

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Beyond Amnesia And Critical Thinking: Forensics And Argument Pedagogy



David Zarefsky rightly observed in his 1994 Presidential address to the Speech Communication Association that the disciplines within the fields of rhetoric, speech, and communication bearing most “directly on public affairs, the study of argumentation and debate” are treated as an “intellectual backwater” by the larger fields[i]. Zarefsky also observed that scholars in argumentation and debate have defined their field with such “insularity” that they fail to provide much insight into public controversy.

Zarefsky’s ultimate purpose in his address was to encourage a focus on public deliberation, an objective we believe scholars of argumentation should make a priority. In this paper, we follow Michael Bartanen in considering the diachronic movement of American intercollegiate forensics and argumentation pedagogy to consider why Zarefsky’s observation has come to pass[ii]. In so doing, we set forth two reasons why argumentation and debate are treated as backwater disciplines and why scholars of argumentation and forensics, in turn, have failed to bridge their theories and instruction to philosophical and pedagogical movements that would place greater value on the need for instruction in argument.

First, we consider the neglect of argumentation and forensics in the standard history of the American discipline. The development of American argument pedagogy and the origins of the speech and rhetoric discipline can be traced to the emergence of intercollegiate forensics[iii]. This history is forgotten in the larger disciplines. We believe this history needs rectification if forensics and argumentation pedagogy are to receive the respect they deserve. Second, forensic educators have aligned their concerns with “critical thinking” and scientific reasoning at the expense of a much larger vision of reason and purpose. We believe that the work of Chaim Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in their 1958 article “Concerning Temporality as a Characteristic of Argumentation” establishes a blueprint for both forensics and argumentation pedagogy that would

move both fields beyond their insularity[iv].

### 1. *Historical Amnesia and Identity*

Zarefsky's observation that scholars and teachers of argumentation and forensics have been consigned to a backwater rings true and invites a sense of historical context. Any discipline, particularly one as broad and varied as those dealing with matters of rhetoric, speech, and communication, will have a number of historical tributaries contributing to its modern sense of identity. Unfortunately, many scholars in the larger fields either do not know or choose not to remember the origins of the National Communication Association and their heritage. This is a theme the first author has developed in a previous article[v].

To explain the reasons for larger fields historical amnesia and to set the stage for the second section of this paper, a brief rehearsal of the argument in that article is necessary. Herman Cohen's *Emergence of the Speech Communication* is the accepted history of the larger field[vi]. His work makes few references to argumentation and forensics, neglecting the rich history demonstrating the role played by scholars of argumentation and debate in the rise of the speech communication movement in American. Indeed, it was precisely the concern for public deliberation that sparked students and their teachers to seek opportunities to argue in public. At several major universities, student demand for public debate gave rise to the formation of intramural and intercollegiate debate leagues. The University of Oregon is a case study. When the University was formed in 1876, students had few opportunities for political or social exchange. In response, students formed two debate leagues, one for women and one for men – they constituted the first student organizations at the University. In turn, students and instructors challenged other universities to debate contests. The first intercollegiate debate in the Pacific Northwest took place in 1897 between Willamette University and the University of Oregon.

In response to student demand, faculty members at the University of Oregon and other universities made curricular and pedagogical commitments to teaching argumentation in the traditional classroom and in the setting of the forensic tournament. Many of those involved in the “divorce” between instructors of speech and English that Cohen discusses had roots in debate and forensics. Without question, a major impetus behind the student movement and the emergence of the speech discipline was a concern for public affairs as it was carried out in the public sphere before general audiences. Implicit in this movement was the assumption that it was possible to reason in conditions of

uncertainty, that there were often good, if not absolute or irrefutable reasons, for making judgments, and that general audiences were capable of listening to and then acting upon the arguments they witnessed. While Cohen does acknowledge the importance of public affairs in the early speech movement, he fails to acknowledge the central role played by student interest in public argumentation and faculty members who joined their students in advocating for courses in argumentation, debate, and forensics.

