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The Times, They Were A-Changin': Exploring The Interstate Oratorical Contests of the 1960s

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The social change emerging in the 1960s can be witnessed from a variety of perspectives, but perhaps none more enlightening than the view from the college classroom. The professor-led “teach-ins” of 1962 and 1963 gave way to sit-ins that shut down some campuses in the middle and latter years of the decade. Anti-war protests spilled out on to the lawns and sidewalks of places like Berkeley and, later, Kent State. In 1968, presidential candidate Richard Nixon called for law and order in city streets and on college campuses, proclaiming we would win the war in Vietnam. By 1972, President Nixon campaigned on the idea of bringing the troops home from Vietnam. It seems the radical message espoused by the students of the Sixties was co-opted by Nixon’s silent majority in the early ‘70s. College classrooms hatched ideas and actions that transformed a nation.

Ideas themselves were being transformed, especially in the communication classrooms of the 1960s. Aristotelian explanations that dominated rhetorical theory for more than 2,300 years were called into question by “new rhetorics.” Black’s (1965) genre-based criticism and Bitzer’s (1968) rhetorical situation challenged the sufficiency of Aristotle’s foundational concepts. Scott and Smith’s (1969) rhetoric of confrontation attempted to explain radical rhetoric and social movement protest unaccounted for in Aristotelian terms. Burke added two new works to his canon in the decade, *The Rhetoric of Religion* in 1961 and *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966. No scholar offered a more comprehensive alternative to classical notions of rhetoric than did Burke. As persuasion in the public forum changed, so did the methods and means for analyzing it.

Since 1874, a handful of American college classrooms have hosted generations of students practicing the art of oratory. Throughout the intervening decades, students involved in the Interstate Oratory Contest have, to varying degrees, addressed the compelling social, political, economic and educational issues of their time. When one considers the shifting socio-political landscape of the 1960s, this decade seems a far cry from the rhetorical contexts that gave rise to speeches for the previous nine decades. Did stock issues give way to Woodstock issues? An analysis of the Interstate Oratory winning orations from the 1960s raises numerous questions. To what extent do the speeches reflect the emerging notion of student empowerment? How are the compelling social movements of the day, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and the Anti-War Movement, reflected in the discourse of the decade? Do the 1960s’ orations signal the generic properties observed by previous researchers?

Literature Review

The Interstate Oratory Contest is the nation’s oldest continuously held intercollegiate speech competition. The initial contest was held on February 22, 1874, in Galesburg, Illinois. Beginning in 1887, each state was represented by its best orator. This practice held until 1937, when the contest divided into men’s and women’s divisions,

allowing one representative from each sex to represent the state. This segregation lasted until 1973, when the division disappeared, and each state was granted two representatives.

The first two volumes of *Winning Orations (1891, 1907)* published the first- and second- place Interstate Oratory speeches from the years 1874 – 1908. They included updated biographies and even a few pictures of the winners from Interstate’s first four decades. In the years between 1908 and 1933, publication was left up to individual states and colleges. Then the Interstate Oratorical Association assumed responsibility for the publication of *Winning Orations* from 1934 to the present.

Despite this well-preserved historical archive, few researchers have taken notice of these speeches (Schnoor, 1984). It should be noted that the contest itself predates even the formation of the first professional speech organization, the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (now NCA) by over four decades. The association’s second president, James Winans, made the oft-quoted observation that helped to launch a discipline: “A speech is not an essay on its hind legs.” In the years before the rise of any professional speech organizations, the Interstate speeches certainly resemble essays, hind legs notwithstanding. While it is probably safe to assume that the delivery of these early orations reflected the dominant elocutionary influences of the day (see William Jennings Bryan), few specific descriptions of delivery details survive. Early essays in the newly formed *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education* (1917) generally hail oratory competitions as worthwhile and educative, but they lack any sense of a specific research agenda.

