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Thinking Outside the Can

Restoring the Value, Teaching and Practice of Limited Preparation in Limited-Preparation Events

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It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.
- Mark Twain

The humor in Twain's often-referenced quotation is more readily apparent to those outside of the forensics community than to those within. Ironically, a student addressing this quotation in competition would likely disagree with the quotation, because, well, it seems like one should. Two "arguments" would ensue—one trumpeting the importance of preparation, and a second reaffirming the value of free speech. After hearing these truisms "supported" by Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, the Dalai Lama's new PR strategy of emptiness, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and those feisty boys from George Orwell's *Lord of the Flies* (yes, the author is aware that Orwell did not write *Lord of the Flies*, but a student in the 2007 NFA final round was not), a judge would be expected to comment intelligently on the fluent, at times almost human, presentation. And so the examples that were neatly packaged weeks earlier would stand in opposition to Twain's observation about preparing what is typically not prepared in advance. In actuality, the arguments and examples would be irrelevant to an understanding of the quotation, but such is the nature of the game. "Our tournament champion in generic exemplification is ..."

Language matters. This point is not lost on any serious student, teacher or scholar of rhetoric. Burke (1957, 1961) claims that language represents "strategic, stylized" responses to the human condition. The label assigned is loaded with meaning, allowing the agent to accept or reject the prevailing context or condition (Burke, 1952). When something is assigned a label, a suggestion is made regarding what the thing is, and what it is not. When forensic educators use the terms "impromptu" and "extemporaneous" in journals or at conferences, the words suggest modes of delivery associated with speeches developed in a limited time frame. However, the pedagogy of practice that has emerged over the past three decades works against the nature of these terms and the intent of these events. When "limited preparation" really means advanced preparation, when "impromptu" rewards the use of examples fully pre-prepared and "extemporaneous" punishes only the deliveries that are truly extemporaneous, then perhaps the forensics community is experiencing an accurately-referenced Orwellian nightmare. Our language betrays us.

The Value of Education in Speaking with Limited Preparation

Limited preparation events are unique in that they are the only events named after modes of delivery rather than genre of content, purpose or occasion. Impromptu and extemporaneous speaking prescribe particular methods of delivery in their titles. The other major distinguishing factor is their common generic tie—limited preparation. The existence and perpetuation of these events represents a community belief in the value of providing instruction in public speech constrained by strictly limited preparation time. The nature of public speech changes when messages are constructed "off the cuff" or "on the spot." Memory functions differently. Invention is necessarily more immediate. Language choices are typically less specific. Audience expectations related to content and delivery are different. These and other factors comprise unique rhetorical situations worthy of continuing study and practice.

Communication text authors and forensic researchers are quick to highlight the value of impromptu and extemporaneous speaking. Impromptu speaking is by far the most practical form of delivery for everyday speech (Lucas, 1998). Beyond the obvious conversational application, speakers are often called to respond immediately in business meetings, religious gatherings, social settings, classroom contexts and civic arenas. The ability to formulate arguments quickly and concisely, and deliver them effectively represents the most practical, useful public speaking skills. When a speaker is given time to prepare, and the presentational setting is a bit more formal, extemporaneous speaking is the most practical and useful method of delivery (Zarefsky, 2007; O'Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein, 2004). Beebe and Beebe (2000) suggest that "extemporaneous speaking is the approach most communication teachers recommend for most situations" (280). Given the usefulness, practicality and pervasiveness of extemporaneous and impromptu speaking in presentational settings, one is made to wonder why they occupy such a narrow tract of forensic landscape.

Speaking with limited preparation time fosters the development of critical thinking and argumentative skills. Impromptu speaking typically requires a student to analyze a quotation and formulate a well-reasoned, organized argumentative response—in a matter of minutes. Extemporaneous speaking invites students to engage the world by forming argumentative answers to domestic and international current events questions. Aden (1992) likens extemporaneous preparation and speaking to presidential public address, in that both necessitate the process of analysis, synthesis and rhetorical strategy. Pratt's (1981) description of final round limited preparation speakers from three decades ago reflects the essence of critical thinking skills and argumentative analysis:

... they advance, support and criticize claims and they give reasons as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes

and values. They use a variety of supporting data to try to establish subordinate claims; once established, those subordinate claims serve as data for a central claim they have made, either in answering their extemp question or in responding to their impromptu topic. (380)

Enhancing the student's ability to develop clear, cogent arguments with severely limited preparation serves an enormously valuable educative function.

