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ABSTRACT

It is a surprising fact that a student of speech can compete in prose, poetry, drama, and program oral interpretation without ever needing to develop two characters, without ever needing to establish two separate focal points in the same piece, and without ever learning to adapt to a new style of writing. This can be done if the student simply picks the right type of material. Free verse poetry and prose sound very similar. Monologues and soliloquies sound very similar to prose also. Part of the reason that so many performances appear to cross genre lines is because students watch what is being done in competition and then seek out pieces that emulate the qualities they see in winning performances. This develops trends, which become norms, which then become rules. Ballots often tell students they need to conform to the norm in an event or that the selection is not right for the competition. Another reason for the crossing of genre lines is that students take the path of least resistance and so do educators: why not have a student perform the type of work they are best at? The damage this trend causes is significant because it undercuts the most basic premise of forensic studies: the need to educate students, to push them toward new, challenging, and growth-inducing experiences. The solution to this problem is not a correction to the event descriptions but a commitment among educators to drive their students toward learning experiences. (TB)

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A Dialogue on Monologues in Dramatic Interpretation

Preamble

"Forensics was founded with the idea that it would be an extension of the classroom." (Mills, 1984) It is with this philosophy in mind that many of us run programs. If this is not the philosophy with which you operate your program this paper won't be of much interest to you because it is on this premise that this paper is based. As educators we encourage students to try new events so that they might broaden their communication skills. Ideally, a four year competitor would have tried all, or just about all, of the events offered at tournaments.

But it is surprising that a student can do Prose, Poetry, Drama and Program Oral Interpretation without every needing to develop two characters, without ever needing to establish two separate focal points in the same piece, without even learning to adapt to a new style of writing. This can be done if the student simply picks the *right* kind of material. Free verse poetry and prose sound very similar. Monologues and soliloquy sound very similar to prose also. For that matter prose

can often be cut to sound more like a drama cutting than a prose cutting simply by choosing a piece with dialogue and cutting out all of the narrative sections (if there were any).

The Flaw

We must assume that when the founding fathers (and mothers) of forensic competition set about to separate the various events to which we are accustomed today, they did so with the thought of education in mind. The divisions of prose, poetry and drama weren't just so that more trophies could be awarded and the events could be smaller. The division was made because the styles of each of these genres, in their purest sense, are significantly different. But, over the years these lines have become less clear.

Typically when we think of the genre of literature known as drama we think of what Judy Yordon in her book *Roles of Interpretation* refers to as Dramatic Drama. Judy Yordon uses a modal analysis in addition to the traditional genre analysis. She points out three modes of literature that can be applied to the genres

of literature. The three modes, *Lyric*, (when the speaker appears to be the writer), Epic (when both a narrator and character speak) and Dramatic (when the speaker is clearly defined and is definitely not the writer).

It may be the idea of a modal analysis that has greatest insight into the distinguishing between the genres. At the SCA Convention in 1981 Bruce Manchester told the audience “Since dramatic literature contains no narrative element, ‘probably most important in the understanding of a play is an understanding of the characters’.” (Dr. Manchester was citing Charlotte Lee, Oral Interpretation, 1971, Boston Houghton Mifflin Co.) Obviously *the times they are a changing*. Current trends in Dramatic Interpretation leans towards monologues which have a great deal of narrative quality. Is this wrong or bad? No. It isn’t wrong or bad in isolation. But it might not be the best thing for the students.

As coaches we need to make sure our students are not just winning but also growing. “Oral interpretation implies far more than the reading aloud of text. It refers to the experiencing and understanding of a text by a reader...” (Taylor,

1980). In as much as we probably wouldn't let/encourage a student to do children's stories for four years in prose, drama, poetry and POI we shouldn't do that with any one of the modes of literature that Yordon's book identifies. Part of the "...point to the importance of oral interpretation of literature is helping students fully experience literature." (Taylor, 1980 [Taylor was summarizing the authors of four other articles.]) This isn't always easy when we are also faced with the reality of students who will surely excel (with minimal coaching) if they are doing pieces which are similar in style to each other and to pieces they have already done.

The Causes

Part of the reason we see so many performances that appear to cross genre lines is because our students watch what is being done in competition and then seek out pieces which emulate the qualities they see in winning performances. This develops trends which become norms which become so expected they are almost "rules." We can probably all recall ballots that have had comments on them which suggest or blatantly tell our students that they need to conform to the norm in an event or that the selection isn't right for competition. This is not just true of

dramatic interpretation but all of the events. Leigh (1984) discusses the differences between festivals and forensics and says "...festivals tend to be more hospitable to literature which enlightens. Forensics interpreters have to concentrate more on what entertains." Marketability becomes a criteria in piece selection.

Another contributing factor is that there doesn't seem to be any reason not to do it. Students can do the same kind of material in three or four different event and excel in all of them. They give good performances, they receive positive evaluations and they win so why should they change?

It actually benefits us in many ways. Students get recognition. Our programs get recognition. Many institutions place a great deal of pressure on teams to "*bring home hardware.*" "*Publish or Perish*" is replaced by get trophies or get out. So we send in ringers. Students who are almost sure to make finals and bring home hardware.

