

Argumentation in the tradition of speech communication studies

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Abstract

In this paper, four broad forces are discussed that shaped the nature of argumentation studies within the speech communication discipline: the evolution of competitive debate, the infusion of empirical perspectives and methods by the social sciences, the recovery of practical philosophy, and the growing interest in social and cultural critique. Unfortunately, the growth of the discipline of argumentation is not accompanied by a clear and common sense of what is being studied. To increase coherence, a root concept for argumentation studies is proposed and explicated: argumentation as the practice of justifying decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

From debate to argumentation studies

Argumentation studies in speech communication sprang from modest roots. Late in the 19th century, as an alternative to social fraternities and athletics, American colleges and universities began competition in debate. The earliest publications were textbooks to instruct students and coaches in this new activity. The most prominent of these books was George Pierce Baker's *Principles of Argumentation*,¹ but the early books shared several common features. They were practical, how-to-do-it guides informed primarily by their authors' intuition and experience. They were unreflective, in that they treated matters of practice as neither complicated nor problematic. They paid little attention to any relationship between the species debate and the genus argumentation. And they typically did not place their instruction in a context broader than preparation for the contest activity itself.

Subsequent generations of textbooks, in the early and middle years of this century, had many of the same characteristics, but with two important qualifiers. First, they became more sophisticated in their analyses. They could rely on a growing body of experience that both codified conventional categories and permitted more textured and nuanced discussion. And, second, they began to make connections with the terms of classical rhetorical theory, particularly the concepts of common topics, issues, *stasis*, and *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* as modes of proof. They also revived Bishop Whately's 19th-century treatment of presumption and burden of proof. Still, they retained an emphasis on practice

¹ Baker (1895).

that was fairly straightforward, without reflection on its goals, methods, and underlying assumptions. In retrospect, debate during those years has been characterized as dominated by the “stock issues” paradigm and modeled on formal logic and courtroom oratory. At the time, a term such as “stock issues” paradigm would have seemed meaningless, because that was all there was. Alternative perspectives largely escaped consideration.

The literature on debate beginning in the early 1960’s represents a series of departures from this tradition. Perhaps most influential was the 1963 publication of Ehninger and Brockriede’s *Decision by Debate*.² At least in embryonic form, this book offered a broader perspective of the debate activity. Debate was seen as a means of making decisions critically. It was described as fundamentally a cooperative rather than competitive enterprise. And it incorporated the model of argument that Stephen Toulmin had set out in *The Uses of Argument*³ five years before. By emphasizing this model as a diagram, Ehninger and Brockriede may have reinforced a formalistic understanding of reasoning.⁴ But by focusing explicitly on warrants, qualifiers, and rebuttals, they significantly undercut the analytic ideal of argument as applied formal logic. Inductive reasoning was seen not as an inferior form of logic but as the prototypical pattern of inference-making. This meant acknowledging that inferences were fallible and conclusions uncertain, and that the warrants authorizing inferences came not from logical form but from the substantive beliefs of an audience.

Subsequently, theorists of debate began to explore alternatives to the received tradition. The pages of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* (now known as *Argumentation and Advocacy*) in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s are filled with articles on alternative patterns of case construction -- the comparative advantage affirmative case, the goals/criteria case, the alternative justification case -- as well as essays identifying underlying consistencies amid these seeming differences.⁵ The counterplan, a negative debate strategy traditionally dismissed as weak, was revived and given theoretical anchor.⁶ Writers began to focus attention on the underlying nature and goals of the process of debate itself, believing that emerging differences about theory and practice really reflected different root assumptions about debate. The late 1970’s and early 1980’s saw essays explicating different paradigms or models of debate -- the policy-making model, the

² Ehninger and Brockriede (1963).

³ Toulmin (1958).

⁴ Charles Willard, for example, has argued forcefully that the process of diagramming arguments fundamentally misunderstands the mix of discursive and nondiscursive elements in argument and gives too much credence to formal structure. See Willard (1976: 308-319).

