

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Problematizing Standards Of Argumentation To Students



## 1. *The Problem*

I teach undergraduate courses in Speech Communication in the United States in which I'm presumed to be able to grade students on their papers and on their classroom presentations based on how well they argue rather than what they argue. Yet I also live in a so-called postmodern

age in which virtually all standards of rational argumentation have been called into question, particularly those emanating from white, heterosexual, Eurocentric males like myself.

Moreover, I've discovered that even those among my colleagues who've been trained as I have in principles of argumentation, informal logic, critical thinking and the like tend to apply those principles unevenly, inconsistently, particularly as regards the sorts of highly sensitive, highly controversial topics my students find most interesting. One potential source of inconsistency is bias. There is little reason to believe that we teachers of controversial subject matter are immune from the well documented influences of prejudices and wish-fulfillment beliefs on judgments of the validity of arguments (e.g., Hamble, D., 1979; McGuire, 1960).

But another likely culprit is the principles themselves. What exactly is a false dichotomy or an inappropriate appeal to authority? When do circumstances mitigate what might otherwise be considered illogical? Does the press of time ever justify my decision to follow the crowd or be swayed by an *ad hominem*?

Designed as they are to apply to an array of context-sensitive situations, the various informal fallacies are inherently imprecise. These problems in judging the quality of students' arguments bear also on what we as teachers say and do in the classroom. At a recent conference on faculty advocacy in the classroom, a number of academics used the occasion to defend against charges that they had been using the classroom to promote one or another version of political correctness. To the contrary, said one Women's Studies professor, ... some, perhaps much, of what my students take to be advocacy in the classroom in fact consists of critical questions about the empirical foundations of their political and social beliefs, or

critical evaluation of the logical structure of their beliefs.... As evidence for my 'advocacy', students point out that most of the corrections I make as to fact or logic tend to be in a more liberal or 'politically correct' direction. [H]owever, it is not at all surprising that I might encounter more poorly founded opinions of the conservative sort. When the opportunity arises, I do try to point out similar errors made by the 'politically (not quite) correct', but they tend to be fewer in number...." (Holland, 1996).

But are what Holland calls "errors" in the logic of her conservative students really a reflection of her own biases, thus providing unwitting evidence of the limits of objectivity?

## *2. A Proposal*

The problems herein identified should not be news to the sophisticated readership of these ISSR proceedings. Yet I suspect that many of us (most of us?) continue to assure our students that we will be judging their essays and class presentation on how well they support a position, not on what position they take. Similarly, we frequently assure students that, on matters of a controversial nature, we will will teach them how to think, not what to think. These assurances may well be scandalous: a violation of "truth-in-advertising" principles which we who teach argumentation, informal logic, and the like, insist that others adhere to.

Of course, one could still maintain (as I do with my classes) that it is still possible for students and teacher to arrive together at reasoned and reasonable contextual judgments of better and worse arguments. (BH Smith, Ch. 1) But even this qualified claim implicitly problematizes the blanket assurance that we teachers will be judging students' work based on how they argue rather than what they argue. Why "contextual" judgments? In what sense "reasonable"? Why only judgments of "better" and "worse"? With these questions I am led to the central proposition of this paper.

I propose that we problematize our evaluations of the quality of students' argumentation with our students. I suggest this, not out of fear that we may be hauled into court for truth-in-advertising violations, but because it is an excellent way to provoke engaged thought by students about argumentation.

## *3. The Context*

The foregoing is part of a larger project on what I call "Teaching the Pedagogies." (Simons) For some years now I've been encouraging my students to subject my use of a video in the classroom to rhetorical scrutiny. Then, in recent years, I've

assigned them the task of systematically analyzing faculty rhetoric in one of their classes, raising with them a wide range of issues having to do with faculty advocacy in the classroom. I've also engaged them in dialogue with respect to issues specific to my own teaching, attempting thereby to illustrate the sense in which one might be able to arrive communally at prudential judgments of better or worse in the absence of formulaic rules of argumentation.