However, several convention panels and papers have focused on Interstate orations through the years. Reynolds (1983) focused specifically on Interstate orations from 1974 through 1981 that demonstrated a particular subject type categorized as “The Dread Disease Speech.” Reynolds observed a certain dread among judges assigned to persuasive speaking events, postulating that perhaps the lack of variety among the speeches resulted in the less than enthusiastic reaction. Beyond the topical redundancy that led to her descriptive label, Reynolds noted the following content similarities: a problem/solution structure; the use of expert testimony; reference to personal involvement; the establishment of significance; and the most dominant type of evidence, examples and illustrations. She concluded that students were learning valuable lessons about persuasive speaking, and perhaps the problem of the “Dread Disease Speech” resulted more from the repetitive nature of judges’ exposure to the content than the orations themselves.

Sellnow and Ziegelmueller (1988) offered a comparative analysis of first- and second-place Interstate orations from 1964 – 1969 and 1980 – 1985. They found speeches from the mid- to late 1960s reflected more personal involvement, employed more evocative evidence and less logic, devoted less time to solutions, and included fewer specific source citations and less specific detailing of sources. The researchers hypothesized that perhaps the search for fresh topics ushered in by national speech tournaments and circuits moved students away from the personal experience-related speeches of the earlier decade. They also lamented a certain loss of aesthetic, remarking, “It would be unfortunate, however, if too much of the emotional quality of ‘old fashioned oratory’ were lost” (p. 85).

Olson’s (2010) more recent study represents more of an attempt to identify successful strategies than a comprehensive analysis of Interstate orations. However, he references numerous orations and moves toward generic analysis by observing similarities among winning speeches. Olson described trends in topic choice, asserting that successful

speeches often called on subjects that: were unfamiliar, derived from contemporary solutions to larger problems, and were felt strongly about by the orator. The structural outline reflected in nearly all the successful speeches included some variation of problem-cause-solution. He noted that unlike typical competitive speeches, Interstate orations were developed with a final round panel of local, professional judges in mind. Therefore, students were more likely to use metaphor, clever uses of language, and references to the occasion. Regarding speech delivery, Olson claimed that speakers should be encouraged to “speak with all the conviction they can muster” (p. 204).

Method

To better understand the topics and development of the winning orations of the 1960s, the first-, second- and third-place award-winning speeches by men and women were systematically analyzed. All but one of the speech texts were published in annual editions of *Winning Orations* by The Interstate Oratorical Association, resulting in a census of 59 speeches.

The speeches were coded by state, institution and general topic. They were then content analyzed to investigate speech development and support, using categories largely drawn from prior research. Each text was investigated to determine if a problem/cause/solution organization was employed, defined by Reynolds (1983, p. 124) as occurring when the speaker’s “goal is assumed to be to persuade the audience to accept the existence of a problem, and then to take some sort of action to remedy the problem.”

Means of support within the speeches were analyzed by coding presence or absence of the following types of development:

- a) Expert Testimony, the practice of citing those with recognized expertise related to the topic (Reynolds, 1983);
- b) Personal Involvement, as declared or explained by the speaker within the text (Sellnow and Ziegelmueller, 1988);
- c) Call to Action, explicitly asking audience members to pursue specific actions (Sellnow and Ziegelmueller, 1988);
- d) Examples, the practice of citing case studies, facts or incidences related to the topic (Reynolds, 1983);
- e) Visualization, the use of hypothetical occurrences or outcomes through deep or evocative description (Sellnow and Ziegelmueller, 1988);
- f) Metaphor, the development of comparison through figurative language (Olson, 2010);
- g) Quotation, citing the words of others;
- h) Reference to the Occasion, employing specific mention of the location or events relevant to the location within the text (Olson, 2010); and
- i) Documentation, specific citation of the source of information used within the speech (Sellnow and Ziegelmueller, 1988).

Results

The speakers represented 15 states, with nine speakers from Minnesota institutions, seven from Michigan, six from Missouri, five from Colorado, Indiana, Ohio and

Wisconsin, and three from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Oklahoma. Two speakers represented Pennsylvania and South Dakota, and one speaker came from Montana and one from Nebraska.

Certain institutions had strong representation throughout the decade of competition. Southeast Missouri State had six award winners, one first-place winner, two second-place winners and three third-place winners. Gustavus Adolphus had four winners, two first-place and two second-place recipients. DePauw, Wayne State, Oklahoma State and Muskingum each had three award winners.