Additional educational benefits emerge from the content areas associated with limited preparation events. Reynolds and Fay (1987) note that one of the distinct features of impromptu speaking is its lack of a particular area of content specialization. Impromptu is the one event where a breadth of knowledge is rewarded. As a result of the challenge of immediate preparation, Reynolds and Fay (1987) add that the canons of invention and memory play uniquely significant roles in impromptu development. The discovery of ideas involves googling one's own mind for relevant ideas, arguments and examples. The memory required in impromptu speaking differs from prepared speaking events in that it is a personal "storehouse of knowledge" from which ideas can be sought out, generated and created. The disciplined process of rhetorical invention initiates, develops and sustains a way of thinking. Articulating the constructions of these cognitive and creative processes forms the essence of impromptu speaking.

The value of content specific education in extemporaneous speaking is so overwhelmingly obvious that it barely requires mentioning. At its best, extemporaneous speaking challenges students to acquire an in-depth knowledge of current social, political and economic events in both domestic and international contexts. And while the task is daunting, the educational outcomes are phenomenal. To begin to know the world, and to articulate its problems while seeking the language of solutions, is the beginning of education.

Limited Preparation in Limited Preparation Events

The redundant section title seems odd in light of the previously noted educational benefits of contest limited preparation speaking. The genre is literally defined by the time constraints, or limited preparation imposed by the events. No doubt, the forensic founders recognized the unique benefits gained from the limited preparation experience. However, the pedagogy of practice imposed over the intervening decades has undermined the events to the point where truly limited preparation is detrimental to success in limited preparation speaking. The pedagogy of practice refers to the dominant educational paradigm present in competitive forensics. In the absence of well-stated, time-honored, community embraced educational standards and pedagogical priorities, the circular pragmatic law of "what wins is good, and what is good wins" functions as "teaching." And students learn these experiential lessons well. Presentational innovations transform into performance norms, which become judge criteria, eventually resulting in unwritten rules (Ribarsky, 2005). The process occurs with little or no dis-

cussion of educational benefits or harm at the national or organizational level. Instead of being considered rhetorical or performance choices, presentational devices, such as teasers in interpretation, research questions in rhetorical criticism, previewed subpoints in speech events, and a problem-cause-solution format in persuasive and after-dinner speaking, rise to the level of criteria on ballots. And the percentage of the national judging pool who gather at conferences such as this one to discuss forensic pedagogy is dwarfed by the number of judges whose programs are fully vested in and served by the hegemonic demands of the status quo.

In limited preparation events the pedagogy of practice has eroded the very idea, and certainly the practice, of limited preparation. In impromptu speaking, the use of "canned" or pre-prepared examples is both commonplace and encouraged. Rather than developing a unique argument in response to a given topic, students plug in well-worn, previously prepared and practiced, meticulously delivered examples. The results are smooth, fluent, impressively delivered collections of examples which offer little insight and have almost nothing to do with the topic at hand. Competitors who are skilled at this method constantly repeat the topic to support the illusion of topicality. Instead of offering focused, insightful argumentation derived from an understanding of the topic, speakers are more likely to develop the unstated, but understood, argument that the examples being offered really do "fit." Judges are continually confronted with the task of weighing polished, less than topical, generic presentations against speeches that lack presentational polish but are developed on the spot, or as some would call it, impromptu. When topicality and argumentative sophistication are not the primary concerns of judges, then a pre-packaged arrangement and recitation of examples will beat an impromptu speech almost without exception. Reynolds and Fay (1987) identified and explained the problem over two decades ago:

Too often, we hear impromptu students and coaches refer to using "blocks" or canned speeches. The problem with this is ... that such set pieces do not employ memory and invention in tandem. This attitude runs the danger of producing stiff and unimaginative speeches that are not adapted to the demands of each specific metaphor. ...If speakers already have established what they will discuss in a given round, then they will not continue trying to expand the fields of knowledge or use newer learning. This type of thinking, even in a purely forensics sense, precludes development. In a larger sense, using only memory co-opts the purpose of the event in a way that can make it meaningless as an educational tool. (87)

In the intervening decades, forensic "impromptu" speaking has rewarded and perpetuated this non-argumentative, anti-intellectual approach.