The project I call "Teaching the Pedagogies" began for me at a conference on political communication for academics like myself back in 1984. Shown at the conference was *Life and Liberty for Those Who Obey*, a hard-hitting critique of the religious right at the time, complete with damning footage of leading ministers, indoctrination campaigns, censorship campaigns, a book-burning ceremony, and a behind-the-scenes look at the workings of political operatives trying to promote conservative candidates. I was much moved by the video, and I resolved immediately to get a copy and show it to my undergraduate classes in persuasion. But how should I teach the video? Should I let my students know that the video had reinforced my disdain for the religious right or should I conceal my own opinions? I decided to take up these matters with my fellow conferees.

The question of how to teach the video evoked a torrent of controversy. "A professor's job is to educate, not advocate," shouted one professor. "A professor's job is to profess," shouted another. Opinions in the group also differed as to what my profession of belief should be. "Use the video to expose the immoral rhetoric of the religious right," said a liberal professor. "Criticize the video, not the religious right," said a conservative. "While you're at it," he said, "do a hatchet job on the video's producer for putting out such a propagandistic film."

The conferees' response to my question left me in a state of initial confusion. It appeared that equally good (and bad) arguments could be made for such promotive strategies as outright advocacy and guided discussion and for such seemingly neutral but potentially deceptive strategies as conducting an evenhanded discussion and presenting in lecture form the arguments for viewing the religious right as immoral and the arguments for viewing the video's depiction of the religious right as immoral.

One thing seemed clear, however: that each of these pedagogical alternatives had ideological implications. Each, then, could be usefully understood as a rhetorical strategy. With this as a guiding insight, yet another pedagogical alternative suggested itself to me: ask the students how they, given my biases, would teach

the film were they in my place. Then use the question as the springboard for a discussion of pedagogical alternatives as rhetorical strategies. This is what I mean by teaching the pedagogies.

Over the course of many years I've engaged in this kind of pedagogical talk about pedagogical talk with a great many students. Typically they come up with a list of promotive and neutralizing strategies similar to those proposed at the conferences of faculty members, and for much the same set of reasons. Yet, the discussion is anything but routine. It moves among multiple levels of abstraction. In the process I both "profess" and lead a class discussion, occasionally playing devil's advocate to stimulate further controversy, and occasionally pausing to analyze the premises students have brought to bear upon the controversy. I generally conclude by answering my own question, proposing that the best answer to the question is the question itself. This inevitably prompts students to raise still other questions:

Isn't this solution also a compromise of sorts, a compromise between telling it like you think it is and discussing competing viewpoints?

Yes, I answer, but it also invites your reflection on these alternatives, and that changes them and you. That is, they are no longer simply natural ways of teaching and learning. And you have to think about what you want from this class.

But aren't you biasing the discussion by letting us know your viewpoint? Mightn't students who take a different position be intimidated by you, particularly since you also give the grades in the course?

Yes, I admit, that's a continuing problem, but can you think of a better alternative? If not, perhaps we have here an example of the possibility for reasoned and reasonable judgments of better and worse, in the absence of formulaic rules of argument. The discussion continues....

This concludes the formal part of my paper. In what follows, I append a number of handouts to my persuasion classes covering issues of advocacy in the classroom generally as well as issues specifically germane to my own classroom. These illustrate the approach I have been proposing in this paper.

#### Appendix A: *The Written Assignment in "Persuasion" Persuasion in the Classroom*

Do your instructors persuade or do they merely inform or educate? Can professors promote a viewpoint on a controversial issue even when they are presenting an informative lecture or conducting an even-handed discussion? Is such "propagandizing" always unethical or is it sometimes legitimate? How

should professors deal with controversial subject matter in class?

Analyze the way one of your instructors handled controversial material in class this semester. Perhaps identify patterns of persuasion (or non-persuasion) that recurred over the course of the semester. Or do a detailed case study of one particularly interesting episode in class. Feel free to focus on my own classroom.

#### Appendix B: *Issues of Persuasion in the University Classroom*

Should educators take and defend positions on controversial issues in their university classrooms? If so, when, how, under what conditions, etc.? Are professors obligated to be up front about their advocacy? Are they obligated to prepare the ground for their advocacy by contextualizing it historically and dialectically (Brand)? Must their advocacy be relevant to the announced subject matter of their classroom? Are they obligated to represent opposing positions fairly and to engage the strongest arguments of the opposition, not just the weakest arguments? Is there a difference between advocating in the classroom (okay) and proselytizing in the classroom (not okay)?