Thirteen of the 59 coded speeches, or 22%, employed a recognizable problem/cause/solution format. For example, the 1969 third-place speech by Lynn Gruentzel, of Wisconsin State University-Eau Claire, first presented a series of examples and testimony to demonstrate the discrepancies found in the cost of specific prescription medications (pp. 51-53). The variation in cost was attributed to the fact that “the drug manufacturer can set his own price for each customer to whom he sells” (p. 52), with specific examples of such practice offered. A three-prong solution was then presented, with calls for the FDA to publish a compendium of prices, manufacturers to resist duplication of drugs, and action against the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers of America’s control of drug sales. However, there was no apparent increase in the use of this format across the decade. While 16, or 27%, of the speeches contained specific public or personal calls to action, they were not all framed within the problem/cause/solution format.

Support Types

None of the speeches coded made specific references to the occasion by citing the locations or events associated with locations. It should be noted that such references could have been added in the final round as an impromptu adaption and then not included in the formal speech text, but the publications have no indication of such.

However, each speech analyzed used examples as a support device. Some speeches relied on case studies; others used statistics, laws, court rulings or historical events.

The second most common device for support noted within 53 of the 59, or 89.8% of the speeches, was the inclusion of quotations, some from prose or poetry, the Christian Bible, public speeches, or newspaper or magazine articles. Almost all quotations were from males.

Perhaps not surprisingly in light of his influence on the decade, quotations from President John F. Kennedy were the most frequent common source, with seven speeches quoting the President. His brother, Robert Kennedy, was quoted in one speech. Other Presidents were also quoted, including Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and Lyndon Johnson. Academics, priests, and an assortment of governmental figures were also quoted. National and state judicial figures, including Supreme Court Justices Vinson, Frankfurter, Cardozo and Douglas, were also quoted, often from their written Court opinions. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was quoted in two speeches, an indication of the influence of the Civil Rights Movement.

Literature quotations were also common. From *Antigone* to *Oedipus Rex* and from Shakespeare to Shaw, speakers chose selections from works or from the authors themselves. In several of the speeches, many quotes are included. For example, the 1963 first-place speech by Diane Baker from the State University of South Dakota (pp. 46-49) included quotations from a court transcript and an address by U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Cardozo. The 1960 speech (pp. 11-14) by Lynda Bayliff of DePauw, “The One Less Traveled By,” contained quotations from Charles Van Doren from testimony before a Congressional subcommittee, theologian Dr. Elton Trueblood, then Sen. John Kennedy, the *Indianapolis News*, Whittaker Chambers, *Antigone*, Albert Einstein, professor Charles Frankel of Columbia University, and William Roberts, before concluding with a stanza from the Robert Frost poem from which the speech title was drawn.

Some 27 speeches, about 46%, included expert testimony from a variety of sources, from jurists to physicians to politicians. More than half of the speeches (52.5%) drew on the personal involvement of the speaker. For example, speakers explained their perspectives as a veteran, a journalist, an international student or from having family members who had been incarcerated or who had illnesses or disabilities. Several spoke as members of racial minorities. Others used first-person voice to characterize issues faced by college students, such as being too busy or having friends who were suicidal.

Illustrative language in the forms of metaphors was found in 15, or about 25%, of the speeches, and through visualization in 10, or about 17%, of the speeches coded. In her 1961 second-place speech, Chloe Beard of the University of Kentucky (pp. 20-23) used the metaphor of diamonds drawn from a Russell Conwell story to represent the value of getting to know the international students who had come to the United States. The speech concluded: “Stop! Stop! Seize that diamond—while there is yet time—hold fast to it!” Through visualization, Roger Robertson, in his 1969 first-place speech “People Get Ready,” repeatedly asked the audience, “Can you remember where you were, and what you were doing, on that . . . tragic day of Friday, November 23, 1963; April 4, 1968, and June 4, 1968” to encourage them to evoke the feelings of shock and sadness that accompanied the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy (pp. 54-56).

