

THE DISJUNCTIVE PREMISE ABOUT FORENSICS

W Scott Nobles and Herman Cohen

IN a recent issue of *The Register*, a director of debate at an Eastern University defended the role of forensic tournaments in an extra-curricular speech program.¹ In the next issue of the same publication, an undergraduate debater from a university whose forensic program included no tournament activities replied vigorously. Assailing the tournament on several counts, the author called for forensic programs devoted entirely to addressing public audiences.² To find debate tournaments under criticism is hardly novel, *The Speech Teacher* alone has published, since 1952, five papers devoted largely to the criticism of tournament debating. The most significant feature of the Lazzatti criticism was the disjunctive premise which it so tacitly accepted, the assumption that a forensic program must be based *either* upon tournament activities *or* upon non-tournament, public debating. A look at many of the extra-curricular programs in practice, and at some of the published comments about them, suggests that many forensic directors may have accepted the same "either-or" premise

about the nature and scope of forensic programs in American educational institutions

Unfortunately, a majority of forensic programs are built primarily or exclusively around the tournament. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, only two of our colleges or universities sponsor audience-directed programs which could be described as organized or extensive. The undeniably difficult problems involved in securing audiences for debate or discussion programs, particularly outside metropolitan areas, have turned many directors of forensics toward the tournament as their only apparent recourse. The added difficulties involved in attempting to maintain both a tournament schedule and an organized audience-directed activity have resulted in the virtual exclusion of the public discussion from many extra-curricular speech programs.

The tournament does not, of course, dominate all forensic programs. A number of schools, though they constitute a minority, sponsor well-organized public debating and public discussion activities. Many of these programs, however, are apparently based upon the same disjunctive premise which in other cases has led to tournament domination. For many institutions the establishment of an extensive audience-directed program has spelled the end, or the very sharp decline, of tournament activities.

It is the belief of the authors that those schools which have excluded, or virtually excluded, either the speech tournament or the audience-directed program from

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¹ Robert Newman, "The Tournament in a Well-Balanced Debate Program," *The Register* (Spring, 1957).

² John L. Lazzatti, Jr., "An Artificial and Inadequate Substitute," *The Register* (Convention Reports Issue, 1957).

their forensic activities have seriously and unnecessarily limited the rhetorical training of their students. This conclusion is based upon three observations:

- (1) Each of these types of speech activity offers to the student some worthwhile experience and training lacking in the other.
- (2) The training at tournaments and that gained before public audiences can be and ought to be complementary.
- (3) A combined program of tournament and audience directed activities, if carefully planned, can prove practical in terms of time, effort, and financing.

Few would question that speaking before public audiences offers valuable experience and training lacking in tournament competition. In an extra-curricular program, as in a public speaking classroom, the instructor's primary objective is to develop speakers who will communicate effectively with audiences. To whatever extent the student's training must occur without representative and varied audiences, that student's training is limited. A student whose experience is restricted to debating before a single critic-judge could conceivably become proficient only in the art of persuading a single critic-judge. Certainly he will not gain maximum training in audience analysis and audience adaptation. Lacking a realistic audience, the student speaker often devoted too little effort toward such important audience factors as attention, interest, and motivation.

Many directors of speech tournaments attempt the difficult task of providing suitable audiences for all or part of their competitive events, such attempts are seldom successful. Audiences, when they are secured at all, usually consist of a captive classroom audience or a group of other contestants. Such audiences seldom approximate a realistic persuasive situation. It is doubtful that such a situation can be provided within the framework of tournament events, for the

focus of the auditors' attention will usually be upon the contest between speakers, rather than upon the conflict of ideas and interests basic to the proposition. It seems evident, then, that a non-competitive audience-directed forensic program offers realistic elements of training which the speech tournament cannot provide.

The tournament, however, possesses some advantages peculiar to it as a laboratory for speech training. It is generally conceded, for example, that in terms of providing a maximum number of speaking experiences in minimum student time and at minimum administrative cost the tournament is an extremely practical activity. The frequent lack of audiences and the possible overdependence upon competition as motivation often make this experience far short of ideal. There is some virtue in experience, however, and the necessities created by demands upon student time and administrative budgets tend to add to this virtue.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the very absence of a public audience may suggest a second virtue of the speech tournament. To the inexperienced speaker, lacking especially in confidence and poise, the tournament offers an opportunity to secure experience and assistance before facing a public audience. Most beginners would prefer submitting their efforts to a helpful critic, even under competitive circumstances, to appearing before a public audience. It should be added that many forensic directors, and many school administrators, would prefer to provide "laboratory training" for their students before allowing them to represent their institution before a public audience. Unless extra-curricular forensics is to be limited to students with extensive classroom training, the kind of

laboratory program which the tournament provides is necessary

Such laboratory training is valuable also to the more experienced and poised speaker. The tournament provides students not only with a maximum number of speaking experiences, but also with the opportunity to be heard, evaluated, and assisted by a number of trained observers. It is unfortunate that tournament directors sometimes fail to provide either the qualified critics or the necessary time for adequate criticism, but these failures to utilize this advantage of the tournament hardly constitute an indictment of the tournament system itself. The opportunity for extensive practice under qualified instruction ought to be the "raison d' être" of forensic tournaments.

Earlier it was noted that student speakers for whom public audiences are not provided tend to ignore such important elements as attention, interest, and motivation. Conversely, speakers often tend to over-emphasize these elements when all their efforts are directed toward popular audiences. Short cuts to audience favor often substitute for the careful research, adequate evidence, and well-reasoned lines of argument upon which most tournament judges place heaviest emphasis. Competitive speaking, particularly debate, before trained rhetoricians encourages the student speaker toward more emphasis upon research, evidence, and logic. At the same time it discourages over-reliance upon rhetorical devices and emotional appeals. Thus the tournament, sometimes censured on ethical grounds, can make a substantial contribution to the training of socially responsible speakers who have been taught to concentrate first upon the integrity of ideas and second upon adapting the presentation of those ideas to audience and occasion.

