

RUBRICS AS A TOOL OF REFORM

by John Durkee

Rubrics as a measure of performance outcomes are nothing new to speech teachers. Evaluation of a clearly defined standard on a scale of descriptive criteria, which is then used to drive instruction, is the norm for the speech classroom. Kind of like with paradigms, the speech community has been quietly using performance rubrics apart from the frenzy of educational reform. However, the use of rubrics as a tool for instructional and institutional reform may be a new use of an old tool.

Rubrics, as a tool of analysis, can be drawn from two evaluative perspectives—from the desired performance or from observed performance. Either the ideal or the actual is appropriate for descriptive criteria. Rubrics are intended to measure whether students have learned what we want them to know and can do what we want them to do. Comparative judgments are useful to examine questions of instructional reform. It is useful to start with the ideal, what we would like students to be able to do, and then to examine actual performances. The difference will yield a target for improvement.

This article is not really about rubrics, but rather about how by using this tool of classroom reform competitive debate can be examined, putting its ideal against our contemporary practice. A rubric from an ideal of expectations for competitive debate might look like this:

Rubric 1

4-Student relates well to the judge using skills of content and delivery appropriate to the occasion and topic. Specifically, uses research organized into an argument and presentation skills to deliver the argument to an audience. Adapts the form, content of the material, and the student's own abilities to the unique demands of a particular competitive environment.

3-Student presents well using content and delivery skills appropriate to the event. Incorporates research in an organized fashion

and shows evidence of practiced delivery. Models techniques of good debate.

2-Presents adequately in accepted formats using information which is understood and reasonably applied. Follows conventional forms.

1-Is disorganized. May use evidence, but with poor attribution and clarity. Attempts to mimic better speakers without understanding the use of style.

In order to target the needed reform in our pedagogical delivery a comparison with current practice follows. This is an observed rubric, from a slightly biased perspective:

Rubric 2

4-Student displays skills imitative of collegiate debaters. Uses verbal and non-verbal tokens such as appropriate college stickers, airline travel tags, and affiliation comments to indicate superiority. Especially prized, you are disdainful of opponents who don't know the magic words of debate ritual. Impresses the judge by reading post-modernist scenarios, improvising deconstructive vapidity in answering.

3-Student presents the ideas purchased from reputable firms retaining the originally published structure. Student demonstrates cleverness, using arrogant assertion or debate cliché, obviating the need to acknowledge argumentative presses of opponents. Enters coach's name as an ethos enhancing structure for the judge.

2-Student presents reasonably original argumentation constructed from original research, avoiding generic ideas and forms. Stands while speaking directly to the judge. Answers own questions in cross-examination.

1-Presents arguments which offend the judge for the simplicity of their ordered clarity, avoiding the clever or conventional struc-

tures. Presents a polished style which shows evidence of practice. Uses original analysis with supporting evidence to refute opponent's position.

If the rubrics had been fairly drawn, the difference between the rubrics would then clarify targets for changes in the way in which debate is taught and practiced. Each observer may well prefer different ideal rubrics or to construct different observational rubrics; nevertheless, follow the conclusions of the comparisons of these two rubrics drawn more from observation than caprice. Rubrics call for the observer to make an accurate judgment call, trusting one's own judgment rather than the wisdom of normative precedent. What accounts for the difference in the rubrics presented?

Debate is no longer a persuasive activity, only an argumentative one. The audience, as public, has been forgotten. Debaters only perform for a closed circuit of similarly biased individuals. Except for the pharaohs, royalty shunned familial marriage. Inbreeding has brought the anemic or imbecilic end of classical dynasties. Debate, as advocacy, approaches extinction.

