

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Denying The Argument Of Indifference: Reclaiming The Possibility Of Intimacy In Discourse



Contrary to the cliché, technology has been successful in making the world a much larger place. Technology has opened up places and interfaces where, literally and figuratively, no person has gone before. From collaboration within multi-cultural task forces, to empowering the oppressed through education, to debating the succession of the next Dali Lama, we are inundated with intriguing information and we have relatively informed opinions about what we know. In turn, the way we “read” each other, our skills in relationship and our competence in conflict become more and more crucial to productive, if not always peaceful progress. We are, individually and as social groups, involved in more and various critical situations than we have ever been before.

As the future promises more opportunity for diverse interaction and as technology falsely promises to bring us closer together simply because we have greater access to one another, it is up to us as social and political beings to work out how that access will transfer (or not) to intimacy, and conflict to productivity. The task that obviously follows such opportunities and challenges is one of argument: How do we communicate what we believe is best and respond productively, in turn, to the conflicts that such beliefs engender? One branch of argument theory has tended to overlook the quality of relationship between interlocutors in its attempt to reduce such relationships to formal logic - overlaying a mathematical function on the face of humanity. Another branch of argument theory (following the lead of other academic scholarship) has given itself over to a postmodern ethic where any notion of objectivity is simply the fool of subjectivity’s reigning court and competing ideals and truths are no more than socially constructed opinion.

Relying upon formal logic, conflict is simply an error; using the postmodern ethic to inform argument studies, conflict is all that’s possible. The problem here is that our theory often leaves us unwittingly empty handed. Argument theory that

attempts to allow real solutions to real problems emerge, must do more than figure or tolerate; it must, by definition, be discontent with passive disagreement. I would like to make a case for the possibility of intimacy in argument - one that affirms the possibility of knowing the other in meaningful, if imperfect ways. I suggest that we adopt an epistemological model that rejects the false dichotomy which characterizes knowing the other as either impossible or inevitable. We might embrace, instead, intimacy, or a willingness to fully engage the other, even (or especially) in conflict. This model of knowing would recognize the other as an integral, autonomous member of a community of fellow truth seekers, willing and capable of the intercourse of productive dialogue. Intimacy requires that we recognize that we are in relation, and yet also in relationship.

At the time I began to study argument in earnest I also began an intensive study of Paulo Freire's theories of education. Freire devised a method of teaching illiterates in the North East of Brazil based upon his philosophy that, in learning to read and write, students and teachers could become active participants in their education by thinking and acting as subjects of their own existence, not objects of someone else's. Freire describes a "culture of silence" of the dispossessed, and he challenges students to think critically about their selfhood and the social situation in which they find those selves.

While studying Freire's pedagogy, I was simultaneously engaged in implementing, to the best of my ability and knowledge, some of the Freirean philosophy of "liberatory pedagogy" in my own composition classroom, a classroom which was centered around written argument. So influential was the Freirean model (critical reflection paired with action, or praxis, as the basis of all learning) to my training as a teacher, that I was, in fact, largely unaware of the theory that informed my practice until I began a course of study out of the core texts of the "radical teaching" movement. We were, quite naturally, reading Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, several pieces by bell hooks, Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* and C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, among others. It was perhaps by way of this parallel and intensive study of argument theory and liberatory pedagogy that I began to be irritated, and then frustrated, and then indignant and finally curious about a very peculiar and yet very prevalent characteristic of the Freirean philosophy, at least in its American interpretation: It was impossible to argue with the theory. In addition, the ethos of the piece, and I am thinking specifically of the Knoblauch and Brannon now, was so belligerent as to be forbidding.

I think it is important to note right up front that my distrust of the Freirean philosophy did not immediately present itself. Critical teaching would seem to be a model of intimacy in education - a respectful, dialogic, reflective and critically aware approach to learning - but reading the core texts of the movement proved otherwise. It was not until reading Knoblauch and Brannon's manifesto that I became painfully aware of my personal frustration with the argumentative content (and the ethos) of the piece. Not unlike Karl Popper's experience with Marxism, psychoanalysis and individual psychology which he relates in the landmark *Conjectures and Refutations*, I began to closely examine not only my own reaction to the work, but the implications of the theory to the wider world. As Popper relates:

The study of any of [these explanatory theories] seemed to have the effect of an intellectual conversion or revelation, opening your eyes to a new truth hidden from those not yet initiated. Once your eyes were thus opened you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of *verifications* of the theory. Whatever happened always confirmed it (*Conjectures* 1968: 34-5).

Again, like Popper's ambivalent interest in the work of Marx, Freud and Alder, I began to mistrust Knoblauch and Brannon; and in the same way, I began to see that a body of knowledge that I had previously admired began to self destruct under the weight of what it seemed to consider its own best strength - irrefutability. It is impossible to argue with a Freirean precisely because their theory has, to use Popper's language, inoculated itself against counter argument. If, for instance, one were to oppose the mission of "radical teachers" as "dogmatic fidelity to leftist ideology," (which Knoblauch and Brannon consider as a possible criticism) those espousing the theory would answer (as Knoblauch and Brannon do) that their opponents are simply unknowing victims of the same oppressive system which they, in full knowledge, are resisting (26-7). By claiming that any belief system that conflicts with theirs is delusional or naive, Knoblauch and Brannon adopt the stance of a Marxist wielding "false consciousness" or a Freudian theorizing "repression:" whatever argument may be put forward is simply further evidence of delusion.

