ISSA Proceedings 2002 – "The Issue" In Argumentation Practice And Theory

1. Introduction

This paper compares metadiscursive uses of "the issue" in two settings (college classroom discussions and public participation in school board meetings), and reflects critically between these empirical cases and the concept of issue in argumentation theory. Our intent is to pursue this critique in both directions; that is, to critique the practical discourse in light of normative argumentation theory while also considering how argumentation theory might be informed by practical considerations. The ultimate goal of our research is a grounded practical theory, a conceptual reconstruction of argumentative discourse that is both rationally warranted and practically useful (Craig & Tracy, 1995).

Jean Goodwin's (2002) work in the normative pragmatic theory of "Designing Issues" provides an especially useful starting point in argumentation theory. For Goodwin, "an issue is a more or less determinate object of contention that is, under the circumstances, worth arguing about." For the purposes of argumentation theory, the existence of a determinate issue can often be taken for granted as one of the preconditions for arguments to be made. In reality, however, issues are not always well defined, nor do they "simply lie there" waiting to be argued about. "An issue arises when *we make an issue* of it" in practical discourse. Issues exist when arguers successfully design them so as to create the pragmatic conditions for argumentation to occur. "In order to make an issue of some matter, the arguer will have to (a) render it as determinate as required for the particular situation, and (b) show that, under the circumstances, it is worth arguing" (Goodwin, 2002).

To understand how issues are designed in practical discourse becomes, then, a task for argumentation theory. As Goodwin points out, the issue itself is at issue in many controversies, and discursive resources for framing and defining issues play important roles in argumentative practice. The task of a normative pragmatic

theory is to explain how issues can be designed so as to induce interlocutors to address them. This requires more than a mere classification of issues, for example as provided by the traditional *stasis* theory of forensic rhetoric. Following Kauffeld (e.g., 1998), Goodwin shows that designing an issue requires the use of available discursive resources to create conditions in which interlocutors will be held responsible for addressing the issue, whether it be an accusation of wrongdoing or a claim about the likely consequences of a policy decision. Although not a direct extension of Goodwin's work, our research extends the broader empirical investigation of issue design in two ways: first, by examining practical discourse in two distinct situational contexts (college classroom discussions and public participation in school board meetings) and second, by focusing on metadiscursive uses of the term issue and related terms. Goodwin (2002) opens her paper with some interesting exploratory observations on metaphors (such as point, terrain, and foundation) that underlie common uses of the term, issue. Taking a slightly different approach (that of grounded practical theory), we analyze pragmatic uses of the issue and related terms in practical discourse in order to identify conceptual features and distinctions and illuminate their pragmatic functions. The following sections summarize empirical findings in the classroom and school board settings, compare the two cases, and conclude with a brief reflection on the implications for argumentation theory.

2. Classroom Discussions

The classroom data are drawn from a corpus of student-led discussions of controversial issues in college "critical thinking" classes (Craig, 1997, 1999, 2000; Craig & Sanusi, 2000, 2002). Transcribed from audio- or videotapes, the discussions usually lasted about 40 minutes and involved 18-25 participants, 4-6 of whom had been assigned as a group to select an issue and lead the discussion.

Craig (1999) showed how participants in one such discussion used a theoretically informed concept of the issue as a normative resource for managing the group's interaction. Participants mentioned "the issue" when doing such things as defining a topical focus, supporting or attacking the relevance of an argument, or questioning an assumption. In performing these actions they relied on certain normative attributes of the issue that had been emphasized in this critical thinking class: that critical discussion should focus on an issue; that the issue should be a clear, unitary question; that prescriptive and descriptive issues should not be confused; and that arguments (conclusions supported by reasons and

evidence) should be relevant to the issue under discussion. The issue thus served as a metadiscursive device (a way of talking about the ongoing talk) that enabled participants "to conduct their discussion while reflecting on the normative basis of some of the practices by which they conduct their discussion" (p. 27).