In advocating, are professors more justified in defending minority voices over majority voices (J.S. Mill)? Voices of the marginalized or the oppressed (e.g., women, African-Americans, Eastern cultures, socialism) over historically dominant voices (e.g., white males, Western culture, capitalism)? Is such advocacy justified as a kind of academic “affirmative action” (Brod): to compensate for the advantages accruing to the dominant voices outside the university classroom? If so, are all marginalized or oppressed voices equally worthy of being defended in the university classroom? If not, what should be the bases for inclusion and exclusion?

On the other hand, is advocacy in the university classroom potentially dangerous? Given that it is coupled with the professor’s right to dispense grades (and other rewards and punishments), is it potentially coercive? When used to “liberate” students from their biases, is it unduly patronizing? And does it really achieve its goals?

Thus, should university professors refrain from taking and defending positions in the classroom? Should they educate and not advocate? Should they inform and not persuade? Should they teach students how to think but not tell them what to think? Should it be enough for professors to contextualize controversies, present all sides in balanced fashion, and conduct evenhanded discussions of the issues with their class?

But is academic neutrality possible, let alone desirable? Aren't most university classrooms either "political" or "already politicized" (Moglen)? Don't the very concepts of imparting information and teaching how to think presuppose a model of objectivity that is itself highly controversial? Isn't it possible to do a lot of persuading (and even proselytizing) in the guise of objectivity? In teaching "rules" of reasoning and "rules" of evidence, for example, can professors be ideology-free? Moreover, on controversial issues, isn't the stance of neutrality itself a position (a position of no position) and potentially an unethical position?

Don't students pay their professors (indirectly) to do more than ask questions and impart information? Shouldn't they provide models of reasoned advocacy and responsible activism?

Given the problems that even the most well-meaning instructors are likely to confront in handling controversial issues within their single-instructor classrooms, should universities do more to expose students to conflicts among faculty, perhaps in co-taught classes (Graff). In addition to "teaching the conflicts" (Graff), should instructors be "teaching the pedagogies": i.e., increasing student awareness of pedagogical issues in treatments of controversy (Simons)?

### *Appendix C: Problems of Faculty Advocacy in my Own Classroom*

As you prepare for your assignment on advocacy in the college classroom, you might wish to ponder the ethics or appropriateness of some of the things I've said and done as a classroom instructor.

A. In my classes I generally tell students that I will grade them on how they support a position, not on what position they take. Yet this claim is in many ways problematic.

1. The sorts of "rules" of argument and evidence found in our text are highly imprecise. For example, the text instructs you to avoid inappropriate appeals to authority, but is unclear as to when such appeals are inappropriate.
2. What is inappropriate in one context may be appropriate in another. For example, scientists claim to reject all arguments from authority. What "counts" is what the research reveals about a phenomenon, not what some alleged expert says about it. But in the courtroom, expert opinion is often invoked by both sides in a case. And, although textbooks on argumentation generally treat appeals to "what most people think" as fallacious, in a message-dense society, we often have little choice but to rely on evidence of this kind.
3. Personal narratives are often quite persuasive; yet stories of this kind often overwhelm reason by appeals to emotion. Oftentimes, the story is about an

extreme case, not a typical case. And the story gives us information about just one case, even though the generalization it purports to support is intended to apply to a wide range of cases. Yet I confess that I am often moved in my grading of speeches or essays by well told narratives.

4. Such “rules” of argument and evidence as are found in argumentation textbooks were developed over the centuries by philosophers, rhetoricians, and legal scholars, nearly all of whom were white males. Now many feminists are challenging these principles, claiming for example that women think differently from men, and that their ways of thinking (e.g., based on personal experience more than abstract logic) deserve at least equal respect. Similarly Afrocentrists frequently claim that African cultures promulgated a kind of nonlinear reasoning that is preferable to Western linear reasoning. Multiculturalists often extend this line of argument to suggest that rules of argument and evidence are culture-specific, and that white, male Eurocentric thinking shouldn’t be imposed on other cultures. I continue to grade students based on the principles of argumentation found in argumentation textbooks, and I urge them on my students. Is this an unfair imposition of authority on my part?