This amnesia is not unique to Cohen and scholars in the larger disciplines, for those of us in the fields of argumentation and forensics have neglected what our predecessors sought and contributed. A survey of our conference proceedings reveal a clash of two different orientations, which the first author has labeled “critical thinking” and the “rhetorical tradition[vii].” The former school pays little credence to what preceded it; the latter may pay too much. Regardless, both schools have not paid sufficient attention to the objective that Zarefsky set forth, that is a concern with public policy and deliberation. The critical thinking movement in argumentation and forensics ties itself to models of reason that an advocate must meet before arguments are deemed rational. The rhetorical tradition movement in forensics and argumentation too often ties its function to eloquence and civility rather than rigorous testing of public policy issues through research and the scrutiny of the logic inherent in the positions advocated. We agree with Zarefsky that instruction in argument should be tied to public deliberation. Before we can do so we must have a shared sense of what constitutes our purpose in teaching public deliberation and argument and how what we do is different from instruction in formal logic and critical thinking. Toward this end, the second part of the paper draws from an important article written by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca on the difference between argumentation and formal logic. In this article, they establish a definition of argument we believe establishes a pedagogical foundation for instruction in argument.

## *2. Time, Reason, and Argumentation*

Logical positivism eclipsed all other forms of reason until the middle of the twentieth century, and until the publication of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s New Rhetoric project, reason was restricted to formal logic and experimental science. Reason did not enter ethical and political conflicts[viii]. In their article “Concerning Temporality as a Characteristic of Argumentation,” which appeared in *Archivio di Filosofia* in 1958, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca and Chaim Perelman offer

a blueprint for both forensics and the pedagogy of argumentation that captures the gist of their system of philosophical argument. Olbrechts-Tyteca and Perelman describe argumentation as situated in time, and consequently emphasize its contextualization in social and historical realms[**ix**].

They contrast argumentation with formal logic, and in particular, demonstration and the quasi-logical argumentation of such Greek philosophers as Aristotle and Plato. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, these types of formal logic, which arise from contemplation, aim to ensure the timelessness of their premises by artificially isolating knowledge from its context.

Unlike formal knowledge, argumentation's defining characteristic, for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, is its temporality. Time causes argumentation to be tied to action, to history, to a social context, and thus to real individuals and an ever-changing and unpredictable universe. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca stress the transformative quality of time on argumentation: time affects even the events that argumentation aims to influence. Time thus transforms reasoning itself, compelling it to adapt to new situations.

Unlike formal logic, which takes place in empty time, and whose conclusions are restrictive, closed, eternal, and intuitive, argumentation is never definitive or closed because of its temporal nature. Whereas demonstration is the same for all, and for all time, argumentation varies with individuals and their place in history. The force of argumentation depends upon its context: in contrast to formal logic, argumentation cannot distinguish between judgments of reality and value, because both depend on the context and the audience.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that time causes an "interval", an indeterminacy, to intervene between subsequent statements in an argument. Order in argumentation is thus neither a progression nor a system, but tied to time and utility. Argumentation, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, is the process of constructing reasoning, albeit in an unpredictable fashion: what is said first serves to support what follows, which will itself be modified either by the argument itself or by changes in its context, and thus received in a different fashion by the audience. Contradictions exist in formal logic because the subject matter is fixed within this closed system. By contrast, only incompatibilities, which result from decisions, exist in argumentation.

In order to erase the incompatibilities, one can make use of time by compelling the elements to be successive in time.

Time influences not only the reasoning and manner in which an argumentation is

presented, but also the way in which it is received. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca emphasize that arguments are acts of communication. Whereas formal logic carefully distinguishes the various levels of language (for example, language from meta-language), Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe argumentation as polysemous. Because argumentation is concerned with a communication that is temporally-bound, its language is living, historical, and of course ambiguous.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca caution, however, against seeing choice in argumentation as uncertain or arbitrary: if time modifies argumentation, this change must be recognized in order for new changes to take place.

The act of argumentation is rhetorical aggression: one person (the orator) attempts to transform the listener, to change him or the context so as to trigger another action, and yet the knowledge and instruments of knowledge of this audience are themselves subject to modification by time. Unlike Classical argumentation, which deals primarily with the past, the argumentation of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca seeks to change the present and influence the future. In argumentation, every position taken is precarious, and every context is changeable. The orator must take time into account: he must limit his scope, choose the most pertinent or may never be sufficient for definitive agreement, the orator will need to use such techniques as insistence and repetition.

