

The Use of Metaphorical Topoi in Impromptu Training

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Mark Twain once said, "It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech."¹ Many novice impromptu speakers may feel that Mark Twain was correct in his assessment because it seems that they take that long to think of something to say. Despite the apprehension of some novice speakers, impromptu is a very important speaking event. In 1984-85 at least 177 forensic tournaments around the nation offered impromptu speaking competition.² The popularity of this event has grown so that today it is one of the largest events in local and national competitions. Coaches encourage students to compete in impromptu to enhance quickness of thought, to improve organizational skills, and to develop a conversational "spur-of-the-moment" speaking style.

Impromptu speeches abound outside of the forensic environment in school, business, and politics. Public speaking courses sometimes use impromptu speaking exercises to acquaint students with the common presentational mode of business and politics.

Despite the significance of impromptu speaking, the information available on impromptu training has been meager. As Randall L. Bytwerk noted in 1985:

The impromptu speech, perhaps the type most often given, is also the one most neglected in public speaking courses and textbooks. Many texts give the subject a page or two; a few omit it altogether. Research on the matter is equally limited.³

Recent forensic-focused impromptu research is almost nonexistent. The few forensic articles on impromptu training are outdated because they ignore current rules, expectations, and practices. For example, one text on forensics states, "the student is typically given three topics, selects one and immediately begins to speak. . . from two to four minutes."⁴ Another text discusses "two types of

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¹Richard and Linda Heun, *Public Speaking: A New Speech Book*, (New York: West Publishing Company, 1979), p. 276.

²Edward J. Harris, Jr., ed. *Intercollegiate Forensic Tournament Results Book*, (Arlington, Massachusetts: Harris-Kropp Associates, 1985).

³Randall L. Bytwerk, "Impromptu Speaking Exercises," *Communication Education*, 34 (April, 1985), pp. 148-149.

⁴Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, *Directing Forensics*, (Denver, Colorado: Morton Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 213-214.

impromptu contests, and the more common type utilizes a pre-announced subject area . . ." while the "more radical approach" uses a newspaper editorial.⁵ The nature of impromptu competition in forensics has changed in the last fifteen years. One important change has been the standardization of the event's format and rules across the nation as influenced by the NFA impromptu rules:

IMPROMPTU SPEAKING: Contestants will receive short excerpts on general interest, political, economic and social issues and will have 7 minutes to divide between preparation and speaking. Speech should be at least 3 minutes. This is not mini-extemp. To remove the topic as a variable decision factor, all contestants in the same section will speak on the same topic⁶

A standard practice today is for students, even the most advanced, to use some preparation time. For the national competition the preparation time will range from one-half minute to two minutes. A novice speaker will normally take up to three minutes to prepare. The main concern for a novice speaker is the generation of ideas or simply coming up with enough ideas to discuss. At this level students need confidence that they can talk about three or four ideas that relate to the topic. The advanced speaker at NFA's and other tournaments, needs to generate *creative* ideas because all speakers in a round have the same topic. When all the speakers in a round have a political topic and everyone just uses political examples (such as Hitler, Nixon and Reagan — how many times have forensic judges heard those examples) the round seems dull and unimaginative. The creative speaker thinks of other *relevant* ways to interpret the topic, or transcends the common examples to a higher level of analysis.

A forensic coach can teach both the novice and advanced speakers ways to generate ideas for impromptu speaking by using topoi systems. Let's examine the nature of topoi and conceptual behavior, the uses of topoi in speech education and forensics, and the relationship of metaphorical topoi and creativity. By analyzing these areas forensic coaching practices will more closely approach theoretical advances in communication and creativity research.

The concept of topoi evolved from the classical rhetorical theories of Aristotle and Cicero. Topoi were thought of as lines of arguments, places of discovery, points of memory, common themes, places of clashing arguments and as warrants in syllogistic reasoning.⁷

⁵Donald W. Klopff and Carroll P. Lahman, *Coaching and Directing Forensics*, (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Corporation, 1973), p. 208.

⁶National Forensic Association, 16th Annual National Championship Tournament Invitation, 1986.

⁷See Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*, trans. by Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs

Topoi were traditionally placed under the general heading of invention or the generation of ideas. Usually with this placement came several attached ideas:

- (1)Topoi can be discovered.
- (2)Topoi can help the speaker create messages.
- (3)Topoi can be both universal and specific to a given context.
- (4)Topoi are analytic guides.
- (5)Topoi can help the speaker produce reasonable ideas to justify arguments to some audience.
- (6)Topoi demonstrate some relationship among ideas.
- (7)Topoi can help speakers to remember ideas.