⁵ See, for example, Fadely (1967: 28-35); Chesebro (1968: 57-63); Chesebro (1971: 208-215); Lewinski, Metzler and Settle (1973: 458-463); Lichtman, Garvin and Corsi (1973: 59-69). An example of an essay questioning distinctions is Zarefsky (1969: 12-20).

⁶ See, for example, Louis Kaplow (1981: 215-226).

hypothesis-testing model, the game-theory model, the critic-judge model, and the *tabula rasa* model, for example. The traditional perspective on debate, now renamed the stock-issues model, took its place among these alternatives.⁷

From the perspective of hindsight, this literature is not so important for its explicit content. Many of the disputes engaging debate theorists were esoteric, and many of the controversies now seem passé, not because they were solved but because they were outgrown. Rather, this phase of the debate literature is significant because it shows how conventional wisdom was rendered problematic through the imagination of alternatives. This is an important step toward developing a more reflective, self-conscious, and critical understanding of argumentation.

One of the major trends in recent writing on debate is to stress the links between debate and argumentation in general. Recognizing that debate was a specific application of more general principles, educators began to develop courses in argumentation theory and practice that were not geared specifically to debate. These courses involved larger numbers of students in the understanding of argumentation theory. To meet the needs of such courses, a new kind of textbook emerged, such as Rieke and Sillars's *Argumentation and the Decision-Making Process*, Warnick and Inch's *Critical Thinking and Communication*; and Branham's *Debate and Critical Analysis: The Harmony of Conflict*.⁸ Even books oriented primarily toward debate, such as my own *Contemporary Debate*,⁹ often portrayed debate as a derivative of general argumentation. This relationship was explicitly acknowledged in 1974 when the National Developmental Conference on Forensics defined forensic activities as laboratories for investigating the argumentative perspective on communication.

The linkage between debate and general argumentation has been pursued in both directions. Not only has debate drawn from an understanding of general argumentation; it also has contributed to it. To be sure, even fifty years ago one could find critical studies of legislative or political debate. Often, however, these were either simply descriptive studies or attempts to apply the principles of contest debate to situations they did not fit. Recent literature has been far more sophisticated. In 1979, my colleague Tom Goodnight delivered a paper on "the liberal and the conservative presumption," demonstrating that presumption was not just an arbitrary concept or a tie-breaking rule but a substantive concept according to which one could distinguish political positions and understand political disputes.¹⁰ More recently, he has drawn attention to the dynamics of controversy.¹¹

⁷ Representative articles include Lichtman and Rohrer (1980: 236-247); Zarefsky (1992: 252-262); and the special forum on "Debate Paradigms," *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 18 (Winter, 1982), 133-160.

⁸ Rieke and Sillars (1975, in 3rd ed. 1993); Warnick and Inch (1989); Branham (1991).

⁹ Patterson and Zarefsky (1983).

¹⁰ Goodnight (1980: 304-337).

I do not think I am straining the concept too much to describe controversy as debate conducted over time, without *a priori* rules, boundaries, or time limits. Scholars trained in debate have employed this understanding of controversy to shed new insight on cultural and political disputes, especially related to military policy and international relations.¹²

I have dwelt at such length on the contributions of contest debate to the field of argumentation, for at least three reasons. First, debate does not get enough respect. Too often in American speech communication programs, it is seen as something of an academic stepchild rather than as an evolving intellectual tradition with far broader implications. Second, many of the leading American scholars of argumentation were introduced to the subject through contest debate, labored in the vineyards of that activity, and found it an important influence on their subsequent work. And third, the case of academic debate illustrates very well a recurrent pattern in the speech communication discipline: practice precedes theory. Rather than being driven by grand theories tested through application, the discipline has tended to construct theories as needed to explain or to solve problems encountered in practice.

I would not want to give the impression, however, that argumentation in the speech communication discipline derives directly or singly from competitive debate. It is far more complicated than that. I would like to discuss, albeit more briefly, three other contributors to our current understanding of argumentation. It is the plurality of these roots that makes the discipline both rich and diverse.

