
**JUSTIFYING THE PRESENT WITH ONE EYE ON THE FUTURE:
CRITERIA FOR THE SELECTION OF EVENT CATEGORIES**

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Why does the typical individual events tournament include the specific event categories that it does? Given the many details that forensics coaches must handle when preparing teams and managing tournaments, this fundamental question is often left unasked and unanswered. Sometimes the "standard" nine or ten or twelve events (depending on the national association to which a coach ascribes) seem to perpetuate simply because of inertia and peer pressure. Only occasionally, when a state or national association asks coaches to select an "experimental" event or when a tournament manager looks for a special extra event that will entice added entries, is some sense of what will be useful or fun for students consciously applied.

Nevertheless, in the back of the minds of all forensics coaches there are good reasons for staying with the standard events. A clear articulation of these reasons can help to justify present practice. Further, since no status quo can ever be perfect, clearly established criteria for evaluating event categories can help the activity avoid falling prey to sheer inertia and not changing when

change is necessary. This essay establishes and applies one such set of criteria. First, the criteria are set forth and applied to the standard event categories to reveal their value. Then, several concerns which might require eventual revision of these event categories are discussed.

I

The most obvious criteria for evaluating event categories stem from the question: "Just who do the categories have to satisfy?" First, the activity has to include events that help its students to reach their goals. The vast majority of students simply want to have a good time while learning skills that will help them find and keep a job. Additionally, an educator has to hope, most students would not mind some general self-actualization along the way. Second, the activity has to include events that satisfy the educational standards and practical limitations of its coaches. Since individual events is usually coached by members of speech communication departments, the educational standards imposed on it will come from that discipline. And, since coaches must be prepared to coach the entire range of events and tournament managers must be able to schedule all of the events into a tournament of reasonable length, there is a limit to the number that can be included. Thus, the event categories included in individual events should be fun, focus on useful skills, provide some liberal and humanistic experiences, suit the speech communication curriculum, and be pragmatically limited in number.

Factors associated with specific event categories that contribute to the fun of individual events forensics are relatively minor compared to the contributions of performing, competing, socializing, traveling, and representing a school that are offered by the general nature of the activity. However, worth mentioning is the fact that the current wide range of speech functions, degrees of preparation, and literary genres allows the inexperienced student to select one event that seems appealing and the experienced student to expand into more events for the sake of variety. Dramatic duo deserves special note because it adds the fun of working with a partner to the fun of performing literature.

The present event categories do a good job at providing useful skills for future employment. A group of more than 4,000 college graduates surveyed by the College Placement Council and the National Institute of Education placed communication ability at the top of the list of skills that they found were necessary when they entered the work force.¹ A Bell System research group found organizational and decision-making abilities, leadership qualities, and oral communication skills to be associated with managerial effectiveness.² And, a recent US News and World Report article cited many executives who believe that career advancements hinge on speaking ability.³ Admittedly, the categories in individual events primarily train students for public performance rather than for interpersonal interactions, while these studies imply the need

for both. Still, performance skills are significant components of oral competency. The public speaking categories clearly help students to build confidence in their ability to research, structure, develop, and present material with both minimal and extensive preparation time. While less obviously related to employment needs, the interpretation events do teach some career skills. The study of literary examples helps students to learn organizational patterns and narrative devices that can be applied in their own public and interpersonal discourse. The ability to take the perspective of the other, important in persuasion and negotiation, is enhanced by role playing.

Along with career training, higher education should offer its students a liberal background which promotes the development of self-concept and critical thinking, reduces prejudice, and encourages participation in social institutions. The ability to communicate with others is essential to these goals. Notes Thomas Woody, the late Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, "Communication is the key to enlightenment. Break communications and the mind begins to grow dark."⁴ The public speaking categories help students learn to identify issues and underlying assumptions, to evaluate evidence objectively, and to draw warranted conclusions. High standards of substance, relevance, and clarity are demanded in the prepared events. Impromptu and extemporaneous speaking teach rapid heuristic thinking and knowledge of public affairs. Since the performance of literature requires an interpreter to assimilate the perspective of the literary speaker, the oral interpretation events provide insight into the diversity of life and aid psychological growth.

Along with satisfying student needs, the standard events must satisfy the coaches. Since most coaches are speech communication teachers, it is hardly surprising that the standard events parallel typical divisions between speech functions, modes of delivery, and literary genres that are employed in speech communication classes. Thus, the individual events activity is an extracurricular laboratory in which students can further explore classroom concepts. The core curriculum, the basic speech course most widely required by college speech departments, almost always includes the fundamentals of delivery and of speech composition with projects in exposition and persuasion. Although rarely required of students and, thus, perhaps less central to the discipline, oral interpretation and rhetorical criticism courses are ubiquitous. The standard event categories, then, are reflections of divisions found in the activity's parent discipline.

Finally, there is a practical limit to the number of events that coaches can be expected to handle and tournaments to schedule. The fun of variety and the pedagogical value of breadth must be mediated by focus. Given the current procedure of three event groupings with three preliminary rounds of competition spread over two days, more than twelve events would stretch resources too thin. And, as the National Forensics Association's national tournament

demonstrates, the more events that students are allowed to enter, the fewer total events there can be. Clearly, if new events are to be added to the current standard lists, old events will have to be sacrificed.

II

The preceding arguments that the standard event categories reasonably satisfy the criteria employed here will seem obvious to virtually anyone who has coached forensics for a time. Nevertheless, those same criteria suggest several concerns which may eventually lead to some revision of the standard events. First, there is need for more events which involve interaction between competitors. Second, events could be more pedagogically successful if they allowed developmental sequencing. Third, events which demand greater attention to audience analysis are needed. And fourth, events that employ more communications technology would be useful.