The problem of this view is that topoi are seen as a "sequential. . . temporal or logical progression."⁸ This narrows the potential range of topoi's heuristic value. It also seems to conflict with the growing evidence on human conceptual behavior. William Nelson, in his article "Topoi: Evidence of Human Conceptual Behavior," summarizes the conclusions of decades of research on human conceptual thinking by many authors:

- A kind of categorizing behavior (contiguity transfer) is intrinsic within man.
- Categorizing behavior is a necessary antecedent to language propensity.
- Categorizing is of significant utilitarian value in virtually all forms of human behavior.⁹

Nelson suggests that meaning, cognitive activity, and rhetorical arguments cluster according to categories. The categorizing behavior is not always sequential but is always associational. Mednick points out the relationship of associations and creativity: "The greater the number of associations that an individual has to the requisite elements of a problem, the greater the probability of his reaching a creative solution."¹⁰

J.P. Guilford believes that factors involved in creativity include associational fluency, adaptive flexibility, spontaneous flexibility, and redefinition. These factors led Guilford to propose convergent

Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1932 and Cicero, *Cicero on Oratory and Orators*, trans. by J.S. Watson (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press), 1970.

⁸Michael Leff, "Topical Invention and Metaphoric Interaction," 48 *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*(Spring 1983) p. 216. It should be noted that this is NOT Leff's viewpoint.

⁹William F. Nelson, "Topoi: Evidence of Human Conceptual Behavior," 2 *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Winter 1969) p. 2.

¹⁰Sarnoff A. Mednick, "The Associative Basis of the Creative Process," in *The Creativity Question*, ed. by Albert Rothenberg and Carl R. Hausman, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1976), p. 232.

and divergent production of ideas.¹¹ Using somewhat different terminology, Edward de Bono makes a distinction between lateral and vertical thinking in creativity. Vertical thinking is selective, sequential, analytical and, therefore, has to be correct at every step, uses the negative to block off certain pathways, concentrates and excludes what is irrelevant, uses fixed classifications, and focuses on problem solving of critical judgment. Lateral thinking is generative, provocative, makes jumps to new points, does not have to be correct at every step, welcomes chance intrusions, has open classifications, focuses on changing patterns and gains new ideas without being judgmental.¹² What needs to be recognized is that rhetorical invention should not be strait-jacketed into dealing only with justifying arguments to an audience. Before justification must come the generation of ideas and discovery:

Some people are unhappy about lateral thinking because they feel that it threatens the validity of vertical thinking. This is not so at all. The two processes are complementary not antagonistic. Lateral thinking is useful for generating ideas and approaches and vertical thinking is useful for developing them. Lateral thinking enhances the effectiveness of vertical thinking by offering it more to select from.¹³

Modern rhetorical invention and topoi need to consider both lateral and vertical thinking.

Another inadequacy is in the use of topoi in educational settings. Unfortunately, topoi in any form — classical or modern — are rarely given the treatment they merit in public speaking courses or in textbooks on public speaking. Michael Leff points out that there has been a lack of scholarship on speech composition as it relates to educational use.¹⁴ Kneupper and Anderson found that:

... in current pedagogy, the most important of the classical rhetorical canons, invention, is seriously neglected. A survey of textbooks in public speaking will show that there is seldom any significant or extended treatment of invention. What most contemporary textbooks present is a fairly detailed discussion of the extrinsic sources of content.¹⁵

¹¹J.P. Guilford, "Creativity: Its Measurement and Development" in *A Source Book for Creative Thinking*, ed. by Sidney J. Parnes and Harold F. Harding, (New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 1962), pp. 156-168.

¹²Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step*, (New York: Harper Colophon Books), 1970, pp. 7-14 and 39-59.

¹³Bono, p. 50.

¹⁴Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (Summer 1978), p. 90.