The influence of social science

One of these is the development of social-science perspectives on communication. To be sure, the discipline has always stood on the boundary between the humanities and the social sciences, drawing on the methods and research traditions of both. Even in the early years, the journals included articles whose lineage traced to classical rhetoric and others whose ancestry was traced to the 18th and 19th century beginnings of psychology. Often the tension between humanities and social sciences has led to a healthy dialectic; occasionally it has led to the academic equivalent of a holy war.

Social-science studies of communication received a significant boost from the World War II studies of persuasion and attitude change.¹³ During the 1950's and 1960's they assumed greater prominence in, and sometimes came to dominate, American departments of speech communication. The social-science tradition brought at least three major

¹¹ See especially his keynote address at the 1991 Alta conference: Goodnight (1991: 1-13).

¹² See, for example, Dauber (1988: 168-180); Ivie (1987: 27-36).

¹³ Carl I. Hovland, who conducted such studies during World War II, then returned to Yale University to establish the Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program. Among its research publications are Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953); Hovland (1957); Hovland and Janis (1959); Hovland and Rosenberg (1960); Sherif and Hovland (1961).

influences to communication studies. First, it emphasized descriptive and empirical, rather than normative, studies. Instead of focusing on an ideal of what communication should be, it sought to describe communication as it actually is. Second, it sought to produce testable statements about communication in general, rather than shedding insight on particular significant cases. It was far more concerned with prediction than with retrospective explanation. Since case studies were important only as they contributed to generalizations, it was not necessary or useful to study the “great speakers.” Indeed, it might be *better* to study everyday interactions among ordinary people. These interactions might be more likely to yield general theory than would the study of what by definition was an exceptional or atypical case. Third, and directly related to this last point, the social-science perspective de-emphasized formal oratory and public address in favor of studying interpersonal communication, group discussion, and bargaining and negotiation, for example.

Social-science perspectives were brought to bear on argumentation studies beginning in the 1970's, predominantly by a group of scholars then located at the University of Illinois and united by their commitment to the perspectives of constructivism. In a particularly influential essay, Daniel J. O'Keefe distinguished between two different senses of argument -- one that referred to texts and products (as in “making an argument”) and the other that referred to ongoing processes (as in “having an argument”). Moreover, it challenged the assumption that the first of these senses was somehow the more foundational.¹⁴ At about the same time, Charles Willard was beginning the work that would lead to a constructivist theory of argumentation, developed in mature form in his books *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* and *A Theory of Argumentation*.¹⁵ Willard defined argumentation as an interaction in which two or more people maintain what they construe to be incompatible claims, and he urged that researchers explore what actually took place in such interactions.

Meanwhile, scholars were launching research projects to do exactly that. Sally Jackson and Scott Jacobs initiated an ongoing program of studying argumentation in informal conversations. They have tried to understand the reasoning processes individuals actually use to make inferences and resolve disputes in ordinary talk.¹⁶ Their work has some similarities to discourse analysis in linguistics. As it has matured, it also has drawn closer

¹⁴ O'Keefe (1977: 121-128).

¹⁵ Willard's view was first set out in “A Reformulation of the Concept of Argument: The Constructivist/Interactionist Foundations of a Sociology of Argument,” Willard (1978: 121-140), and a series of subsequent articles. The two books referred to were published by the University of Alabama Press, in 1983 and 1989 respectively.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jackson and Jacobs (1981: 77-90); Jackson and Jacobs (1980: 251-265). Several other reports on this research program also have been published.

to the pragma-dialectical perspective of Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, with whom they collaborated on a recent book.¹⁷

Another strand in the empirical literature, associated with Barbara O'Keefe and Pamela Benoit, among others, is studies of how individuals develop argumentative competence.¹⁸ Its value is its focus on argumentation as a set of acquired skills. If we know more about how and when these skills normally are acquired, we can design more effective pedagogy and training. In a somewhat related research program, Dominic Infante has explored the distinction between argumentative competence and skills, on one hand, and argumentativeness as a personality trait, on the other.¹⁹

Yet another application of the empirical perspective on argument studies is the growing interest in studying argument in natural settings. Unlike the debate contest or the courtroom, these are usually informal and unstructured. School board meetings, labor-management negotiations, counseling sessions, public relations campaigns, and self-help support groups are some of the highly varied settings in which argumentation has been studied.²⁰ The goal of such studies is to produce what has been called "grounded theory," that is, a theory of the specific case. Of course, recurrent patterns observed in such cases also contribute to more general understanding of argumentation.