Discussion

The degree to which “the times were a-changin’” depends on one’s perspective. While the topical shift from the beginning to the end of the decade reflects a significant change in college oratory, the fact that the decade perpetuated the gender segregation initiated in the 1930s suggests that at least in this area, the times weren’t a-changin’ much. A consideration of speech topics from the decade reflects a social change narrative. The inspirational, almost seemingly naïve speeches of the 1960-1962 period gave way to a vigilant, socially active strain in 1967-1969. Topics from the early years included making moral choices, staying mentally active, and the busyness of students (1960); getting to know international students, a lack of shame for crime, and a lack of personal responsibility (1961); and the need to love one another, the importance of virtue, and how to live a good life (1962). The list of subjects sounds almost like sermon titles, and indeed a number of the speeches included biblical references. By the end of the decade, those references had for the most part disappeared among the winning orations. The latter-day orations included a veteran’s post-war adjustment and two speeches on college suicide (1967), anti-gay prejudice and pride in Vietnam (1968), and press coverage of trials and two speeches warning of the coming violent revolution (1969). And while exceptions to this trend exist, the general tenor of the orations had clearly shifted.

A constant throughout the decade was the topic of civil rights and race relations. It was the most represented among the winners, claiming nine of the 59 spots. A speech on prejudice was present among the 1960 winners, while two orations on racial injustice made it through in 1968. In between, all three of the female top prizes in 1964 and one of the male prizes went to civil rights-related speeches. Racial injustice was truly the topic of the decade.

One might assume that the emergence of civil rights speeches and students' rights-related speeches among the winners should naturally be joined by women's rights speeches in the years immediately before the *Roe v. Wade* decision. However, this assumption proves to be totally false in the decade that continued the practice of separate divisions for women and men. One speech in 1966 called for the need for abortion legislation. This was the only speech among the 59 winners to address women's rights directly.

The decade did provide one final opportunity to compare the oratorical styles of women to men head-to-head. While few significant differences emerge, women did tend to rely on personal involvement at nearly twice the rate of men, as 20 out of 31 references to personal involvement came from women. This finding tends to support the generic observations of Campbell (1973) in her ground-breaking identification of feminine oratorical style. Indeed, as Campbell's article, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation" was going to press in 1973, the Interstate Oratorical Association was voting to end the practice of separate divisions.

The decade of the 1960s provides the last opportunity to observe intercollegiate oratory before the influence of major national forensic tournaments, organizations and circuits. Before Reynold's (1983) lament, "The repetitive nature of the event, our evaluation of the same student—giving the same speech—from tournament to tournament..." (p. 134), or Sellnow and Ziegelmüller's 1988 conclusion, "It would be unfortunate, however, if too much of the emotional quality of 'old fashioned oratory' were lost" (p. 85), the orations of the 1960s reflected a freedom of style and literary components lost in the subsequent decades. When one considers that only 16 of the 1960s' winners featured a call to action and only 13 speeches reflected a problem-cause-solution structure, it is clear that the unwritten rules that would dominate the following decades had yet to force prescription on the rhetorical choices of the student voices of the Sixties.

Dylan's proclamation of "changin' times" was echoed in a 1964 Interstate oration from a young, idealistic sophomore, Edward Harris from Purdue University, whose introduction began with a humility not often seen in competition today:

I am a college student. I speak to you with no real authority, no assumption of rank or age; I hold no outstanding position...My criterion for speaking out now is that I am a sophomore at Purdue University, a member of the controversial college generation" (Esch, 1965, p. 52).

The controversial college generation found its voice in college classrooms across the nation in teach-ins, in sit-ins and protests of many varieties, and in the voices of competitors in the Interstate Oratorical Association. And these voices echoed throughout the world and for many decades to follow. Three years prior to Harris' Dylan riff, another competitor from Macalester College in Minnesota offered a similar introduction in the final round of the 1961 contest: "I speak with no authority, no assumption of rank or age; I hold no position, I have no wealth. One thing alone I own, and that is my soul." This speech

concluded with a phrase that the orator would embody the rest of his life—"all men are brothers, indeed" (Nelson, 1961, p. 80). The words belonged to Koffi Annan, future United Nations Secretary General. The 1960's Interstate Oratory Contests launched great speeches and great speakers, suitable for changin' times and changin' the world.

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