The problem of extensive pre-preparation is not limited to impromptu speaking. In their content analysis of extempo-

aneous ballots, Cronn-Mills and Croucher (2001) listed the issue of “canned” speeches as one of two major concerns that emerge from the study. They noted that “prefabricated” speeches were often indicated by a presentation that was “non-unique to the question posed.” Three significant questions emerged from their inquiry.

- 1) Are students pre-prepping speeches based on assumptions of what the questions may be on any given weekend?
- 2) Are coaches encouraging students to pre-prepare extemporaneous speeches?
- 3) Are coaches actually pre-prepping speeches themselves for their students to present?

From a pedagogical perspective, question three obviously points to practices that are educationally, and ethically, unsound. The other questions call forth interesting instructional issues. One could certainly argue that in-depth pre-preparation affords students more engagement with significant current events. However, if issue “briefs” are encouraged, how can a judge be sure that the student speaker prepared them? The allowance of briefs seems to greatly advantage a large squad. The experience involved in delivering a speech from pre-prepared briefs differs significantly from the strict 30-minute preparation experience. And while the educational advantages afforded by both approaches is a matter for debate, the issue of fairness seems more obvious and potentially damaging to the event. On one hand, the event calls for 30 minutes of preparation, on the other, as Cronn-Mills and Croucher point out (2001), current intercollegiate event guidelines do not preclude the use of briefs. At the very least, forensic professional organizations need to discuss the issue and clarify event guidelines—if not for pedagogical purposes, at least as a matter of fairness.

A pedagogical inquiry into extemporaneous speaking poses the question, what is most valuable in extemporaneous instruction? The current pedagogy of practice argues that delivery polish and numerous source citations trump most other concerns. In fact, an obsession with delivery threatens to eliminate the use of a note card in an event that’s name is generally characterized by the use of notes. From an instructional perspective, the message delivered is clear, we would rather you spend half of your prep time memorizing source citations and committing your speech to memory than developing your argument or refining your analysis. As the push for polish pervades, and the easily observable, least common denominator delivery techniques become event standards, the pedagogical value of extemporaneous speaking is severely diminished. Richardson (2009) offered the following six reasons for encouraging the use of note cards in extemporaneous speaking:

- 4) Tournament rules explicitly allow the use of notes.
- 5) The most common definitions of “extemporaneous” speaking offered by communication text authors include the use of notes.

- 6) Practice in extemporaneous speaking is valuable because it is the most practical method of public speech delivery.
- 7) Current contextual variables contribute to the likelihood of unethical behavior in extemporaneous speaking.
- 8) Research fails to support a no note card thesis.
- 9) An insistence on note card exclusion emphasizes lesser pedagogical prerogatives.

In the end, we must ask, do we truly value limited preparation in extemporaneous and impromptu speaking? Our pedagogy of practice suggests that we value the educational benefits of limited time constraints far less than the appearance of polish. Perhaps this is a natural outcome of a contest that is constructed, in all other speaking and interpretation events, to reward those who are best prepared. The notion of limited preparation, of constructing arguments “off the cuff,” runs counter to nearly all of the important lessons offered by all of the other events. If we truly value limited preparation speaking events, we must act to preserve the very notion of limited preparation.

Restoring Limited Preparation

A re-introduction of limited preparation requires a shift from the pedagogy of practice to the practice of pedagogy. As professional educators we need to direct forensic practice toward pedagogically justifiable ends—outcomes that develop critical thinking, encourage creative expression, enhance rhetorical processes, and inspire audience engagement beyond the narrow latitude of acceptance of current forensic practice. The enhancement of limited preparation speaking begins with well thought out and articulated judging criteria derived directly from meaningful educational objectives.

An increased focus on the development and sophistication of argumentation should dominate our teaching and practice in both impromptu and extemporaneous speaking. Students, coaches and judges need to explore the breadth and depth of comparative argumentative analysis. As program directors, we should produce graduates who can skillfully and accurately assess and articulate quality differentiation among arguments. In general, more emphasis on speech content and less on delivery can help to revive limited preparation. The push for polish that has dominated forensic practice for the past three decades has resulted in a disturbing confident incompetence. Speakers display all the style and intellectual depth of infomercial hucksters. In order for students to gain the great benefits of limited preparation speaking, they must be allowed to experience speaking with limited preparation.