The recovery of practical philosophy

Let me now turn to a third trend affecting argumentation studies in speech communication: the recovery of practical philosophy. This theme harks back to the classical concept of *phronesis*, practical wisdom in a given case. Practical wisdom was divorced from analytic knowledge and formal logic during the 17th century. The intellectual history of the disappearance and rediscovery of practical philosophy were included in my colleague Stephen Toulmin's keynote address at this conference four years ago.²¹ Toulmin himself is a major figure in the recovery of *phronesis*, especially with the 1958 publication of *The Uses of Argument* and the 1972 volume, *Human Understanding*.²² The other major figure in this recovery is Chaim Perelman, whose *The New Rhetoric* (co-authored with

¹⁷ van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993).

¹⁸ For example, see Benoit (1983: 72-89); O'Keefe and Benoit (1982: 154-183).

¹⁹ Infante's bibliography is lengthy. A representative example of his research is "Trait Argumentativeness as a Predictor of Communicative Behavior in Situations Requiring Argument," *Central States Speech Journal*, 32 (Winter, 1981), 265-273.

²⁰ An example of such studies is Putnam, Wilson, Waltman and Turner (1986: 63-81). The proceedings of the SCA/AFA Summer Conferences in Argumentation at Alta, Utah, often include such studies.

²¹ Toulmin (1992: 3-11).

²² Toulmin (1958) and (1972).

L. Olbrechts-Tyteca) also was published in 1958 in French; the English translation appeared eleven years later.²³

Both Toulmin and Perelman were surprised to discover far more interest in their work among speech communication scholars than within their own disciplines, where they were seen as marginal. In each case, however, they offered concepts and perspectives that helped to illuminate the study of argumentation. I already have mentioned how Toulmin's model was adapted as a way to understand and systematize informal reasoning. His other concept that strongly influenced argumentation scholarship was that of "field." In *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin said only that arguments belonged to the same field if their data and conclusions were of the same logical type,²⁴ without explaining what that meant. In *Human Understanding* he described fields as "rational enterprises," which he equates with intellectual disciplines, and explored how the nature of reasoning differed according to whether the discipline was compact or diffuse. This treatment led to vigorous discussion about what defined a field of argument -- subject matter, general perspective or world-view, or the arguer's purpose, to mention a few of the possibilities.²⁵

The concept of fields of argument, however defined, encouraged recognition that the soundness of arguments was not universal and certain but field-specific and contingent. This belief, of course, was another step in undermining the analytic ideal and resituating argument within the rhetorical tradition. Instead of asking whether an argument was sound, the questions became "sound for whom?" and "sound in what context?" Some feared that the only alternative to formal validity was vicious relativism, according to which any argument must be deemed sound if some person could be found to accept it.²⁶ This concern was allayed as research on argument fields demonstrated the role of cumulative experience in shaping one's perspective and the durability and predictability of a field's standards of judgment.

The term "field," of course, was a metaphor for the location of arguments. Other metaphors have also been used. McKerrow, for example, has written of "argument communities,"²⁷ emphasizing that shared values, common personal bonds, and argument evaluation are mutually reinforcing. Goodnight has preferred the use of the term "spheres," emphasizing more general and all-encompassing categories. His triad of personal, technical, and public spheres stresses differences among arguments whose relevance is confined to the arguers themselves, arguments whose pertinence extends to a specialized or limited

²³ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969).

²⁴ Toulmin (1958: 14).

²⁵ These questions are explored in a special issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association*. See Zarefsky (1982: 191-203), and the essays which follow.

²⁶ This concern is explored and answered in Booth (1974).