We would be lying to ourselves if we, as coaches, denied our role in creating the blurred lines between the genres. As coaches we are often over-burdened with classroom assignment which need correcting, students who need advising, committees that need our input, the pressure to publish and administrators who need ... whatever we can give them. Then a student comes to us with a drama and a prose and some poetry and they are all what Yordon would define as epic (when both a narrator and a character speak). We can coach three events with general comments that will apply to nearly each of the three pieces but still have enough specificity to be a real help to a second or third or fourth year student. We get two or three times the coaching done in the same amount of time and the student does well. So where is the harm. Well there isn't direct harm, again it is not inherently harmful. But there is damage being done, the government would call it collateral damage.

The Effects

The first area we need to acknowledge takes us back to the first line of this paper, "Forensics was founded with the idea that it would be a extension of the classroom." (Mills, 1984) There are not many educational activities at the college

level that a student can be actively involved in for four years. Theoretically, each performance (in or out of competition) should be a learning experience for the student. Ideally, each event should stretch a student to new limits. Certainly, each year should be a learning and growing process for every performer.

Allowing our students to perform just one *mode* of literature is like putting a jade plant in a four inch flower pot and expecting it to reach its fullest potential. There is only so much room for growth.

The second area where we see damage is to the events and the activity itself.

When all our students see is first person narrative epic literature, all they are going to look for is first person narrative epic literature. This is then further compounded by ballots which reenforce the idea that this is what “*should*” be done. Just about anyone ho has had a student do something “different” can remember ballot with statements akin to “You really shouldn’t do three characters in DI, actually two characters is probably too many” or “If you didn’t have two characters you wouldn’t need focal points and then more of the piece could be directed at the audience and that would be more effective.” In T. C.

Winebrenner's book Intercollegiate Forensics (1993), Katherine Waste tells us "Finding the perfect cutting for DI . . . typically involves a frantic search through your library's monologue collection." This reenforces the idea that DI should be a monologue.

The same problem arises in other events also. I actually saw a poetry ballot (not from one of the infamous hired judges) one time which said *All this metaphor is distracting from the narrative sections of the piece. Why don't you cut the metaphor and intertwine another poem with this one.* Because that is the trend, that does not make it the only way to do it.

Several years ago the forensics community opened up the genre of drama to include screenplays. But coaches who have tried to use them have found them to be problematic because judges will often times compare the competitors to the actors and actresses who made them famous. It just isn't fair to expect a first year competitor to be comparable to Jody Foster or Dustin Hoffman. Hindman, Schackelford & Schlottach in their book Working Forensics: A Competitors

Guide (1993) come right out and tell students "if you select movie/TV scripts, it usually pays to avoid the latest blockbuster. Your performance will be compared to the film by fans. Most of you are not Al Pacino or Meryl Streep --yet."

Shortly after An Officer and a Gentleman was in theaters I remember a team doing a cutting from that screenplay. In talking with them they said they were frustrated with conflicting ballots (which is nothing new). They said when they started they were taking much the same approach, attitude, mode of expression and motivation that they found in the movie, i.e. they were mirroring the movie production.

Judges commented that this was more of an imitation than a performance. They worked hard to overcome that. They started with the original work, then the screenplay and did some in depth analysis with their coach. They completely changed their performance and gave it new life through their own interpretation (the goal of oral interpretation) and then found judges who said that this was from a screenplay and they had seen the movie and the movie seemed totally different to them.

The example seems to be a bit of a digression but it has purpose and provides a bit of an antithesis to this paper. If we are going to allow screenplays in drama then we need to embrace them. That means allowing our students to develop their own understanding of the material and making a conscious effort not to compare them to the larger than life professional actors and actresses of the silver screen. If we are going to divide literature by genre, then we need to allow monologue to stand alongside dialogue and judge them on their own merit.

The Proverbial Solution

The main emphasis needs to be on the student's development. If they have mastered the epic or dramatic or lyric mode, as educators it is our responsibility to push them into a new mode so they continue to grow. We cannot just follow trends, because literature and the study of literature is not trendy it is classical.

If we do epic drama because epic drama is what wins and we encourage our students only to pick pieces that will win we are defeating our purpose. Instead of training students to have sharp minds, analytical skills, and a thorough

understanding for and appreciation of literature, we are training them to be sheep. The scholarly aspect of performance studies turns into a dog and pony show or a gilded version of David Letterman's popular "Stupid People Tricks".

Whether or not a narrative monologue is crossing the modal line into epic literature which we traditionally associate with prose isn't the real issue. The event description are such that anything from a play is drama, any poem is poetry and any short story is prose. As judges we must accept what the student is doing as prose or poetry or drama.

As coaches our jobs should include making sure our students are ever-growing. If a student has mastered a skill it should be time to move to a new skill. Sure they can find an easy piece for themselves and do that piece well. They can do what they do best, follow the path of least resistance and still win.

But is that what we are here to do? Are we here to produce winners? Rivers are great and powerful but they are formed by following the path of least resistance.

If we have students that want to grow up to be rivers, allowing them to follow the path of least resistance is fine. Education rarely follows the path of least resistance. It tends to be an uphill progression. As educators we are sometimes here to point our students up rocky paths rather than down smooth trails.

In a public speaking class we wouldn't let students give a speech of demonstration instead of a persuasive speech because they were better at demonstrative or demonstrative speeches were easier for them. By the same standard we shouldn't let our forensics students do the equivalent in their events. Because "Forensics was founded with the idea that it would be an extension of the classroom." (Mills, 1984).

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