considering events for possible inclusion in our activity.

One reasonable concern about an education rationale is that there may be too much concern for communication skills. Ronald Lee and Karen King Lee also examined the interviews of high school debate coaches, categorizing the coaches' remarks into Burkean philosophic perspectives. They found representations of pragmatism, idealism, realism and materialism, with pragmatism accounting for 48.5% and idealism only slightly less (353). I believe their observations might be instructive when applied to individual events. Recognizing the need for some concern with teaching pragmatic skills, they point out that "if forensic educators continue to retain their outdated role as academic Dale Carnegies, then serious problems of scholarly legitimation will persist" (356). They also point out that "forensic pragmatism prevents a vision of the activity, which fails to attract high school students and build vigorous college debate programs" (357). They conclude their criticisms with "just as we would find it odd to hear students of American literature say the reason they chose their major was to improve their reading skills . . . so, too, should we find it odd to hear forensics students justifying participation on the mastery of technique" (357). If this critique is applicable to individual events, I would expect charges of irrelevance or educational abuse and development of difficulties similar to those collegiate debate is facing. My own complaints listed above have a curious resemblance to complaints made against debate circa 1970. Perhaps the fact that we are searching for "rationales" means that the existing rationale has broken down and we are at the threshold of an exciting era.

Other concerns within a rationale for events to be included in competition can be grouped as the "practical" aspects. These may not be as crucial as the rationale's commitment to an educational purpose, but they will contribute to

the workability of the activity as a whole. Several elements contribute to the issue of practicality: in Burkean terms, we could look for ratios between the purpose and elements of scene, act, agent and agency. In determining whether an event's inclusion is warranted, strong educational purpose might overcome weaker justifications in other areas. Unfortunately, I would suggest that the reverse is also true. Strong practical rationales may allow in more events with overlapping or deficient educational justifications.

Currently, most events take place in classroom "scenes," those standardized spaces containing seating for auditors and some open space for presentation. Should a proposed event need specialized facilities (an educationally intriguing but wholly hypothetical event called "scientific demonstration" might need a chemistry laboratory), no matter what the educational benefits, there would be resistance to its inclusion. I believe the lack of adequate facilities to approximate "real" radio is one substantial reason for the decline of radio speaking. On the other hand, a classroom space is sufficiently similar to an audition stage that interpretation events are reasonably "realistic."

In individual events, competitive public speaking is the central "act." No matter what the educational rationale, I doubt that individual events will broaden to include communication contests stressing writing, computer facilitated interaction or American Sign Language. Similarly, I would wager that it will be a long time before a proposal for the turnabout event of "listening" gets fair hearing in our community. But I would not be a bit surprised to see the development of "legal speaking" or some form of impromptu interpretation.

The practical concern I would place within the term "agent" is that there needs to be sufficient appeal to attract sufficient participants, both competitors and critics. Currently, I believe that for many tournaments, the strong educational rationale for communication analysis or rhetorical criticism only just offsets substantial resistance among coaches and students. Furthermore, I believe there is a marketplace of events. Conceivably, a new event may recruit new individuals to the activity or encourage existing competitors to try an additional event. It would seem more likely to draw potential competitors away from other opportunities. The community seems to have settled on about ten events. But the impact of the introduction of new events or reduction of existing events has not, so far as I can determine, been studied.

If the act is competitive public speaking, the "agency" would certainly include the mechanics of rounds, things such as time limits and the ballots used in evaluation. The name of the activity, for example, hints that this is to be an "individual" event, foreshadowing scheduling difficulties for Readers, Theater and Group Discussion. (Can you imagine trying to have five double-entered competitors get to a round at the same time? Can you imagine a 10 minute maximum for any group discussion?) Duo drama escapes this problem,

I expect, because it only minimally offends the "individual" and may still be meaningfully developed within the same round structure as other events.

These are by no means the only practical considerations. But they are illustrative of the concerns which I feel a rounded consideration of the activity demand. A rationale which overlooks them, focusing exclusively on the educational aspects of individual events, will be nearly certain to inadequately guide deliberations and will probably emerge with poor decisions about which events should be included in individual events competition.

On the other hand, a rationale which emphasizes the practical concerns without prioritizing the educational purposes of forensics diminishes the activity.

#### D. CONCLUSION

I argued that there are problems in the activity and that a rationale considering both educational benefits and practicality is one way of addressing them. I do not expect that any rationale will be enough to recreate a forensics Eden. The community has a developed rationale for forensics that has not ended the difficulties. Creation of a specialized rationale for the inclusion of individual events will be no different. Whatever our rationale, individual participants must give them effect. Whether student, critic, or director, each individual is responsible for determining the fate of the activity.

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