In pragmatic terms, the issue is a device for negotiating the topical focus of discussion. Presuming that the issue has a certain normative status – i.e., that discussion *should* focus on the issue – statements of the issue can be used strategically to create a context in which some lines of argument are more relevant than others and therefore easier to pursue. If different statements of the issue favor conflicting lines of argument (e.g., "right to life" versus "right to choose" formulations of the abortion issue), then the issue itself can become the issue, the focus of controversy (cf. Goodwin, 2002).

Craig (2000) showed how certain ambiguities in the issue can "affect its strategic use as a normative standard for what the group should be discussing" (p. 65). "The issue" may refer to the "nominal" (officially announced) issue, the "de facto" (actually being discussed) issue, an issue that "comes up" or is "brought up" during the discussion, or the "real" issue (the underlying, important, or controversial issue that should be discussed). Participants maneuver strategically among these distinctions in order to influence the topical focus of discussion: "getting back" to the issue, getting down to the "real" issue, pursuing or declining to pursue an issue that has "come up."

Issues that "come up" or are "brought up" in discussion were treated only briefly in Craig (2000). For purposes of comparison with the school board case, it is especially interesting to see how metadiscursive references to such issues were used pragmatically in the classroom discussions.

Three features that characterize the pragmatic context of these classroom discussions should be noted before proceeding. First, the institutional set-up of a critical thinking course invited the participants to couch their discourse in an "argument" frame. Although the discussions actually varied in argumentativeness, often drifted away from the announced topic, and in general were not heavily laden with "argument" terminology (issue, conclusion, reason, assumption, evidence, etc.), the classroom environment and the official purpose of the assignment, which was to exercise critical thinking skills in a 40-minute discussion of a controversial issue, did shape the discourse in certain obvious

ways. The institutional set-up supported the presumption that there was an issue, the issue was controversial, and it was appropriate to express opinions and make arguments that addressed the issue.

A second pragmatic characteristic is that the discussions were classroom exercises in which little was at stake beyond the personal skills, knowledge, and opinions of the participants, and, for the leaders, an academic grade. The students were required to discuss an issue but not to resolve or otherwise do anything about it. The classroom is not a public forum or deliberative body, and the students, who tend to be apolitical, did not generally approach it as a site of political struggle even when arguing passionately on different "sides" of the issue. In American culture, the classroom is a relatively low-risk environment for self-expression, interaction, and learning.

A third pragmatic feature of the situation is that the discussion leaders had official authority to announce and interpret the nominal discussion issue, which could then be "mentioned or alluded to by any participant as an authoritative warrant for establishing, clarifying, or criticizing the relevance of statements" (Craig, 2000, p. 65). Other participants could invoke, question, or challenge the nominal issue, or bring up other issues. Discussion could (and frequently did) drift away from the nominal issue as long as no one intervened to reassert it. The leaders, however, could intervene at any time. The nominal discussion issue, whatever its actual role in the discussion, was nothing but whatever they said it was.

Although only the leaders could announce *the* issue, other issues could *come up* in the discussion, and any participant could *bring up* an issue. Bringing up an issue or noting that an issue had come up were ways of introducing a topic for discussion, thereby authorizing the speaker to express an opinion and/or inviting others to do so. Leaders would often come prepared with lists of discussion questions, which they would bring up throughout the discussion by way of moving on to the "next" or "another" issue. Another common practice was to break the class into small groups for a preliminary exercise or discussion prior to the main class discussion, during which participants might later bring up issues that "came up" in the small groups. Issues were also brought up, apparently spontaneously in response to, or triggered by, something said in the discussion ("that brings up," "another thing," "spinning off of that"), or even out of sheer curiosity.

Regardless of how it was brought up, however, in order for an issue that was brought up to be accepted as a legitimate discussion topic, it needed to be sufficiently relevant, both to the immediate conversational environment and to *the* issue – the nominal discussion topic (for example, as a sub-issue or a larger issue implicated by the nominal issue). Otherwise, a discussion leader or some other participant might challenge it. Speakers, then, in bringing up issues, used a variety of discourse devices to establish their topical relevance, and other participants could accept such an issue (by responding in topically appropriate ways), challenge it, or modify it in some way to negotiate its relevance. On either side, this only occasionally involved labeling the issue explicitly as an issue (using the word "issue" or some equivalent metadiscourse marker) or as being "brought up."