If argumentation is an aggression for the orator, it nevertheless is very open relative to the listener. Argumentation allows hesitation and doubt, and thus permits the listener the liberty of choosing to agree or not. The listener will consider the discourse itself as the object of thought. Moreover, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca highlight the relative aspect of the listener's relationship to the discourse: he will intervene with his creative liberty, with the unforeseen turns of his behavior, with the precariousness of his adherence. Even if the listener is not convinced, he must make up own mind, since time obliges a decision in argumentation. However, argumentation for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca must allow certain debates to be taken up again, especially when new "facts" are brought in.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's conception of argumentation is their creation of what they call the universal audience. Although argumentation varies with individuals, it nonetheless seeks to convince the broadest audience possible, the universal audience. The universal audience will be complex and yet normative, but normative only because it is made up of individuals who are situated in history. In conferring a temporal

aspect to reason, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca thus allow for an element of rationality in argumentation: reason is normative for them because they give a historical context to concrete individuals.

In the article itself, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca demonstrate the openness of argumentation by using other disciplines other than philosophy for their examples. Because of its temporality, argumentation such disciplines as anthropology and psychology, even calling it the “sociology of knowledge.” The discipline most frequently cited is judicial law; they refer to the processes of interpretation and the creation of precedents in law as models for argumentation. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca define argumentation as an open practice, applicable to and drawing inspiration from many different fields and disciplines. The concept of argumentation as ever-evolving, polysemous, and non-restrictive, developed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in this 1958 article thus offers a model for contemporary forensics and argument pedagogy:

- \* Argument deals with the lived reality and reason tempered by experience.
- \* Argument responds to situations of uncertainty and seeks most plausible and reasonable solutions.
- \* Argument assumes the existence of touchstones of communal agreement and premises that can be used to build argument. These premises may be contested if there is good reason.
- \* Argument moves beyond critical thinking, seeking to provide guidance in the realm of action.

With the vision outlined in this article, we hope both to more deeply impress argumentation pedagogy with its educational power and responsibility. One of the promises of reason has been that human conflict about significant matters need not produce violence but can be resolved reasonably, not through the use of formal models of logic but through reasoned and reasonable discourse. Forensic educators and those who teach argument are teaching students how to use reason. The reason at the center of their instruction is different than the expression of reason taught in formal logic and math. Ultimately, we hope that scholars and teachers of argument will ground their instruction in the vision of reason set forth by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca.

### *Conclusion*

We offer this paper as an exploration of Zarefsky’s observation that argumentation and forensics remain in a backwater because scholars in the larger

community do not fully value what argument has to offer and because scholars and teachers of argument and forensics have defined their concerns narrowly. The fields of argumentation and forensics can move out of the backwater if we first get our history right and then develop a pedagogical grounding that emphasizes argument's role in public argumentation about public policy. We offer this paper as an effort to think through some of the issues facing our community.

## NOTES

- [i]** David Zarefsky, "The Postmodern Public," *Vital Speeches* 1 March 1994, 308-315.
- [ii]** Michael D. Bartanen, *Teaching and Directing Forensics* (Scottsdale, Ariz.: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1994). See as well his paper presented at this conference, which outlines a much larger project involving the history of forensics. "The History of Intercollegiate Forensics in the United States: An Uneasy Fusion of Democracy and Competition." Paper presented to the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, Amsterdam, June 16, 2002
- [iii]** "A New Forensics for a New Millennium" *The Forensic* 83 (1997): 4-16.
- [iv]** Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. "De la temporalité comme caractère de l'argumentation." *Tempo, Archivio di filosofia* II (1958): 115-33.
- [v]** Frank, "A New Forensics for a New Millennium"
- [vi]** Herman Cohen, *The History of Speech communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914-1945* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1994).
- [vii]** David A. Frank, "Debate as Rhetorical Scholarship" in *CEDA 1991: 20th Anniversary Conference Proceedings* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1993), pp. 75-95; see as well .See for example: James H. McBath, *Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective* (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Co., 1975), Donn W. Parson and Speech Communication Association., *American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics, September 1984*, Northwestern University (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1984).
- [viii]** Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. "De la temporalité comme caractère de l'argumentation." *Tempo, Archivio di filosofia* II (1958): 115-33. See Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969) for the full display of the New Rhetoric project.
- [ix]** Chaim Perelman, "The Theoretical Relations of Thought and Action." *1 Inquiry* (1958): 130-36.

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