We demand judges trained in our arcane art. Judges are now often required to speak their philosophy before debaters will advocate an argument, limiting in round adaption to judge feedback to preconceptions. Our desire to know the quality and competency of the critic has been carried to the point that at some tournaments we even rate the perceived quality of judges before they render a decision, rather than after the ballot has gone against us. The national tournament uses a judge information form, which even now is out of step with the trends of debating as any formalization must be in a dynamic activity, yet it is used by debaters and coaches to assess the quality of their judges. No longer do most tournaments use lay judges. We explain away the lack of audience adaptation in debate by claiming a superior knowledge and superior skill

the general public can not understand. After all, it would be unfair to allow debaters to be evaluated by somebody who does not understand all the accepted practices we have developed. In an attempt to improve the quality of the pool of judges, local tournaments began requiring attending schools to provide judges as a condition of participation. Student debaters, consequently, see the same critic week after week, marginally experiencing a variety of audience expectations. But, these few judges are experienced critics.

Some judges no longer enjoy practicing the role of teacher of debate, a duty many coach judges feel is the heart of competition. Instead they find themselves merely the recipient of precanned verbiage or faced with debaters grown contemptuous of judges who may actually be interested in listening to new answers to an evidentiary

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question. The NFL found it necessary to require a judge bond to insure coaches meet their obligations at the national tournament. So onerous has judging become, this year a new rule requires coaches of debate teams to provide a debate judge. This may merely be a manifestation of a change in the national tournament schedule, coaches want to spend time with their own orators and interpers rather than watching rounds of debate. More likely, this is a manifestation of the transformation of debate into a cult activity shunned by those who are not compelled by ever more regulations to judge. Judging debate used to be such a joy that coaches were lined five deep at the judge assignment table of the national tournament in order to take ballots not claimed in time by the original assignee. Now, coercion is required to cover the necessary rounds and some rounds still wait a half hour or more until a judge can be found. My suggestion is that we have reached this state because the impartial critic is no longer necessary to the activity. Judges seem to be valued for their partiality, inside

knowledge, and willingness to go along with trends set by our cultural elites.

The language of debate has always been a specialized knowledge. Discovery of the key to the meaning of these terms made the debater heir to the power of the word organized for persuasive effect: Knowledge to speak to others. This language now resembles a private code, designed to exclude the uninitiated, limiting discourse to the privileged few. Classic orators divined a similar problem in the difference between Oratorical structures designed for public benefit and sophistry, divorcing form from sense. In this earlier day and age the excess manifested in moving an audience with the arts of delivery devoid of purposeful content. Sophistry has ever since been a word of disdain. Our contemporary failure has been to remove content from purposeful delivery. Debaters argue well, wittily, and with continual adaptation to the evolving expectations of the critics, whose memories, unfortunately, only flow from the forms of an immediate yesterday. Critics, with increasing willingness, verbally intervene, turning critique into criticism. Debaters want to win and will adapt.

The rubric was initially prompted because of my surprise that a judge at the national tournament would publicly berate a team for initiating disadvantages in the second negative speech. This judge, perhaps, didn't realize that all except for the very newest debate writings recommend a course opposite the judge's imperatives. He was probably trained by a budding intellect, undoubtedly clever, casually contemptuous of the unfamiliar. The debaters in that round could not argue with the youthful arrogance of the judge, he was too belligerently verbose. Fortunately, the coach rescued the hapless debaters from the unwonted attack, though was not sustained in an appeal to the tournament staff to have such an abusive judge disbarred. It seems a judge shortage existed, and a trained, yet abusive, critic was better than one untrained. It is easy to excuse youthful excess.

At one time, reformers bent upon correcting the abuses they perceived in debate advocated the Punishment Paradigm. If you don't like a practice, punish it. This judge's interpretation of punishment went beyond voting a loss on

the ballot, replacing that humane form with a public and humiliating chastisement. We've given judges too much latitude, no longer requiring reflective thought, only emotional response. Judges are so rare, we need to pamper them. A young coach at the national tournament exemplified for me the difference in attitudes between coaches who view their role as a teacher of debate and those who see themselves as masters of the universe of debate. Just before a late round on Thursday, she approached a key tournament official with the complaint that the opposing team had a half-hour to prepare, while her team had only moments. Her complaint was that her team was denied valuable blocking time because they had prepared for the wrong side against the team they knew they would meet. The other team had notified the tab room of a