1. CT960410, 732-745 (Symbolism Over Substance)**[i]**:
Mike: (go ahead) (.) yeah (.) go ahead uh::
Barb: oh this is just (.) uh: (.) I kinda (wanted) to go back to big-big business just cuz it's kinda I mean it's kind of little side line but (.) speaking of (.) uh like symbolism over substance (.) I wanna know like (.) I don't really understand that invisible hand so where is like (.) the substance in this invisible hand (.) magical hand that's gonna come down and help the little people uh:
Sam: well (.) there is not that's just basically John (.) John Adams (.) mentioned that (.) he believed (.) that uh: (.) he said that in the free market there's an invisible hand that'll keep everything balanced out (.) yeah the free … [turn continues]

In (1), Mike, a discussion leader, recognizes Barb, who brings up a challenge to the economic concept of the "invisible hand" that had been mentioned earlier in the discussion. Barb marks her discourse in several ways to indicate that she is bringing up an issue that is only peripherally relevant to the nominal discussion issue ("oh this is just … kind of a little side line") yet sufficiently relevant to earlier discussion and warranted by personal curiosity ("kinda wanted to go back to … I wanna know). Barb's curiosity may be disingenuous, given her ironic and ideologically loaded characterization of the invisible hand ("magical hand that's gonna come down and help the little people"). Raising no challenge to the issue that Barb has brought up, however, Sam's reply straightforwardly addresses the issue by explaining the invisible hand (with a garbled reference to Adam Smith). This example illustrates one way in which an issue can be brought up by a

participant, inserted coherently into the ongoing discussion, and implicitly accepted without challenge by other participants as a discussion topic.
Explicit use of the word "issue" as a metadiscourse marker often indicates a challenge or anticipated challenge to an issue that someone is bringing up. (2) – (4) illustrate such uses.

2. CT960426, 944-985 (Capital Punishment):
Sally: I agree th't the law should be changed um just outta curiosity there's one text that says somebody comes into y'r house and attacks you you c'n shoot to kill n you will not face (.) any [6 lines deleted] any things like that
Susan: That's not the issue.
Sally: I figure it wo- it's the same thing though (.)
Fred: nnn I: know 't you'd be less apt to break into a house if you thought you c'd get shot (.) doing it.
[11 lines deleted]
Susan: That makes sense. You know I mean but- but I mean that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about capital punishment for first degree murder.

In this example (which has been condensed for reasons of space), Sally brings up a law that allows anyone to shoot an intruder in certain circumstances. She marks this topic change as peripherally relevant ("um just out of curiosity"). Although the topic clearly stimulated the group (Fred's comment is illustrative; several other comments or brief interjections have been deleted), Susan, a discussion leader, definitively rejects it as "not the issue" and "not what we're talking about."

3. CT981113, 761-769 (Sexual Attraction in the Workplace):
Jill: what about (.) sexual harassment (.) and uh (.) a role that plays (.) if you don't (.) make any rules in companies (.) an:D (.) a superior is putting pressure on someone (.) about (.) making sexual advances (.) how do you: (.) weigh that (.) because that's how sexual harassment cases start (.) in the first place (.)
Mary: I think they're both (.) two different separate issues (.) one's (consensual) and one's not … [turn continues]

4. CT971203, 139-142 (Smoking Bans):
Marge: … so it was really close. (.) (Jenny?)
Jenny: an issue (.) you have to go outside and smoke by yourself. Don't you think that's an issue.

Marge: right. … [turn continues]

In (3) Jill brings up the issue of sexual harassment, and Mary (not a discussion leader) challenges its relevance by distinguishing it from the nominal issue of romantic relationships in the workplace. Jenny in (4), having been recognized by one of the leaders, seeks confirmation that the topic she has brought up is "an issue." In this case, the issue is explicitly accepted as a topic of discussion. Apparently, so is the issue brought up in (5).