²⁷ See, for example, McKerrow (1980: 214-227).

community, and arguments that are meaningful for people in general.²⁸ His project also dovetails with efforts to revitalize the “public sphere,” that metaphorical place in which people transcend their personal interests and guide themselves by a sense of the common good.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric*, perhaps because it is more vast in scope, has proved more difficult to digest. Many of its ideas have not been plumbed by argumentation scholars, and some --such as the construct of the universal audience-- have been shown to be problematic in application. Several of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s ideas, however, have permeated argumentation scholarship. Let me briefly highlight four. First, the concept of *loci*, akin to the topics in classical rhetoric, has been used as a way to understand sources of argument. Second, the treatment of figures and tropes has made clear that they are not just ornaments applied after an argument is constructed, but that they themselves have the argumentative function of strengthening or weakening presence, that is, the salience of an idea or topic. Third, the concepts of association and dissociation -- especially the latter -- illustrate the role of definitions and stipulations in advancing or retarding arguments. And fourth, the distinction between the rational and the reasonable has, like Toulmin’s work, helped to displace formal logic as the paradigm of reasoning and instead to position it as a particular, and highly limited, case.

Toulmin and Perelman probably have had more far-reaching impact on argumentation studies than other philosophers, but they are not unique in their interest or concern. For example, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., has written provocatively about the relationship between argumentation and selfhood. To engage in argumentation, he writes, is to accept risk -- the risk of being proved wrong and of having to alter one’s belief system and self-concept. But the very act of person-risking proves to be person-making, constitutive of one’s sense of self.²⁹ Legal philosophers Gidon Gottlieb and John Rawls, as well as Perelman, have explored reasoning about the nature of justice, and by extension about other abstract values.³⁰ On this continent, Habermas has sketched the nature of the ideal speech situation which, though counterfactual, serves as a normative ideal for argumentation.³¹ And the informal logicians, especially in Canada, have re-examined the

²⁸ Goodnight (1982: 214-227).

²⁹ This view is developed in Johnstone, Jr. (1959); Natanson and Johnstone, Jr. (1965); and Johnstone, Jr. (1970). For an example of his influence on argumentation scholarship, see Ehninger (1970: 101-110).

³⁰ Gottlieb (1968); Rawls (1971); Perelman (1963).

³¹ The list of Habermas’s works, of course, is extensive. His philosophy of communication is explicated in McCarthy (1978). The entire Fall 1979 issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* is devoted to studies of the implication of Habermas’s philosophy for argumentation theory.

fallacies, reinterpreting many of them as errors in argumentative practice rather than as flaws in logical form.³²

In the late 1960's, Robert L. Scott wrote an influential essay, "On viewing rhetoric as epistemic."³³ Objecting to the view that the processes of discovering and expressing truth were distinct, he maintained that rhetorical discourse itself was a means of determining truth. His work contributed further to the emerging belief that truth is relative to argument and to audience. It stimulated studies of what sorts of knowledge are rhetorically constructed and how arguing produces knowledge. Proposed answers have included the claim that *all* knowledge is rhetorical and hence that there are no transcendent standards, to the intermediate position of my colleague Thomas Farrell, who distinguishes between technical and social knowledge and maintains that it is the latter that is achieved rhetorically, to the more limited position that there is objective knowledge but that argumentation is one means of discovering it.³⁴

Although not specifically intended by Scott, one consequence of the rhetoric-as-epistemic perspective has been to foster studies of rhetoric within academic disciplines. Probably more has been written about the rhetoric of science than about other disciplinary clusters.³⁵ I suspect that is because the popular conception of science is that it yields certain knowledge, that it is the empirical analogue for formal logic and mathematics. Demonstrating that there is a significant rhetorical component even to what we sometimes call exact sciences, therefore, would make it easier to establish that rhetoric is a part of other ways of knowing as well. But there also have been studies of rhetoric in economics, sociology, medicine, statistics, business, history, religion, and other disciplines too numerous to list.³⁶ This line of inquiry received a powerful boost from the 1984 conference on The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences, held at the University of Iowa,³⁷ the subsequent formation of the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry (Poroi) at that institution, and the series

³² Here the work of John Woods and Douglas Walton has been especially significant. See, for example, Woods and Walton (1982) as well as the keynote presentation from the 1990 Amsterdam conference -Woods (1992: 23-48). Blair and others in the informal logic movement have also contributed to a re-examination of the fallacies. See Blair and Johnson (1980). The book often cited as the impetus for this effort is Hamblin's *Fallacies* (1970). Volume 1, Number 3 of *Argumentation* (1987) is devoted entirely to essays exploring the theory of the fallacies.