This rhetorical move, this coopting of the interlocutors argument as part of the rhetor's own, serves to completely insulate the theory from criticism, protecting the claim even before any dissension can possibly be raised. It disallows criticism by intercepting any possible objections and claiming that such criticism are only further proof that the rhetor is, in fact, correct. Because this rhetorical move

demands the end of argument and the ethos is one of sweeping indifference toward, and dismissal of, the other, I suggest that we begin to recognize the move as *argumentative insouciance*. As is the hallmark of argumentative insouciance, any instance of criticizing a liberatory pedagogy or the radical teaching movement itself becomes proof of the interlocutor's own implication in the system of oppressive teaching.

I have borrowed the idea of such insouciance from the work of Reed Way Dasenbrock who locates "methodological insouciance" within the work of certain literary theorists who have "changed our notion of admissible evidence" by proclaiming that any counter argument is irrelevant because any counter argument is only evidence that the theory in question applies with special force (547). Like Popper, Dasenbrock identifies this particular type of irrefutability with Freudian repression when he demonstrates that Harold Bloom's work on influence contains the hallmark of insouciance: "the notion that we are often unable to articulate feelings of, say, hostility but our very inability to articulate such feelings may be evidence of their existence and depth. This does away with the possibility of any corroborating evidence whatsoever" (547-48). Knoblauch and Brannon employ just such evidence manipulation when they insist that anyone who disagrees with them is delusional (on the grounds that their insecurity makes them depend on false notions like canonical literature, aesthetic discernment or social cohesion [19]), naive (on the grounds that they just haven't heard "both stories" [27] or "remain unconscious of their ideological dispositions" [24]), or implicated in maintaining oppressive forces (on the grounds that "the economic self interest ...gives way here to a broader...alarming, ethnocentrism" [20]).

The critical teaching movement's explicit exigency ("radical social change"), which "presumes that American citizens should understand, accept, and live amicably amidst the realities of cultural diversity - along axes of gender, race, class, and ethnicity (Knoblauch and Brannon 1993: 6), must be seen as admirable goals that should be pursued with vigor. However, it is the delicate task of transferring theory to methodology that is crucial to most endeavors. Because the warrant behind Knoblauch and Brannon's argument is universally acceptable (living amicably amidst the realities of cultural diversity is desirable), the burden of proof is to convincingly demonstrate to a critical reader that what they believe to be the best pedagogical strategy to achieve these ends is, in fact, liberatory pedagogy or "radical teaching." It is at this juncture - where the Brazilian

pedagogical philosophy for illiterates meets the American academy – that the need for practicing argument ethically, dialogically, and intimately becomes crucial. However, Knoblauch and Brannon disallow any challenging voice by employing the tactic of argumentative insouciance, while their own theory claims to champion freedom, community and dialogue. The irony is devastating here.

Knoblauch and Brannon begin by isolating four arguments about literacy:

1. the argument for functional literacy
2. the argument for cultural literacy
3. the argument for literacy- for-personal-growth and
4. the argument for critical literacy.

The authors aim to demonstrate how the view of literacy that they advocate is superior to the others by the method of discrediting the other three until only “critical literacy” is left standing. This may at first seem a classical argumentative practice until we look closer at the method by which Knoblauch and Brannon meet this challenge. Taking the functionalist perspective as their first opponent, the authors describe this “representation of literacy” as a pragmatic epistemology carried out with utilitarian ethics. Knoblauch and Brannon sprinkle their description of the benefits of this perspective with sarcasm (“the advantage of...appealing to concrete needs rather than...self improvement...or the possibility of changing an unfair world” [18]) and tongue-in-cheek praise (“The functionalist argument has a more hidden advantage as well...it safeguards the status quo” [18]). Knoblauch and Brannon imply that any practitioner working through a functionalist perspective, say, is guilty of suppressing real learning for the sake of enforcing an oppressive social order. This use of argumentative insouciance denies any possibility of intimacy, the rhetorical move denotes a refusal to see the other as integral and autonomous, and interdicts the possibility of engagement and productive dialogue.

Next, cultural literacy is shot down for its paranoia and self interest (“popularly sustained as well among individuals and social groups who feel insecure about their own standing and future prospects when confronted by the volatile mix of ethnic heritages and socioeconomic interests that make up American life”). Literacy for personal growth is discarded because of its naivete, its delusional beliefs and its affected sincerity (“it borrows from long-hallowed American myths of self-determination, freedom of expression and supposedly boundless personal opportunity...Using the rhetoric of moral sincerity”). It is most important here to

recognize that these pseudo-arguments suffer both in ethos and ethics, as they attempt to characterize not the opponent's position, but the opponent herself. Having effectively stripped their prey of all legitimacy, Knoblauch and Brannon deliver the death blow: these other practitioners aren't even aware of their own ideological dispositions. Apparently, once the functionalists, culturalists and expressivists are able to reach the level of self awareness and critical consciousness that Knoblauch and Brannon must be capable of, they too, will choose liberatory pedagogy as the right path. Besides the implications that the aggressive ethos, the ad hominem attacks, the marshaling metaphors and the sarcasm had already had for the authors' ethos, I began to sense a conspiracy theory coming on.