5. CT981120, 391-401 (Capital Punishment)
Linda: What about drunk driving? I mean
John: Yeah.
Linda: If they drank and they drove I mean.
John: What if what if their parents were alcoholics and that's the life that they live. They don't get the death penalty for that.
Beth: Well that brings up an interesting question is when would the death penalty apply, or you know is it for all murders, or is it for if you are a serial killer and that's I think one of the major controversies surrounding the issue.

As we have seen, an issue that has been brought up may be accepted or challenged by other participants. Acceptance is usually implicit, indicated simply by continuing the topic. Challenge more often involves the use of explicit metadiscourse markers (issue, etc.). Sometimes, though, an issue that has been brought up is *explicitly* accepted, usually by a discussion leader, and usually as a prelude to reformulating the issue or changing the topic. In the following example, Linda and John collaboratively bring up the issue of whether a drunk driver who kills someone (or perhaps the alcoholic parents of the drunk driver?) should be subject to the death penalty. Beth, a discussion leader, explicitly accepts the topic ("that brings up an interesting question") but immediately reformulates the issue as the broader question of crimes to which the death penalty should be applied, which she labels "one of the major controversies surrounding the issue." She thus manages to shift the topic back toward the nominal issue while explicitly accepting another issue that has been brought up.

Although much more was going on in the pragmatics of these classroom discussions than can be accounted for by argumentation theory alone, the classroom context did invite the use of an "argument" frame to manage the discourse, and argumentation theory is therefore often quite relevant to a

normative evaluation of the discussions (which by that standard too often displayed an abysmal level of argumentative quality). The participants themselves quite often evaluated issues. For example, they asked for clarification of the nominal issue, argued for claims about the real issue, offered warrants for bringing up issues, and commented critically on issues that were brought up. In doing these things, they often displayed an orientation to one or both of the two normative standards defined by Goodwin (2002): that an issue must be sufficiently determinate and worth discussing. The pragmatic context constrained participants to search for issues that were sufficiently clear and controversial to sustain a "good" discussion.

3. Public Participation at School Board Meetings

Tracy's studies of school board meetings (e.g., Tracy, 2002; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001) provide a useful setting for comparison to the classroom data. In this site, the more common move was for participants to dispute what issue should be the issue. Tracy and Standerfer (in press), for instance, showed how the group's deliberation about what procedures to put in place to select a new school superintendent occurred within the context of a larger implicit issue (the competence of the Board members and whether they should be re-elected). Tracy and Muller (2001) examined how different labels that could be given to the interactional trouble the group was experiencing led to markedly different assessments of what issue was most pressing for the group to confront. The present study extends these analyses to examine how participants in a controversy that touched on matters of race and fairness, freedom of speech, and age-appropriate school activities sought to argue what the issue "really" was. First a few specifics about the communicative site.

School board meetings in Boulder Valley School District (BVSD), a community in the Western United States, involve an elected board of seven who oversee the staff responsible for educating more than twenty-five thousand children at 50-plus schools. Meetings, which are held twice a month in the district's administrative center, are open to the public and are broadcast over a local cable channel. A typical meeting begins with public participation, a time when community members bring concerns of any type to the board. Then the superintendent and board members offer comments and decisions are made about non-controversial actions (referred to as the "consent grouping"). Finally the school board gives its attention to the day's focal business: discussion of and voting on the policy issues

that are on the agenda.

The concerns that garner the board's attention in the discussion-voting segments of the meeting are ones that have made it through an informal nomination and selection process. Although any citizen, staff person or board member may propose items for the agenda, there are many more items (i.e., problems or issues) demanding attention than there is meeting time. One function of public participation, then, is to address the ever-present albeit tacit issue of "what concerns deserve the collective public attention of the board?" Issues that make it onto formal meeting agendas are ones that involve potential differences of opinion; items that are uncontroversial will be put in the consent grouping. Proposals as to what the school board *ought* to be addressing are especially likely following a controversial event.