³³ *Central States Speech Journal*, 18 (February, 1967), 9-17.

³⁴ For examples of these positions, respectively, see Brummett (1976: 21-51); Farrell (1976: 1-14); Cherwitz and Hinkins (1983: 249-266). The "Forum" section of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 76 (February, 1990), 69-84, consists of an exchange of essays by these same writers.

³⁵ A recent strong example of studies of the rhetoric of science is Prelli (1989).

³⁶ For examples of such studies, see McCloskey (1985); Simons (1990); Hunter (1990); Kellner (1989). A series of approximately twelve books on "rhetoric of inquiry" has been published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

³⁷ Nelson, Megill and McCloskey (1987).

of books on rhetoric in the human sciences published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

Argument as social and cultural critique

So far I have discussed three broad forces shaping the nature of argumentation studies within speech communication: the evolution of contest debate, the infusion of empirical perspectives and methods, and the recovery of practical philosophy. I'd like to discuss one more: the growing interest in social and cultural critique.

Although it usually is not characterized this way, I believe that the work of Walter Fisher is an example of this influence.³⁸ Fisher began with an attempt to flesh out the meaning of "good reasons" -- what rhetoric regarded as the equivalent of deduction in formal logic. He found that good reasons often took the form of narratives, and has gone so far as to claim that story-telling is a defining aspect of the human condition. But traditionally story-telling has been excluded from the category of reasoning, because of what Fisher calls the "rational world model" of knowing. The result, he believes, is systematically to privilege certain kinds of claims over others -- in his example of the nuclear debate, it is scientific claims that are preferred over moral claims. It is not Fisher's primary purpose to do so, but his work points to the nexus between argumentation and power. It is power (whether political, social, or intellectual) that permits one to stipulate what sorts of claims "count" in any argumentative situation.

Power enables those who hold it to impose a partial perspective as if it were holistic - the definition usually given for the term "hegemony." The most recent wave of argumentation studies seeks to explore and expose the tendency of power to foreclose discourse, and to seek emancipation by opening up alternatives. This project focuses on marginalized arguers and arguments, and is given impetus by the widespread concern throughout the academy for matters of race, gender, and class.

The intellectual underpinning of argument-as-critique is postmodernism, a pattern of thought that began in architecture and has spread through much of the arts, humanities, and social sciences.³⁹ There are many varieties of postmodernism, and I admittedly oversimplify, but the central core seems to me to be the denial that there are any verities or standards of judgment, and the claim that what passes for such standards really is socially constructed. In some measure, this perspective is altogether consistent with the others I've discussed, in its rejection of the analytic ideal and the location of argument in communities. But it goes on to argue that only a *part* of the relevant community has defined the standards and then hegemonically imposed them on the whole. The goal

³⁸ See especially Fisher (1987).

³⁹ For the implications of postmodernism for argumentation, see several of the essays in McKerrow (1993). The keynote address, by Joseph W. Wenzel, is titled, 'Cultivating Practical Reason: Argumentation Theory in Postmodernity.'

of critique is to shed light on this practice and to promote emancipatory potential by posing alternatives to it.

At least two different implications of the postmodern project can be suggested. The more extreme is the denial that there can be any such thing as communal norms or standards for argument. On this view, the principal goal of the project is to celebrate difference and insist that it is “difference all the way down.”

The other implication is more optimistic. If communal standards have been defined by only the powerful interests in a community, then the goal of argument-as-critique is to expose this practice and to suggest alternatives, so that those who were excluded or marginalized can be brought into the process of deliberation and more inclusive and meaningful norms can be developed. This view fosters empowerment of the marginalized, not in order to tear a community apart but to bind it more closely together. The question, then, is: Should the public sphere be expanded or disbanded? I expect that the coming years will see a continuing dialectic between these two versions of the postmodern challenge.