¹⁵Kneupper and Anderson, "Uniting Wisdom and Eloquence," pp. 320-

In impromptu students need to learn the process of creating intrinsic arguments. How to come up with ideas, or how to think about a topic needs more attention. Ruth Anne Clark and Jesse G. Delia, in 1979, suggested that topoi could be used to examine and develop rhetorical competency since it can provide us with an understanding "of the *message choices* made by the potential persuader."¹⁶ In the article, they advise that topoi systems should be used more often in theorizing, research and teaching. Clark and Delia state that there are at least four steps involved in message strategy and development. These steps are: (1) identify communication objectives; (2) identify obstacles to communication objectives; (3) discover lines of argument; and (4) examine ways of casting argument.¹⁷ This four-step process can be used by teachers and forensic coaches when using topoi for training and development. Otis M. Walter as early as 1954 expressed the need for the teaching of creativity in public speaking. He suggested the use of a four-step process: the preparation process, a plateau period, the moment of insight, and the process of verification.¹⁸

A few topoi systems are currently used in speech education. Wilson and Arnold offer one topoi system based on classical rhetoric: existence, causality, degree, spatial, attributes, correlation, attributes of time, genus-species relationships, motion, similarity or dissimilarity, form, possibility or impossibility, substance, capacity to change, potency, desirability and feasibility.¹⁹ Karl Wallace presents a topoi system that focuses more on values, value hierarchies, affective states and character traits of the speaker along with some of the more traditional terms like Classification, Fact, Causation, Disagreement, and the Possible.²⁰

Debate and forensic coaches have been far ahead of most of their colleagues in the use of topoi as an education technique.²¹ Four

321. Two exceptions to this problem were noted by Kneupper and Anderson. John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, 3rd ed., Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974; and Otis M. Walter, *Speaking Intellegently: Communication for Problem Solving*, New York: MacMillan, 1976. Some other books mention brainstorming but few other intrinsic inventional techniques are usually mentioned.

¹⁶Ruth Anne Clark and Jesse G. Delia, "Topoi and Rhetorical Competence," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, (1979), pp. 187-206.

¹⁷Clark and Delia, p. 199-202.

¹⁸Otis M. Walter, "Creativity: A Neglected Factor in Public Speaking," p. 160.

¹⁹John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*.

²⁰Karl R. Wallace, "Topoi and the Problem of Invention," pp. 393-394.

²¹For a recent example see John E. Crawford, "Toward Standardized Extemporaneous Speech Competition: Tournament Design and Speech Training," *National Forensic Journal*, 2 (Spring, 1984), p. 49.

modern conceptions have received the most notice in forensics. The topoi of policy argument or stock issues (need, inherency, policy, practicality, advantages, counterplan, etc.) are often used in debate.²² Ralph Towne develops a system of nine topoi that deal with public policy (justice, waste, confusion, security, morality, efficiency, strength, prestige, and destruction).²³ B.G. Blackburn suggests a typology of anxiety-arousing arguments (such as: loss of security, loss of democracy, death, loss of a loved one, professional loss, social disapproval, financial hardship, loss of status, failure, lack of meaningful relationships, mental anxiety, etc.).²⁴ Wayne Minnick presents a topoi of American values (theoretical values, economic values, aesthetic values, social values, political values, and religious values).²⁵

There are several problems with the aforementioned classical and modern topoi systems. First, they are often viewed as proving logical arguments and fail to adequately consider the discovery process. They tend to emphasize verticle thinking to the exclusion of lateral thinking. Second, some of the systems are not expandable. They do not challenge the student to add to the list of topoi. Third, the categories are hard to remember. The problem with most of the topoi systems discussed is that students would have to memorize a rigid classification system that does not easily correspond to their lives. For example, Aristotle's topoi of 'correlative' terms, division and crisscrossed consequences do not come right to mind when looking for ideas for an impromptu speech.

The fundamental problem with the classical and modern topoi systems is that they fail to link the two major creative processes in communication — topoi and metaphor. This is probably due to the traditional rhetorical division of topoi with invention and metaphor with style. Metaphors are usually thought of as a stylistic figure of speech that compared two unlike ideas. Classical rhetorical theorist usually viewed metaphors as beautiful ornaments that would be added to the speech *after* the ideas were developed by the invention process. Modern theorists view metaphors as associational clusters that produce creative arguments or ideas. Instead of metaphors coming after invention, metaphors may come before or along with the invention process. Metaphors are essential to the creation of ideas as Lakoff and Johnson state:

²²James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 4th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.) 1982, pp. 154-155.

²³McCroskey, p. 156.

²⁴McCroskey, pp. 156-157.

²⁵McCroskey, pp. 158-160.

Metaphor is thus imaginative rationality. Since the categories of our everyday thought are largely metaphorical and our everyday reasoning involves metaphorical entailments and inferences, ordinary rationality is therefore imaginative by its very nature . . . Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness.²⁶

By joining the concepts of metaphors as imaginative rationality with the educational function of topoi, the impromptu speaker could enhance their production of creative ideas.