5. It’s fashionable these days for scholars to claim that all so-called knowledge is mere belief; that there is no objective way to evaluate an argument; that all an argument does is reveal a particular angle of view, or perspective, of the arguer. I sometimes tell my students that such arguments are self-refuting and hence self-defeating, but they could as well use these same arguments on me. Still, I insist that we as a class can often agree on what constitutes a worse or a better argument. I try to demonstrate this in my classes.

6. A particularly vexing form of controversy involves problems of incommensurability. This occurs when each side argues from premises that the other rejects; neither side in the “feminist logic” controversy, for example, is able to engage the other on neutral ground. Am I as a teacher in a position to evaluate their arguments?

7. In my “Race and Racism” classes, I’ve sometimes admitted to difficulties in grading quality of argumentation. I hereby confess that I often have similar difficulties in our Persuasion class.

## B. Classroom Practices

1. In our discussion of the video about the religious right in America, I pointed out some of the issues I faced in handling controversial issues of this kind in the classroom. E.g., Should I focus our discussion on the film as a form of

propagandistic rhetoric or on the religious right's propagandistic rhetoric? Or both? On whatever the class wishes to discuss? On the least popular position? Or my own concerns? With a film such as this, can (and should) there be such a thing as an evenhanded discussion?

2. Questions of this kind present themselves to me in a variety of ways. I'm aware that I can influence your thinking (a) by the books I assign, (b) by the tasks I assign, (c) by what I say in lectures and what I talk about, etc.

a. In S.C. 082 I've spent much more time on material glorifying Martin Luther King than on material glorifying Malcolm X.

b. In S.C. 082, students read a book on race and racism issues by Dinesh D'Souza, a conservative scholar whom even other conservatives (e.g., G. Loury) have charged with promoting racist beliefs.

c. In S.C. 082, I assigned an essay on "The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ." The author, psychologist Jay Haley, presented Christ as a revolutionary who was not above using deception to gain his ends.

Two students strongly objected to the essay.

3. The course on Campaigns and Movements (SC 082) that I teach is officially designated as a Race and Racism course. One of its purposes is help overcome racism. Does Temple University's decision to require such courses of all undergraduates constitute an implicit endorsement of at least some advocacy (and even proselytizing) in the classroom?

#### Appendix D: *Letter on "Appeals to God and Patriotism in Political Campaign Films; Followup Discussion*

"The campaign films are designed for people who place their vote according to matters of heart over matters of mind."

Student:

"He [Reagan] showed so many things in his campaign ad that represented freedom. For example, he must have shown the flag 29+ times. This allowed me to just remember what America is all about."

Student:

The following is a response to criticisms of my advocacy in the persuasion classroom. What do you think?

In the "Classroom Advocacy" papers, a few of you took me to task for my remarks on the Reagan film's use of appeals to God and patriotism as reasons for voting for Reagan. One student commented that I'd unfairly put down religion on other occasions in class. Another said, "Educators do not have the right to chastise their



students on their beliefs in God or their country.”

My thanks to these students for their critical comments. God and country are indeed sensitive topics. If I’ve crossed the line in comments on the Reagan film or in other treatments of religion in class, I’m sorry.

That having been said, I want to defend my remarks on the appeals to God and patriotism in the Reagan film.

Earlier this semester I referenced Petty and Cacioppo’s distinction between central and peripheral processing of persuasive messages. The peripheral route is the knee-jerk route; in a message-dense society, we frequently respond unthinkingly to persuasive appeals like those of God and country. As some theorists put it, we use “cognitive shorthands.” Thus, we don’t ask many questions about what we’ve seen or heard (as in central processing).

There’s a lot of evidence that politicians often get elected on the basis of voters’ peripheral processing. I think that’s a shame. Whom we elect to high office is too important for Americans to choose based on cognitive shorthands – on hearts rather than minds.

Re the Reagan film’s repeated appeals to God and pride in country, I used an analogy to Pavlov’s dogs, learning to salivate to a bell rather than to the food powder with which it had been previously been associated. My point was (and remains) that symbols like the American flag and references to God come to evoke conditioned responses. Then, when Reagan is linked to these positive stimuli, their positive associations rub off. Some of you will say that the foregoing comments are further evidence that I’m unrepentant in chastizing my students for their beliefs in God and country. On this issue, I want to respond carefully. I believe one of my jobs is to help you to think critically. But that doesn’t mean that I have a right in a persuasion classroom to put down all beliefs in God and patriotism. That’s not in my job specifications.