A root concept of argumentation

As I have tried to demonstrate, the study of argumentation within the speech communication discipline is a complex and many-splendored thing, a tree growing from many roots. The most obvious common features of the four intellectual movements I’ve described are the dethronement of formal logic as the paradigm case of reasoning and the corollary insistence that argumentation relates to audiences and fits squarely within the rhetorical tradition. There are only so many times, however, that that basic statement needs repeating. Growth of a discipline depends more on advancing knowledge and insight than on continuing restatement of a basic premise.

Where do argumentation studies in speech communication stand in that regard? In my judgment, the record is mixed. To be sure, the literature is rich. There are two major journals, *Argumentation* and *Argumentation and Advocacy*. Several books and edited collections have been published. We now have eight volumes of proceedings of the summer conference at Alta and two sets of proceedings from this international conference. The question, though, is where this literature is going. Is it building on itself or is it fragmented? I fear the latter, largely because we are not working from a clear and common sense of what we are studying. Without that, it is hard to anchor our burgeoning literature or to see how one line of inquiry relates to another. The four-part schema that I described earlier was an idiosyncratic arrangement that I’m not sure would be shared by others. Disciplinary maturity requires a greater consensus about how we organize what we do. Having made these statements, it seems incumbent on me to sketch such a framework. To that end, I’d like to propose and explicate a root concept for argumentation studies. I believe we should regard argumentation as *the practice of justifying decisions under conditions of uncertainty*. This definition has four key elements.

First, argumentation is a *practice*. It is a social activity in which people engage. In the course of this practice they make and examine texts, but the texts should be studied as products of the practice. Unlike some subjects, however, argumentation is not a practice that can be easily isolated from other practices. It has no unique subject, and people who engage in argumentation are *also* doing other things. They may not even recognize what they are doing as argumentation. This is to say that the practice of argumentation occurs in both the natural and the critical attitude. It is something that people do, and it is also a perspective or point of view which analysts use to examine the argumentative dimension of *whatever* social actors regard as their practice.⁴⁰ Studying argumentation as a practice means that it can be studied both in general and in the specific situations in which it occurs. This view of argumentation as practice contrasts most strongly with a view of argumentation as textual or logical structure.

Second, argumentation is a practice of *justifying*. This word is critical. It stands in contrast to the word *proving*. Having dethroned the analytic ideal, we recognize that the outcomes of argument cannot be certain. On the other hand, neither are they capricious or whimsical. They are supported by what the audience would regard as good reasons warranting belief or action. To say that a claim is justified immediately raises the question, “justified to whom?” Several answers can be given, depending on the situation. Claims can be justified for oneself, for one’s family or friends, for the particular audience present on the occasion, for a broader audience defined by some special interest, for the general public, or for an audience of people from diverse cultures. The questions then become whether the practical meaning of “justify” varies among these different audiences and whether the process of justification is different as well. Much of the literature on argument fields, spheres, and communities, as well as discussions of what counts as evidence for claims, could be anchored productively to this basic question.

In any case, however, the question “justified to whom?” immediately calls to our consciousness the fact that argumentation is *addressed*. It is a practice that occurs in the context of an audience, not *in vacuo*. Since it is concerned with the nexus between claims and people, it clearly is a rhetorical practice.

Third, argumentation is a practice of justifying *decisions*. Decisions involve choices, for if there were only one alternative there would be nothing to decide. But decisions also presuppose the need to choose. The alternatives are perceived as being incompatible. Taking a decision is like standing at the proverbial fork in the road. One cannot stand still; one cannot take both forks; and one cannot be sure in advance which fork will prove to be the right path.

Sometimes decisions are taken at a particular moment in time. Each of the nations in the European Union, for instance, had to decide whether to approve the Maastricht treaty, just as the United States Congress had to decide whether to ratify the North American Free Trade Agreement. These decisions took place at particular moments and were preceded by attempts to justify one decision or another. Sometimes, however, a

⁴⁰ The notion that argumentation can be seen as a point of view is developed more fully in Zarefsky (1980: 228-238).

decision is taken over a long period of time, and the process of justifying the decision is likewise longitudinal. The shift from nationalism to globalism as a frame of reference is a good example. For many years now, we have witnessed an ongoing controversy about whether the national or the global economy should be the unit of analysis for policy choices. Maastricht and NAFTA might be seen, from a longer term perspective, as moments in that ongoing controversy. The practice of justifying these decisions about world-view should be examined over a long period of time, not by considering particular texts in isolation.