The following metaphorical topoi system is offered for the impromptu speaker:

Arts
 Biology
 Business
 Chemistry
 Communications
 Economics
 Education
 English
 Film
 Foreign Affairs
 History
 Law
 Military
 Philosophy
 Psychology
 Religion
 Politics
 Science
 Sociology
 Sports
 Television . . .

This flexible and expandable list follows the already existing academic categories or majors. This list provides the students with associations to develop ideas about their quotation. After determining the meaning of the quote, the student could go through such a topoi list and ask:

How does this relate to the arts?

How does this relate to biology?

How does this relate to business? etc.

²⁶George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press) 1980, p. 193.

These questions produce associations between the speech topic and the topoi. The topic for an entire impromptu could be generated by using such a set of topoi.

For example, if the student had received the quotation "Guilt is what civilizes" by Philip Lopate, they could associate guilt with any of the metaphorical topoi. Speaker number one associated guilt with art by discussing guilt in religious art of the middle ages, in Picasso's work and in the Vietnam War Memorial. Each work of art was shown to be part of the civilizing process brought about by the guilt of the artist or of their society at the time. This same student went on to associate biological guilt to society's fears about overeating, overpopulation and genetic accidents. This biological guilt created controls imposed on people and science that helped the civilizing process. Another student with the same quote discussed guilt in religion from sin, social guilt from peer pressure, and guilt in sports when the team leader fails in a crucial situation. Each of these students usually selected the topoi they were comfortable or familiar with, however, the topoi structure often allows students to associate two concepts that would normally not be associated. Student number one normally would not have associated guilt with biology but did so when she saw it on the list.

This topoi list is easily expanded. A student could add any other major (math, agriculture, journalism, engineering, medicine, fashion design, etc.) or any subdivision of a major with which they are familiar. Someone knowledgeable about biology might discover topics under the subdivision of anatomy, bioethics, botany, ecology, genetics, microbiology, or zoology. Such a set of topoi would allow the student to explore both the familiar and the novel in the development of ideas. Students would be encouraged to develop intrinsic ideas first and then look for extrinsic examples from books and articles.

Students at different levels of development would use the metaphorical topoi differently. The beginning student needs to learn to relax and generate a few ideas. To help the beginning speaker, the coach can suggest that the student pick 4 or 5 favorite areas from the topoi list. One beginning student selected his major (history), his minor (communication) and his three favorite pastimes — sports, film and television. To develop greater confidence for novice impromptu speakers, written speed drills were used. In a written speech drill the student is handed a quote and is told to list as many ideas as possible on a piece of paper. To get the speaker used to the time element in impromptu, the student was told to draw a line across the page when 1 minute, 2 minutes and 3

minutes had passed. This practice establishes confidence and a sense of timing. Novice speakers realize that most of their ideas are generated in the first two minutes. After several drills, a regular verbal impromptu practice is held where each speaker is encouraged to use concrete examples. So instead of talking about talent in sports they would discuss specific teams or players such as the Boston Celtics or Larry Bird. Speakers are encouraged to have a thesis, a preview and a summary. Previews are easily generated by listing the main topoi areas — "Let's see why this quote is accurate by examining business, communication and politics." General previews allow novice speakers more flexibility to avoid using too little speaking time because they can add examples to the general topic areas already selected.

The more advanced impromptu speakers need to work on generating more ideas in less time so that they can select the most appropriate or interesting topics. During practice rounds, the advanced student could experiment with topoi they usually don't use at tournaments. For example, some speakers will consistently use examples from history and literature in almost every impromptu round. Coaches should encourage their students to explore other topoi that may be more appropriate for a particular quotation. Another problem of a speaker at this level is developing a transcendence for an impromptu quote. A transcendence tells the audience how the examples interrelate to one another and to the topic. Often transcendence explains the common denominator, the philosophical point or the unifying theme for the examples and the quote. For example, the first student, who spoke on the quotation "Guilt is what civilizes," transcended by pointing out that guilt civilizes only indirectly by placing constraints on artists and by placing controls on biological process. By using the metaphorical topoi system a student could break the typical associations of one field by inserting the ideas of another field in order to generate a creative transcendence.

In summary, the training practice for impromptu speaking can be enhanced by using the metaphorical topoi system. The classical notion of topoi can be transformed into a modern associational aid to help forensic students discover, create and remember ideas for impromptu. The metaphorical topoi system meets the needs of students at various levels in competition. A beginning student might generate ideas only from topoi of their major interests. But as the speaker gains confidence and knowledge, other more creative and challenging approaches might be tried. A more experienced speaker may use the topoi to develop extended metaphors across fields.