3.1. "Barbiegate"

In the first February meeting of 2001 a dismayed dad came to the board meeting to protest the decision of his daughter's elementary school to prohibit the display of her science project as part of her school's science fair. In an emotion-filled speech the father framed the action taken toward his daughter as highly inappropriate, raising serious issues for the school board. He began by describing his daughter's project and its results: His daughter had done an experiment that presented 30 adults and 30 5th-graders with black and white Barbie dolls wearing dresses of different colors where each person was asked to say which doll was prettier. The adults selected the doll with the purple dress; most of the children selected the white doll. Following his description, the father characterized the reason for his participation:

6. *The Father*: "What I'm gonna cover is the reaction of the school, which was the antithesis of science, it's censorship, it's sweeping racial inji- issues under the rug, it's a violation of your own strategic plan, and it opens the district up to extremely serious legal liability. What the school board does with this is extremely important."

The father's comment drew a sympathetic editorial in the local newspaper, which in turn elicited additional local as well as national coverage, most of which portrayed the school in a negative light.

At the next meeting two weeks later speakers representing different

constituencies, as well as each of the board members, offered comments on this event that one board member dubbed “Barbiegate.” Speakers during public participation included the father, two representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a teacher speaking for the staff of the focal elementary school, a parent, the president of the school’s parent-teacher organization, and a spokesperson from the Million Man March, an African American group in a nearby large city.

In the public participation and board commentary phases of the meeting, speakers noted that they were “concerned,” had “a problem with,” wanted “to cover,” or “speak to” something; during this hour-long segment the term, “issue” was used 42 times. Worth noting is that usage of an argument frame in school board meetings is uncommon (Tracy & Muller, 2001). By and large the typical practice in the observed meetings, and presumably other deliberative groups, was for speakers to describe an existing bad state of affairs, speaking as if everyone would see the event in the same way. Framed a bit differently we would say that in school board meetings the preferred way to raise an issue was to frame it as a *non-issue* – a problem that all could see in which the only uncertainty concerned what needed to be done to correct it. This, in large measure, was what the father did in his comments during the first board meeting.

In community groups responsible for developing policy and making decisions about limited resources a first task is to determine what concerns needs to be treated as issues and what can be treated as problems (situations everyone agrees are undesirable). In this context, speakers do everything they can to frame their concerns as being non-controversial, problems rather than issues. Speakers, however, cannot control how others respond and once a good number of others begin weighing in with different opinions, a problem becomes an issue (or set of issues). This is what happened with Barbiegate. With the media attention that the father’s comment garnered, it was clear that the school district had a controversy on its hands. But what exactly was the issue? Analysis of the meeting points to three distinct but interlocked kinds of issues animating people’s talk.

3.2. Issue Type 1: How Should This Event Be Assessed?

When a controversial event has occurred and parties speak out, their comments can be interrogated and understood as speaking to the issue of how the particular event should be assessed. In this case, then, all comments could be seen as addressing the forensic issue of whether the decision to remove the girl’s science

project was a good or reasonable one. Of interest is that the only participants who explicitly framed their comments as addressing this issue were those who defended the school's action. Participants who saw the school's action as inappropriate treated the assessment of the event as obvious (it was bad) and explicitly focused their comments on the other kinds of issues. An example of explicitly addressing the forensic issue is displayed in the comment from the teacher representing the school.

7. *Teacher*: "I am a teacher at Mesa Elementary, and I am speaking on behalf of the staff. The staff at Mesa Elementary wants to clarify the information concerning the decision to not display the Barbie doll science fair project [. . . main body of the comments are deleted and then speaker concludes] We must say, however, that there is clearly more than one viewpoint, on whether the project should have been displayed, and we feel our decision was appropriate given the ages of our students, the arena of a grade school science fair, and the district's nondiscrimination policy. The project did not belong in the science fair forum, but the issues it brings up do belong in the classroom in the homes of our students. Thank you."