Both student needs and a trend in the speech communication discipline's curriculum suggest a need for more events which involve interaction between competitors. While performance skills and the related research and analysis skills are very useful for employment, a recent survey of Career Advisory Board members found working closely with others, working in groups, and dealing with the public one-on-one to be far more frequently needed in the work place than making oral presentations to groups.⁵ Certainly, there is some transfer of skills from the public setting to the interpersonal one. And, interpersonal skills are enhanced by interactions between teammates and competitors in forensics. Still, event categories which formalize training in interpersonal communication would expand the pedagogical utility of the activity. The previously mentioned fun of working with a partner associated with dramatic duo would also apply. Moreover, interpersonal events would acknowledge and exploit a trend in speech communication. Quite a while ago, W. Barnett Pearce noted the increasing tendency for competitive speaki

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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 providual events should lend its popularity to the national discussion circuit.

An argument for events which allow more developmental sequencing stems from the work of scholars in rhetorical invention. Frank D'Angelo relates composing to the key principle in evolutionary theory: the movement from an undifferentiated whole toward greater and greater differentiation. Thus,

he says, intuition precedes analysis. "Once the mind intuitively grasps the initial gestalt, then the rational mental processes can take over."⁷ James Moffett argues that developing writers start close to the self, utilizing the present tense of drama. Subsequently, writers move gradually outward toward more impersonal kinds of discourse which demand adaptation to convention: what happened (narration), what happens (exposition), and what should happen (argumentation).⁸ James Britton and his coauthors believe that expressive composition, which reveals the speaker's self, lies at the heart of the human ability to conceptualize. Writers develop toward a more public style by working through a stage of expressive writing.⁹ Thus, writing promotes learning first about the self, then about the self in the world.

The foregoing primarily suggests that coaches follow a developmental sequence when coaching a student's growth in one specific event. However, the potential for guiding a student through several different events in a developmental sequence is also evident. A new event which allows personal expression in a public speaking context would start off a sequence that follows with the existing events of informative speaking, persuasive speaking, and then rhetorical criticism. In interpretation events, since the traditional genres of prose, poetry, and drama have overlapped to the point where some performances in each are indistinguishable from performances in the others, a developmental sequence which moves from an undifferentiated whole toward greater and greater differentiation would be both pedagogically wise and consistent with actual practice. Monologues from any literary genre would begin the sequence. Multiple voices in closed focus, mostly from drama and poetry, would follow. And multiple voices in both open and closed focus, using prose and poetry, would complete the sequence.

That adaptation to the receivers of any message is vital in communication is axiomatic. Every basic and advanced textbook in speech communication expounds on audience analysis and taking the perspective of the other. Robert Brubaker believes that the central skills that communication students learn and bring to prospective employers are the abilities to "determine the audience to be addressed, analyze lines of argument to appeal to that audience, construct effective communication with that audience, and evaluate the results of that communication."¹⁰ However, the individual events audience is always a nebulous amalgam of all those who judge individual events. There is value in having students learn the high standards of form, substance, and delivery which will satisfy that audience. Still, their sense of audience analysis and adaptation must become rather myopic. Events, like the rhetorical situation impromptu used in junior college competition, which require adaptation to different audiences may better prepare students to use the skills of audience adaptation, not to mention make them aware of the diversity that exists in this world.

Finally, individual events should make more use of communication technology. Jesse Delia, in an article charting trends for the future of communication departments, asserts that, "the technological developments transforming public communications are so massive that by the next century theoretical, empirical, and critical concerns with these agencies of information transmission and their impact are likely to be the major focus of communication study."¹¹ Individual events should help students prepare for this focus with events like the preparation and broadcasting of news segments or features for radio or television and with increased use of state-of-the-art equipment for visual aids. Few professional speakers still use the type of visual aids proliferating in the current informative event.

CONCLUSION

Granted, many new event categories can be imagined that meet the criteria set forth in this essay. Yet, pragmatically, the number of event categories must be limited. Any new event must displace a current event. And those current events are fun and useful for students and meet the standards of the speech communication discipline. Still, individual events forensics must keep pace with trends in the discipline, in education, and in the work place. Present practice should not continue solely due to inertia and tradition.

NOTES

- ¹ Ron Adler and Neil Towne, Looking Out/Looking In, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978) 15.
- ² Robert Brubaker, "Training Students for a Diversified Market," Association for Communication Administration Bulletin 40 (1982): 26.
- ³ Leonard Wiener, "Speaking with Confidence," U.S. News and World Report 12 Jan. 1987: 56.
- ⁴ Thomas Woody, Liberal Education for Free Men (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1951) 240-41.
- ⁵ John Muchmore and Kathleen Galvin, "A Report of the Task Force on Career Competencies in Oral Communication Skills for Community College Students Seeking Immediate Entry into the Work Force," Communication Education 32 (1983): 212.
- ⁶ W. Barnett Pearce, "Forensics and Speech Communication," Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication 7 (1974): 28.
- ⁷ Frank D'Angelo, "An Ontological Basis for a Modern Theory of the Composing Process," Quarterly Journal of Speech 64 (1978): 80.
- ⁸ James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 32-59.

⁹ James Britton, Tony Bergess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18 (London: Macmillan Education, 1975) 14-15.

¹⁰ Brubaker 27.

¹¹ Jesse Delia, "Some Thoughts Concerning Departmental Focus in Speech Communication," Association for Communication Administration Bulletin 40 (1982): 5.