It, as the preceding comments have indicated, tournament and audience-directed speech activities each provide facets of training which are neglected in the other; a forensic program must not choose between these activities. Instead, it must strive to utilize and further to enhance their complementary nature. A requisite to such a program is that participation of the same students in both phases of the program be strongly encouraged. To treat the two as separate programs with two sets of participants is to limit the experience and instruction afforded each group.

It is suggested, further, that students should concentrate upon tournament activities during at least the first half of the school year, using the tournament as a laboratory for experience under direction and criticism, and that the later portion of the forensic year be devoted to an organized program of appearances before public audiences. Such a chronological arrangement emphasizes both the laboratory function of the tournament and the more realistic nature of speech experience before popular audiences. It also places tournament participation at a time when research and content analysis ought to be most heavily emphasized and reserves the biggest problems of audience adaptation until such a time as content is thoroughly mastered. An additional advantage is that students do not address public audiences until they have had enough time, experience, and instruction to do credit to themselves and to the institutions they represent.

To this point, the position that a well-rounded forensic program must include both tournament and non-tournament activities has been strongly urged. No practical suggestions have been made, however, to those interested in the problems involved in maintaining such a

full program Chief among these problems is that of getting students before numerous and varied public audiences in the face of limited budgets and limited time for student and faculty planning and participation Even the mechanics of finding audiences, arranging suitable dates, and scheduling panels of students to fill engagements can pose formidable problems Obviously, different schools will find it necessary to meet these problems in slightly different ways It is the hope of the authors to illustrate a general program by specific reference to the combined tournament and symposium program of the University of Oregon This program, with some variations, has been followed since 1932

First, it should be noted that an active symposium program has not eliminated tournament participation The forensic schedule includes five or six tournaments each year, and between twenty and thirty students participate in these activities These tournaments, however, are concentrated into the first two terms of the school year Normally no more than one tournament is scheduled after March 15, and participation in that tournament is limited to two or three students From March 15 to June 1, forensic students are engaged in an audience-directed program referred to as "The University of Oregon Symposium" This program places panels of three or four students before public audiences to discuss timely and usually controversial topics in which the audiences have expressed interest Averages based upon the last three years' activities will indicate the scope of this program each year twenty-two students have travelled 6,302 miles to present forty-seven programs in thirty-five Oregon communities The financial burden of such an undertaking proves surprisingly small The average cost per year is less than five hundred dollars;

for schools with very small budgets, this cost can be made even smaller Two forces operate to keep costs low First, many programs are presented to luncheon and dinner audiences, thus reducing the subsistence cost of the program Second, many organizations which request programs make voluntary contribution to defray travel expenses

The cost in terms of "student time" is also less than one might expect for so extensive a program Scheduling of engagements is done with careful attention to limiting student absence from classes For example, over one-third of the speaking engagements are always filled during the Spring vacation These are usually the engagements which involve the greatest distance and time Many of the remaining programs are evening programs close enough to the campus to prevent the necessity of missing classes With over twenty participants, the usual result is that no student misses the same class more than two or three times and some students miss no classes at all It may be readily seen that schools located in urban areas would be able to carry on a symposium program with negligible travel and subsistence expenses and with little or no loss of student time

Another problem which must be met by a dual program is that of preparation time Obviously the students who prepare only one debate proposition for the entire year face a less demanding task than those who must also prepare to discuss symposium topics This problem is mitigated to some extent by using some less formal statement of the standard debate proposition as a symposium-forum topic The topic is usually restated in such a way that it encourages three or more basic reactions instead of strict affirmation and negation This allows each student to take a position on the panel which arises out of his own

convictions, it further allows some speakers to present basically expository speeches. In addition to this topic, two others are selected by the students in the early fall, thus allowing sufficient preparation time without frenzied effort. Normally one of these topics will be selected because of its interest to service clubs and one for its suitability for high school audiences, these two groups comprising a majority of the audiences to be addressed. In keeping with this pattern, the three symposium topics in 1958 were

"Should Oregon enact a right-to-work law?"

"How much emphasis should Oregon high schools and colleges place upon scientific education?"

"How should we endeavor to attract industry to Oregon?"

The topics selected in the fall are included in a brochure which is mailed in December or January to service clubs, high schools, church groups, business and farm organizations throughout the state. Organizations desiring programs indicate on the returned brochure their order of topic preference and one or more suitable dates for a program. When most of the brochures are returned and possible grouping of engagements for economy and convenience have emerged,

final arrangements are completed by correspondence—sometimes, it must be admitted, rather extensive correspondence.

In this manner, the University of Oregon gives its forensic students repeated opportunities to present and defend their views on several topics before interested public audiences. It does so without prohibitive financial expense and without undue pressure upon student time. Equally important, it does so without sacrifice of the laboratory training afforded by speech tournaments.

Every forensic director must tailor the program he plans and sponsors to his own local situation. Many of his decisions must be based upon the attitude of his administrative superiors, the size of his budget, and the number and capability of his students. Whatever the details of his program, however, it must aim at the fullest possible training of his students in all facets of rhetoric. The attainment of this goal demands, not that he make the proper decision about whether to emphasize tournament speaking or the public forum, but rather that he make the fullest possible use of these two valuable and complementary methods of speech training.