Decisions involve choices, but they are seldom so final that they obliterate the alternative not taken. The same forks in the road may present themselves repeatedly, if in slightly altered guise. In the United States, for example, the current controversy about how best to pay for health care is largely a re-enactment of arguments that go back sixty or eighty years, even though various specific decisions have been made along the way. The minority position is seldom vanquished completely; it may come back and win another day. Recognizing this fact, decisions should respect all of the proffered alternatives, even if only one is selected at a given time.

Fourth, argumentation is the practice of justifying decisions *under conditions of uncertainty*. It was Aristotle who wrote that no one deliberates about matters that are certain. The need to make choices when not everything can be known is the defining feature of the rhetorical situation. We might have to act in the face of incomplete information. The universe affected by the decision might be so large that only a sample possibly could be considered. Or the decision might depend upon other choices or outcomes that cannot be known. Alternatively, the situation may be uncertain because of an inferential gap between data and conclusion. Even if perfect information were available, it would not entail a conclusion. The data might be factual whereas the conclusion was a matter of belief, value, or policy. Or perhaps the information relates to present conditions whereas the decision involves predictions for the future. For whichever reason, people argue to justify decisions that cannot be taken with certainty. Hence argumentation is situated within the realm of rhetoric, not of apodeictic proof. This does not mean that outcomes are irrational but rather that they are guided by rhetorical reason. Warrants are evoked from the cumulative experience of a relevant audience, rather than from a particular structure or form.

This root conception, in my opinion, will help to organize the branches of our subject, giving greater coherence to an otherwise disparate and diffuse field. The major research traditions I've described can be grafted onto it. Its descriptive and normative dimensions are clear and it can encompass argumentation from the personal to the cultural. Likewise, I believe it can suggest the questions on which research needs to focus.

Several of these questions relate to the fundamental role of an audience or community as a validating agent: (1) Given that argumentation occurs within fields, how can it occur *across* fields? How do interfield disputes come about or how do arguers in practice

transcend field boundaries? Willard has made a beginning effort to address these questions,⁴¹ but more attention to them is needed. (2) What is the relationship between argument fields and the public sphere? Is “the public” just another field? Or is “the public” an *alternative* to argument fields, in which case what determines its boundaries? (3) What conception of “the public” is appropriate for a 21st century world characterized increasingly by cultural diversity and globalism yet tainted by the confusion of icons, images, staged events, and spectacles with the practice of justifying decisions? As I put it a few moments ago, should the public sphere be expanded, or disbanded?

A second set of issues emanates from the concept of *justifying*: (1) What do audiences count as justification? How does this view develop, and how does it change over time? (2) How do (or should) listeners decide upon the threshold level of assent needed to justify a decision? When and how does this threshold level change? (3) When is controversy healthy for a society, so that the threshold will be high, and when is it unhealthy so that relatively little would be needed in order to count as justification? (4) How does the possession or absence of power affect what decisions need justification and what counts as justification for them? More generally, how can a commitment to the practice of justifying decisions coexist with the pursuit and attainment of power?

Other questions could be clustered around elements of the definition, but these two examples should illustrate its potential for stimulating as well as classifying inquiry. It is a view of argumentation, it should be noted, which is not without assumed values and beliefs. It does place value in the idea of a “marketplace of ideas” in which claims compete for justification. The perfect market would be found in Perelman’s universal audience or in Habermas’s ideal speech situation. Argumentation is also presumed to have epistemic properties, because through the practice of justifying decisions a person, group, or society determines what it regards as right. This definition values community standards as a source of validation and hence rejects the extreme postmodern view that there are no common bonds and that it is “difference all the way down.” And this view places argumentation firmly within the speech communication tradition, which focuses not on discourse in the abstract but on the study of how messages affect people.

⁴¹ See especially Willard (1989) on this subject.

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