Knoblauch and Brannon's rhetorical stance as an act of communication can only be recognized as pseudo-argument because it denies the one universally accepted element of real argument: discourse with a known interlocutor. Argumentative insouciance precludes the possibility of discourse; it is self absorption taken to a monastic extreme. In order to employ this rhetorical move and form this pseudo-argument, the writer denies any possibility of merit in counter argument and in doing so, denies the value of the other's beliefs and perspectives. As such, argumentative insouciance can only be successful in demonstrating a certain ideology. Not unlike Marxism, liberatory pedagogy relies upon a politically sound warrant to justify the forcefulness of a welcomed, yet prescribed, ideology which can only serve as a substitution for the oppressive police force of the dominant class. Any argument that denies the possibility of dialogue also signals the end of productive conflict, and the end of conflict is the end of freedom as well. It could be that liberatory pedagogy is the best methodology to use to empower students as they seek their own education and their own consciousness.

However, in arguing that this belief is best, Knoblauch and Brannon have abandoned the spirit of the Frerian philosophy in favor of the error of irrefutability necessary for a powerful ideology. It is this error of irrefutability, manifesto masquerading as argument, which, once turned to methodology and advocated by a practitioner, becomes argumentative insouciance.

Intimacy is, rather, the hallmark of productive argument. Argument must be an act of intimacy to produce useable results. If we are to consider how we best communicate what we believe - the best pedagogical method in this example - we must not only assert our own position, we must fully engage with the opposed other. Intimacy in argument is discursive with a real, autonomous, integral other

and it encourages dialogue. I am not interested here in naming errors that can be considered flaws, or “fallacies” which occur in what would otherwise be sound positions. Rather, I would like to suggest that we begin to isolate those arguments that are unproductive and even unethical in a more wholesale way; specifically, those moments in discourse which abbreviate, ignore, diminish or recompose the interlocutor in such a way as to make the relevant audience strangely irrelevant. Because I identify argumentative insouciance with an unwillingness and an inability to identify and engage with a discourse partner, I would like to consider Plato’s *Symposium* as one source for the conditions and potentials of intimacy. I do not find, however, that the *Symposium*’s notions of Love will offer us a model of peaceful resolution but rather, an acknowledgment of conflict and an insistence upon dialogue.

Plato’s Socrates points out that Love (the quality that I am identifying with “intimacy” here) is “neither fair nor good,” (192) but “a mean between the two” (193). This is so, according to the character Socrates, because Love desires the “fair and the good” and “he has no desire for that of which he feels no want” (195). The character Socrates uses another example that is relevant to our discussion here to illustrate his point; it is that of the mean between wisdom and ignorance, which he calls “right opinion:”

...which, as you know, being incapable of giving a reason, is not knowledge (for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?) nor again, ignorance (for neither can ignorance attain the truth), but is clearly something which is a mean between ignorance and wisdom (193).

As rhetors, we must first recognize that what we offer is neither pure ignorance nor pure wisdom. What we offer is hypothesis – “right opinion” – that does not deny Truth, in fact it aims directly toward Truth, but at the same time it is always subject to rigorous testing, retesting and redetermination in a community of fellow truth-seekers. It is important to understand the implications of such a “mean” here. It is believing that the virtues of the ideal of objectivity are possible while at the same time recognizing the constraints of sure subjectivity. As the character Socrates points out in Plato’s *Symposium*, “that which is always flowing in is always flowing out,” and Love, or intimacy, being the progeny of Poverty and Plenty, is “never in want and never in wealth...a mean between ignorance and knowledge” (194).

Recognizing our beliefs as hypothesis and valuing our interlocutor as one worthy of love, allows us to accept intimate communication (dialogue) as the “...

intermediate between the divine and the mortal... He [Love] interprets between gods and men... the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together (193).” In such a way, dialogue, which includes the quality of necessary otherness along with a longing for intimacy, is “dialectical objectivity” in practice.

We understand that to solve real-world problems - the only actual value of argument theory - we must discover a road between the all-or-nothingness of pure logic and pure subjectivity. But how do we do that? How do we hold, what seem to us contradictory views, both in our minds at the same time? I believe we must begin by creating a paradigm shift that values intimacy equally with logic, and reinventing the sense of the Aristotelian mean imbedded in the notion of “right opinion.” George Levine writes of such endeavors that “It requires an extraordinary and perhaps impossible balance, a tentativeness that keeps all aspirations to knowledge from becoming aspirations to power as well”(72). It is just this “extraordinary and impossible balance” that I have come to believe must become the central issue for theorists who study argument and that must inform the serious and conscientious application of argument theory to common problems from all disciplines.

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