3.3. Issue Type 2: What Larger Issues Does this Event Raise?

Events that generate controversy generally do so by virtue of tapping into recurring concerns in a society. Yet naming the bigger issue is itself an issue. For the Barbiegate controversy two families of larger issues were flagged. The first focused on freedom of speech and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Consider a small part of what one of the ACLU representatives said:

8. *ACLU Representative*: " … the ACLU's very concerned about the prohibition of this project, of the display of this science fair project … we haven't heard anything about fear of imminent disruption of education or um of rioting or a history of that sort of thing in the school, of racist incidents at Mesa Elementary, or anything of that that sort … it's ironic that this experiment was suppressed by the school in the name of protection of the rights of the members of minority groups. Because freedom of speech has historically been a bulwark for minority groups and viewpoints against the tyranny of the majority."

But while the ACLU and other speakers treated the Barbiegate event as raising a First Amendment issue, not everyone agreed. This is illustrated by the comments of two participants who spoke after the ACLU representatives.

9. *Million Man March Representative*: " …We believe you are right on this issue. This is not about First Amendment, this is not a First Amendment issue. I'll be the first one to stand up as a Black man and say we stand by the First Amendment."

10. *Elementary School Parent*: "I also don't think that this is a freedom of speech issue. I think that um the project was given the opportunity to be discussed and that was deni- that was um rejected."

The second larger concern raised by Barbiegate, actually more a topic than an issue, was related to race. By virtue of U.S. history any event that connects to treatment or assessment of black Americans easily can become a focus of concern. But what was especially striking with this second "issue" was its vagueness. Barbiegate may have raised the "issue of race" but what exactly that issue meant was not clear. Interestingly it was in this least determinate of contexts that the word "issue" was most used.

11. *Father's comments at second meeting*: "Fourth, race remains a huge *issue* in this country and clearly one that is very difficult to talk about. However, we cannot limit discussion about race merely to the sterile controlled environment of a set lesson in a classroom."

12. *Teacher Spokesperson*: "This project brings with it much controversy. It carries the issues of sensitivity to race and the freedom of speech."

13. *School Board Member*: "And this *issue* of being sensitive is important. But I don't think that we can always look for a nice controlled environment to talk about these *issues*, and we need to find a way as individuals, as teachers, as human beings to have that moment even outside of that structure. And I truly believe in my heart that this school board and this school district is totally committed to dealing with these *issues*."

More than identifying a determinate object of contention, *issue* was used as a delicate reference to point toward a morally sensitive matter (Bergmann, 1992, 1998). In using the term speakers marked that they regarded the topic in all of its facets as needing to be approached with caution.

3.4. Issue Type 3: What Group-level Policy Should We be Addressing?

Finally, in civic groups such as school boards, speakers are concerned about more than the reasonableness of a past action or a larger issue. If an event has

occurred that is evaluated as bad or a larger issue has been raised, it is because the event raises implications about an existing policy or points to the need for a new one. But again, what particular policy issue an event raises is frequently disputed. For Barbiegate, four issues deserving future deliberative attention were flagged. The issues were:

1. whether the district's nondiscrimination policy infringed on freedom of speech;
2. who – the elected officials or the school administrators – should be responsible for making decisions about the handling of "these" types of events;
3. how, if at all, science fair guidelines should be revised so that this kind of event would not occur in the future; and
4. several times labeled the "real issue," what to do about the achievement gap between white and minority students.

We have referred to these four items as deliberative issues. From this group's point of view, however, rather than issues (i.e., matters of controversy), the proposals were formulated as obvious problems that needed to be addressed. And in the intervening time since the Barbiegate controversy, many of them have returned to the group as formal agenda items. But are they problems or issues? What is the significance of these two discursive frames?

Problems, we would suggest, are foci that a group can cooperatively turn its attention toward; they are objects a group collectively can move forward toward solving.

Issues, on the other hand, are what come up when a problem-solving frame is challenged. Issues occur when there is contention, when a group is "stalled" and arguing about direction. A civic group that is addressing a lot of issues is likely to be a civic group that is ineffective. Deliberative groups will do everything possible to frame what they are doing as solving problems rather than arguing about issues.