Nor would I want to put down beliefs in God and country. I’ve seen three ministers through to a Ph.D. degree and am supervising a fourth. These people have well thought ideas about God and religion. They have also interpreted their calling and their faith into missions of healing. When these (and many other) people speak of their belief in God as the inspiration for their service to others, I have nothing but admiration for them and respect for their beliefs.

My criticism of Persuasion students for peripheral processing of God appeals in the Reagan film was by no means intended as a general put-down of beliefs in God or in religion more generally. Campaign films in general are not a message

form in which one can easily determine the sincerity or authenticity of a political candidate's religious beliefs. Still less are viewers in a position to evaluate their contents.

As for appeals to patriotism, I would again urge critical thinking. What kind of America do you want to be proud of? Earlier this semester I observed that Americans have historically been influenced by competing ideologies: one emphasizing individualism and the pursuit of economic self-interest; the other emphasizing equality and communal interests. Some critics of patriotism argue that it causes people to be unconcerned about problems elsewhere in the world. Others interpret American patriotism as a call for precisely this kind of worldly concern. Yet another way of expressing what America is all about is to point to the First Amendment, which makes possible, through its guarantees of free speech and free assembly, such substantive debates as I outlined above. Ironically, even the burning of the American flag has been interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court as a kind of "speech" protected by the First Amendment. Of course many Americans believe flag-burning to be unpatriotic.

In my comments on the Reagan film, I believe I also drew a comparison with Nazi Germany's appeals to God and country, including the Nazi's use of the "Sig Heil" salute. Was this comparison invalid? Was it an instance of the very sort of knee-jerk rhetoric I was complaining about in class? Possibly. There are huge differences between the propaganda apparatus used in Nazi Germany to compel allegiance to Hitler and the techniques of persuasion used by American politicians to get elected. Still, there are some underlying similarities that deserve our attention.

One thing I regret is that I was a lot harder on the Reagan film than on the Clinton film. I did this because so many of you seemed to have been taken in by the Reagan film's superbly crafted appeals to God and patriotism.

But the Clinton film deserved critical scrutiny as well. Some of you said in your papers that you especially liked Clinton's kind remarks about Republican Bob Dole, as well as Clinton's expressed wish that the campaign would focus on issues and not stoop to personal attack. A more critical reading of these remarks, given what we know about Clinton's image problems, is that he was trying to frame the upcoming contest to his own advantage by taking the high road.

Others of you said that you were moved by what Hillary and her mother had to say about Bill. Interestingly, Clinton has expressed his admiration for Reagan's campaign tactics. Clinton's warm and fuzzy displays of family togetherness and

family values were right out of Ronald Reagan's campaign book. We should no more have voted for Clinton based on these emotional appeals than we might have for Reagan on the basis of his appeals to God and patriotism.

Finally, there's the question of whether I've been overly critical of religion or of religious rhetoric at other times during the semester. One student cited my showing of the film, "Life and Liberty for Those Who Obey," put out by People for the American Way. Recall that I used the film to introduce the final paper assignment on advocacy by teachers in the classroom. How, I asked, should I have "taught" this film? Use it to criticize the rhetoric of the religious right? Use it to expose the rhetoric of the film? Conduct an evenhanded discussion? etc.

Here's my secret: I decided after pondering this question with my colleagues that the best answer to this question was the question itself. That is, I now think that the best solution to the dilemmas associated with how to teach the film is to ask my students how I should teach the film, and then encourage further thought about the rhetoric of the teacher in the classroom. I've tried to do that in this class. See my essay on this (on Reserve).

Well, there you have it: Herb Simons not only advocating in the classroom, but committing himself in writing.

I'd encourage you to respond to this essay, either in writing or in a visit to my office. The same holds true for other issues we discussed towards the end of the semester. For example, is my essay evidence of a white, male, or Eurocentric way of thinking? If so, should you think any the less of it for that? Is my advocacy in this essay to you appropriate or inappropriate? Can you "grade" my essay based on how I think, independent of what I think? Keep in touch; otherwise I'll miss you. You've been a wonderful class!

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