Impromptu speaking requires innovation for the event to wear its name accurately again. Experimentation with new and old formats benefits impromptu outcomes. In their 1993 article, “Is it Time for a Change in Impromptu Speaking,” Williams, Carver and Hart outline an event they call “Reasoned Response,” which no doubt brings to mind “Rhetorical Situations” to many forensic veterans. In this variation, students are provided with situations, audiences, topics, and even a role that they are required to assume in the rhetorical

context. Adaptation and creativity can be encouraged and rewarded by this approach. The National Forensic Association's experimental event, Editorial Impromptu, also forces students outside of the can of familiar examples to a context that is more argument-centered. Certainly students can develop canned approaches to these events as well, but educators can be vigilant in staying ahead of the latest developments from the canning factories. When the community agrees that true limited preparation is a valuable learning experience, then the pressures to develop pre-packaged short cuts will minimize. Variations in types and forms of impromptu speaking are generally good for the event.

Impromptu speakers also need to be encouraged in the employment of various types of supporting material. Forensic impromptu has relied almost exclusively on exemplification in recent year. Typically, the examples highjack the speech and become the focal point of content development. The argument is often lost in the sea of pre-prepared examples. Students who spend time actually explaining, or experimenting with comparing and contrasting, are criticized for not arriving at examples sooner. Examples are meant to support arguments. They often exist within the framework of explanation, or comparison, or even criticism. Impromptu speaking rules do not mandate the use of examples. Judges should be open-minded enough to allow for the use of explanation or other types of support, especially when these types clearly represent a more directly topical argument. In fact, several years ago impromptu speakers typically used the first point to explain, the second to exemplify, and the third to apply. While this may appear on the surface to be a can of a different color, this approach emphasized critical thought in all three areas of analysis. Students had to demonstrate an understanding of the quotation, as well as the ability to connect with their audience through application. Examples were important, but they did not dominate the speech.

Practice in impromptu speaking should encourage invention and creativity. When students spend practice time delivering repetitive examples, not only is the idea of limited preparation at risk, but also the limited preparation of ideas. Critical and creative thought and expression should be the hallmarks of impromptu speaking. The well-worn pages of the student's speech-in-a-can notebook should be abandoned for approaches that blend invention with memory. The "storehouse of knowledge" from which speeches are drawn should appear more like a great art museum where the human condition is depicted in aesthetically and intellectually challenging ways, less like a Walmart, where ideas are neatly packaged for human consumption.

Contest extemporaneous speaking should encourage the use of note cards for the sake of credibility and depth of argumentative analysis. While the presence of a card ensures neither, the insistence on its absence potentially harms both. A renewed emphasis on source accuracy is imperative for the future of extemp. Pedagogy is useless if it teaches the wrong lessons. Our pedagogy of practice must emphasize

ethical behavior. Judging paradigms that emphasize analytical depth over source tallies and stumble counts will focus the limited preparation that occurs on argument development. Delivery is important, but an excessive emphasis on polish to the exclusion of analytical insight threatens to undermine limited preparation.

The relative pedagogical value of a given practice is often difficult to determine. To emphasize one lesson often means de-emphasizing another. One way to increase the chances for a level playing field while reviving true limited preparation in extemporaneous speaking is to mandate the use of the Internet in extemp prep (Voth, 1997). Instead of spending preparation time between tournaments constructing a file, students would spend their time in the news on issue analysis. Work sessions could be built around extending current events knowledge rather than adding bulk to the file. The ability to search the Internet quickly and construct arguments from credible sources serves students in today's world much better than the outdated filing mode of a bygone era. Preparation time could be extended if necessary. Students would be forced to do their own work, and that work is likely to be much more valuable to them as students, researchers and, one day, professionals. Mandating the use of Internet searches in extemp prep enhances the presence of limited preparation in extemporaneous speaking.

Our language has betrayed us for far too long. If the forensics community believes in the unique educational values afforded by limited preparation speaking situations, then it will act to preserve limited preparation. If not, we should restate our pedagogy and rename our events. Perhaps a championship in generic exemplification or current events briefs awaits.

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