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posting error indicating which team would defend which side of the topic. Her team received the news as they entered the room. When assured that there was no tournament violation, only a strategic error on her part, she proceeded to explain how the posting problem didn't matter anyway, because her team could think well on their feet. The tournament official asked her if she had just contradicted her complaint. Apparently not understanding, she continued saying she really wanted someone to know she was very unhappy. Later, the tournament official commented on the entitlement attitude she communicated to him. The rage of that young coach at unfairness is likely what she communicates to her debaters, not the debaters obligations to the judge. I suspect she punishes teams for practices she dislikes. Others are not entitled. Perhaps it is no wonder that debate is no longer a pleasure.

This essay does not seek a revolution in practice, many acceptable styles of debate exist. Truly, there are no rules except for time and topic. Yet, when we presume rules (*Durkee to Page 38*)

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of practice, humiliating and punishing debaters for not meeting our own private standards, it may be time to return debate to a more impartial audience, who do not carry a bias for either form or reputation into the round. For better or worse, even the court system still retains lay jurors. Even with a winning case, the advocate must appeal to this jury, and it is never an ideal one. The goals of the first rubric would certainly be easier to reach if we eliminated artificial norms.

College debate has selected Parliamentary Debate as an alternative to thoughtful reform, eliminating the substance of debate in order to preserve the form. High School debate has proposed to place duet as a premier event at the National Tournament, perhaps as a lure for speech programs discouraged with debate to continue investing in the national tournament with team revenues. Another suggestion was to make debate a single elimination event, maybe because debate at nationals is no longer a plum. Duet has merit, of course, yet debate as advocacy is the heart of Forensics. NFL sponsored conferences have focused upon some of the important issues, yet in spite of thoughtful dialogue, debate continues to drift further away from public utility. It may be, as some have proposed, that we will soon have two national leagues in place of the NFL; one for the hot shots and one for the bumpkins. That would be the road from NDT to CEDA to Parli; and would be successful as a temporary rear guard, common public schools and more elite schools could sustain their differing predilections for a time. High School debate should be able to avoid this pratfall. We are closer to a debater's beginnings than college programs, and thus less invested in debate as an elite activity and more in debate as an educational activity. Sometimes in the rush of tournament success, we forget to ask the question, what is this activity for? To what end? Rubrics help to ask. They can define what is at the heart of our instruction.

Does this article make claims beyond the rubrics offered? Of course. Don't take the rubrics here offered unexamined. Construct your own rubrics explicating the difference between your ideals for debate and what you observe in cur-

rent practice. You may find your ideal and actual rubrics match, in which case you only need to find a better cudgel to coerce judges into rounds. You may reach a conclusion which does not call for lay judges, as I do, viewing lay critics as a simple expedient which can accomplish much. Non-paid critics might be a better answer, the range of age and experience would widen, we would avoid using only young judges eager for token payments with little tradition in forensic debate, and debaters would add adaptation to their repertory of skills. Whatever other rubrics define, you will discover, it is past time for complacency.

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dropped my second point, therefore I win"; tell me why the issue is damaging to the opponent's position and how the issue is vital to the affirmation or negation of the resolution. If you cannot illustrate how this idea proves the resolution true or false then do not waste time making it a major issue because it is not.

In order to have meaningful debate of ideas it is imperative that debaters comprehensively explore the ideas and take the time and care to build the foundations of their case ideas, so that the issue(s) is clear, concise and logical. The work for making L/D the intellectual exploration of ideas must be done at home. I think that it all begins with case writing and the willingness to use only the best ideas and not all of the general ideas that have had a modicum of success. L/De's have to realize that in this activity, more is not better; and, the activity is an alternative to policy debate for a reason, not because it is better, but because it allows students to explore fewer issues at a slower pace so that ideas could be communicated and judged by all people, regardless of their exposure to high school debate. The only way to do justice to the activity, the educational aspect, and to win many rounds is to build your style on the presentation and the refutation of ideas and issues and not tag-lines.

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