4. Comparison of Cases

These two cases offer an interesting contrast. In the classroom case the end goal for talk was to have a lively, focused discussion in which each participant arrived at a more thoughtful, developed understanding of an issue as well as his or her standpoint toward it. In this American classroom the primary dangers that discussion leaders faced were lack of involvement from fellow students or a lack of focus and conversational drift. Although the discussions sometimes became heated, which could be a problem for the leaders to manage, having too little

rather than too much heat was the more typical danger. In the school board setting the aims of talk and the dangers were quite different. For citizens the aim was to persuade the board to take seriously a concern they had as well as to address it in a particular manner. For board members the goal was to make timely and reasonable decisions. In addition, board members wanted to do so in a way that showed citizens in the district that they took their concerns seriously. In this context the personal and political stakes for citizens and board members were high: reputations and scarce resources were on the line. Talk that became angry and emotional was a real fear; deadlocking in lengthy discussion was an ever-present danger.

In these two situations, the role for issues was different. In the classroom, having an issue enabled the group to accomplish its goal of having a good critical discussion. An issue provoked controversy and helped the group achieve a livelier, more focused exchange. In the school board context, having an issue was a undesirable. Issues divided the group, keeping it from making decisions or opening the group to charges of making decisions undemocratically. Issues generated negative feelings; they generated questions as to whether the board leadership was effective. In this context, then, issues were designed as *non*-issues.

A second difference between the two pragmatic contexts is the difference between staying on *the* issue and raising *an* issue. In the classroom context there was a single issue – the issue – to which all talk was expected to be responsive. *The* issue framed what could or could not legitimately be talked about. *The* issue anchored judgments of relevance and provided a normative standard for assessing how people were talking. In contrast, during public participation in school board meetings the job of speakers was to raise *an* issue: either a topic deserving controversy or more frequently an uncontroversial problem warranting action. Although speakers could comment on what others had said, they did not do so frequently. Raising of different issues was legitimate; actual back-and-forth discussion of any of them was not. In this sense civic groups can be seen as building considerable space between the raising of *an* issue and its appearance on the agenda as *the* issue for an extended period of focused discussion. Moreover, the behind-the-scenes design of *the* issues for meeting discussions seeks to strip them of as much controversy as possible.

5. A Brief Reflection on Argumentation Theory

This comparative study of the issue as a metadiscursive device in two pragmatic contexts has revealed important variations in the meaning of the "the issue" and the ways in which participants orient to issues. The "situated ideal" (Craig & Tracy, 1995) of classroom discussion is generally quite compatible with the use of an argument frame to manage the discourse. Issues are matters of controversy, and are ideally designed to be both sufficiently determinate and worth arguing (Goodwin, 2002). The situated ideal of public participation at school board meetings is somewhat different. Participants actively avoid the use of an argument frame. Issues are ideally designed to be *non–issue*s: obviously problematic states of affairs that can be described objectively and resolved cooperatively. Goodwin (2000) points out some related phenomena. She notes, "It is common to find ordinary arguers explicitly bracketing some conflicts of views, making them *non-issues* or *dead issues* for some debate." She also acknowledges that people are not necessarily presupposed to engage in controversy, and calls upon argumentation theory to explain "why, pragmatically speaking, anyone would find it worthwhile to start this sort of discussion at all." These phenomena, although related, do not quite capture the idea that issues, depending on the pragmatic context, may be designed either to sharpen and stimulate controversy or to smooth it over and minimize it. And as we have seen, "the issue" contains abundant resources of ambiguity with which to pursue either goal or maneuver between them.

NOTES

[i] In examples from the classroom data, the title indicates the date of recording (year, month, day), transcript line numbers, and the discussion topic. Transcripts have been simplified to enhance readability. Speaker names are fictitious. The following special conversation analytic transcription symbols are used: "(.)" = brief untimed pause; ":::" = elongated syllable; "( )" = transcriber uncertainty.

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