

## QUESTIONING IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM: A SOCIAL VALUE APPROACH

I must confess at the outset that I have experienced some difficulty completing this assignment. When I agreed to write this position paper I assumed that I would defend asking questions in rhetorical criticism on the grounds that the practice enhanced the educational validity of the activity. The difficulty began when I sought to isolate the educational values of forensics and to identify their actual operation in competition.

Upon further reflection it occurs to me that the differences between theory and practice reflect two values existing in dialectical opposition to one another—an "idealistic" value of educational attainment opposed by a more "materialistic" value of competitive success.<sup>1</sup> These values, and the dialectical tension between them, underly the entire forensic activity. The tension becomes conflict as students, coaches, and judges make their respective decisions regarding the creation, maturation, and evaluation of competitive forensic discourse. While the conflict exists in every form of forensic competition, I believe it is seen most clearly in rhetorical criticism.

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<sup>1</sup>Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frenzt, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, XLII, 2 (Spring, 1978), pp. 63-72.

With this understanding in mind, I propose to discuss the following in this essay: First, an explanation of the idealistic value of educational attainment. Second, an explanation of the materialistic value of competitive success as embodied by the forensics "game." Finally, an application of the competing values to rhetorical criticism leading to the central question of the essay, the validity of questions in rhetorical criticism.

**FORENSICS AND IDEALISM:** In discussing the role of forensic competition in the education of students, one must identify the overall purpose or purposes of education. Despite the current "Yuppie" credo, a successful education is not determined by the type of job obtained upon graduation. I offer a broader view that is grounded in the philosophy of Robert Maynard Hutchins, namely, that the purpose of education is the creation of a trained mind. To me this orientation views education as a process rather than a product in that teaching people *how* to think is far more important than teaching them *what* to think. I look again at Emerson's famous discourse on "The American Scholar" and, overlooking his sexism, find myself in agreement with his depiction of the educational ideal of "man thinking."

Forensics, of course, trains minds and teaches a process. Competition in debate, interpretation, and public address events helps students learn the process of analysis and critical thinking. These skills are, by and large, developed as the student prepares for competition. While preparing, a student learns principles of research, organization, composition, empathy, and the like. The point to be made here is that competition serves education in that it provides a compelling opportunity for learning. I would assert further that some forensic events provide a unique opportunity for learning in that they demand that students create answers and "think on their feet." These events seem to require a mastery of process as well as product, and as such occupy a place of particular value educationally.

I would also note that forensics provides an added dimension to the educational process—effective communication. James J. Murphy explains the value of effective communication to education in his discussion of the ancient Greeks and their admiration of the man who "possesses both wisdom and rhetorical skill to express his wisdom effectively." Murphy explains that the Greeks believed that "thought is useless without a way to convey it, and mere expressive ability is worthless" if a speaker has nothing important to say.<sup>2</sup> The reference to "mere expressive ability," of course, leads

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<sup>2</sup>James J. Murphy, ed. *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*. (Davis, CA: Department of Rhetoric, University of California at Davis), 1983, p. 4.

naturally to a consideration of the forensic game.

**FORENSICS AND MATERIALISM-THE GAME:** Competition produces winners. After all, that's why they keep score, isn't it? Our society loves winners and is willing, even eager, to tolerate great deviance from people who "win." The obvious example is inter-collegiate athletics, where students often do not graduate and some do not learn material while in class. In forensics, it matters not whether material was used in high school or was written by another student or even by a coach. If it wins, love it. As soon as a technique, theory, argument, or cutting becomes "successful," it is copied.

As I view it, debate and individual events are oriented almost exclusively toward competitive success, measured traditionally by trophies and championships, but more recently by "margins of victory" and "years of consecutive championships." With this orientation, the educational benefits discussed previously occur at best by accident, if at all. I isolate the following as specific manifestations of the "game" orientation to forensics: denying students the opportunity to learn from failure by having coaches do the work for them; tolerating and encouraging an attitude that forensic competition is the most important aspect of a student's educational career; administrators treating forensic coaches like athletic coaches and ignoring deficiencies in teaching and scholarship; worst of all is the practice of hiring faculty with no academic responsibility save coaching. I can think of no clearer polar opposite to Hutchins than the Al Davis philosophy of "just win, baby" and don't worry about anything else. The essence of this value is treating forensic students as athletes, which leads naturally to the exaltation of "mere expressive ability."

**RHETORICAL CRITICISM—QUESTION AND THE CONFLICT:**

With the possible exception of "impromptu" speaking, which is, after all, an exercise in adapting a situation to a pre-fabricated pattern of analysis, I know of no forensic activity as game-oriented as rhetorical criticism. It is impossible to conduct a meaningful, in-depth analysis of a worthwhile rhetorical artifact within the time allowed for the event. On the other hand, with the possible exception of debate, I know of no forensic activity having the educational potential of Rhetorical Criticism. Done properly, Rhetorical Criticism is the essence of "man thinking" and is a perfect encapsulation of the goal of training the mind via process rather than filling it with products.

Students in Rhetorical Criticism can, and do, mislead their judges. They claim the ideas of others as their own. They misapply

or short-circuit a method. They misrepresent an artifact. They lie about its effect. These things are done in all forensic events, but they can be done with impunity in rhetorical criticism because of the limited pool of truly qualified judges. It is difficult to keep up with the literature in rhetorical criticism, and coaches who follow the athletic model don't even try. It is further impossible to schedule a tournament so that only qualified personnel judge rhetorical criticism. In the absence of a judge who knows as much or more about the method and the artifact as the competitor, the opportunity for abuse is functionally irresistible.

Given the above analysis, I find no recourse but to endorse the practice of asking questions. If students know that they will be questioned, I believe they will make a greater effort to understand their material and to present it fairly. A qualified judge can ask questions which will prove insightful to other, less qualified critics. A "good" question enables students to extend their analysis as a partial remedy to the time constraints which strangle the event. Questions almost inherently require that students think on their feet, and few questions can be answered satisfactorily without a thorough understanding of the subject matter and the method used to gain insight. Once again, this is "man thinking" in that questions pose unique problems for the student to solve. A competitor who is "playing the game" will often (but not, unfortunately, always) be discovered in their deception.

In sum, I endorse the practice of asking a question in rhetorical criticism on the grounds that questioning advances the value of educational attainment while combatting the value of the forensic game. While I recognize that not all questions are "good" in the sense of requiring students to think creatively and that "poor" questions can undermine the educational benefit of rhetorical criticism and function to promote the "game" mentality, I believe that the benefits outweigh the risks. Because questions can and do probe the wisdom of a particular rhetorical criticism, they can and do counter the "mere expressive ability" that is sufficient to garner success in most forensic events. If the ancient Greeks were running modern forensic tournaments, I believe that they would insist upon asking questions in rhetorical criticism, and perhaps in a few other events as well.

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