

PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK INTO SPEAKING

by Jill K. Gerken

"Momma, I made a speech today at school. . . . I'm gonna make speeches for the rest of my life!" --Thorton Wilder, Our Town

The truth is, for us as forensic educators, our students will be giving speeches for the rest of their lives. While students won't all be using the stylistic presentations of a lawyer or teacher, public address events in forensics are a direct catalyst for future speaking avenues.

Interestingly, a 1994 study investigated the educational perspectives in forensics for the 21st century. (Schroeder, 1994) The final observation stated, "Coaches must develop educational objectives if forensics is to remain a productive, well funded activity." Therefore, the task remains, to make public address events aligned with specific educational objectives, more synchronized for student learning and achievement. In short, we need to put the public back into speaking when coaching our students in public address events. I propose this aim can be met through teaching communication skills for application.

The word "narrate" comes from Latin, made up of *narre*--to tell and *gnarus*--knowing. In communication studies, narrative is a way of knowing, a search for meaning, that privileges experience, process and action. (Conquergood, 1993) What better way to begin making perceived complex ideas, like communication theory, clearer to our students than through that definition which explains a true narrative speech combines: 1) experiences 2) processes and 3) action of the orator.

Unlike interpretation events, original oratory has distinguished itself as an event which mandates students not just to "give a speech",

but be effective writers of the oration in elements of style and clarity. Using the three elementary elements of a narration (experiences, processes, action) students can begin to be persuasive in their speech structure and language, not only in the actual speaking. As many high school original oratory's have a larger theme (like volunteerism, technology, or taking risks), students can create clearer, more direct orations through the three narration elements.

In using "experiences" as an oration foundation, we can use this to instruct students on writing from their broad themes to direct, specific events. All too often, high school orations remain vague and broad. "Experiences" can be woven in the oration in terms of testimony, personal encounters, narrative stories, or any concrete literary device which takes the broad theme of the student's speech into a well written, clearly illustrated example. Aristotle explained one part of the persuasive process was ethos, or speaker credibility. If a student's original oratory is calling for personal change or action on the part of the audience, what better way to show that the persuasive goal can

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be accomplished than through the student's sharing his or her own experience. In short, original oratories can be more memorable through narrating a real person and a real experience to support the overall persuasive thesis.

The second requirement of an effective narration is the "process". Simply defined, this means making both logi-

cal links and emotional appeals in a systematic, well thought out way through the oration. Referring back to the original definition, gaining "a way of knowing and a search for meaning" in oration, mandates an organized construction of arguments and contentions. Too many high school public address events lack a basic organizational pattern. As educators, we must instruct students in how to organize the points of the speech or both the students' writing process and speaker effectiveness will be sorely limited. On the east coast, most championship extemporaneous speakers structure their speech into the classic introduction, thesis, preview, three main points, summation and conclusion. This organizational pattern truly enhances student achievement in making clear arguments and lowers student apprehension during the construction of their extemporaneous speech. The value of this organizational pattern, this "process", is the refinement of what could be seven minutes of rambling ideas into a cogent, well defined speech that answers the extemporaneous question in a balanced style. Original oratory should teach the same skills to students that extemporaneous speech drafting does. However, in too many cases, an organizational pattern of any kind is lacking. As speech coaches, we can assist our students through teaching variations of basic structure, but we must teach our students to write orations with some structure. This will truly make an educational objective come alive in coaching original oratory.

The final criterion of a narration, to know and tell with effectiveness, is the "action" of the orator. As Seneca said, "Language shows a man. Speak that I may know thee." How a speaker handles

language says something about him or her. . . . We are quick to make judgements about speakers on the basis of whether their language is forceful or wishy-washy, grammatical or incorrect, dull or lively. (Harte, 1993) The persuasive action of our original oratory students can be strengthened if we coach borrowing a strategy from debate. A popular term in coaching Lincoln-Douglas debate is "word economy". In light of the fact that a 1AC has only six minutes, each sentence must be clearly useful and necessary for the affirmative's constructive case. Coaches and students alike pine over each sentence and each word to make sure the language is effective. If only such measures were taken by oratory students. One can presume national championship oratories have been combed for word economy and effectiveness, but to truly come aligned with educational objectives, all speeches by all students should be given that same effort by coaches.