

**REASONING TOGETHER AS DIALECTICAL PARTNERS:  
"BEYOND PERSUASION" TOWARD "COOPERATIVE ARGUMENTATION"**

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*Difference must not be merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic (Lourde 11).*

As someone involved in intercollegiate debate for a quarter century, I might be accused of having invested just too much in it in order to see debate clearly. I'll admit it . . . I appreciate good debating and I believe that academic debate is a powerful pedagogic tool. Constructing an argument; answering questions about it; listening attentively to skeptical critique; asking questions of the critic; re-constructing the argument; responding to follow-up queries; carefully considering refined critique; synthesizing and articulating a description of the argument that takes all of this into account; attending carefully to third level critique – this exhausting, if not always exhaustive, process awaits students several times a weekend at intercollegiate debate tournaments. Unfortunately, it must be said, that is not all that awaits.

Intercollegiate debaters are probably not representative of college students generally. Clearly, a willingness to endure increasingly focused criticism requires a certain stamina. A context of recurrent skeptical critiques might be brooked, for example, by people who can't imagine being wrong or by those who relish verbal combat. Argumentation and debate may also attract some who are caught in the linguistic web of what Deborah Tannen – sadly, but not surprisingly – terms an "argument" culture. In her book *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*, Tannen puts forth an unfortunately labeled – but otherwise compelling – critique of the dominant social paradigm. The label is unfortunate because debate is more a co-opted product than an on-balance producer of dominant culture. It is unfortunate because bad "arguments" make such good examples of unhealthy communication. And it is unfortunate because the label "argument culture" masks more

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*Jeffrey Thomas Bile (M.A., Eastern Illinois University) is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Interpersonal Communication at Ohio University. This essay's subtitle is a nod to the explanatory power of these two elegant phrases. In their title "Beyond Persuasion" Foss and Griffin introduce us to much about the "invitational" perspective. Makau's choice of "cooperative argumentation" (Reasoning 48) unsettles the assumption that argument must be competitive and points us in a new direction.*

fundamental aspects of our social condition: monological discourse, logics of domination, and a culture of masculinity.

However labeled, Tannen's description of the dominant cultural paradigm is compelling. Its logos has colonized much of the social world, including argumentation and debate. Given intercollegiate debate's location in its institutional matrix, it is understandable that debate tournaments often attract and reward the most assertive, competitive, dogmatic, contentious, and arrogant. The state of debate – like the state of rhetorical theory, communication studies, and higher education generally – is burdened.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that debate probably draws more than its fair share of new students from those who make the same linguistic assumption (argument = antagonistic) as does Tannen, we might expect debate tournaments to produce some intensely contentious exchanges. Often, they do.

The problems in contemporary intercollegiate tournament debate practices have been conceptualized in many ways. Tournament debate, it has been said, encourages students to speak to others in ways they would not want to be spoken to themselves. Contemporary practices reproduce obsolete last millennia thinking in a new, quantum, global, and wired world. Intercollegiate debate practices are unsustainable. They're patriarchal. They reconstruct an assertive, contentious, domineering, unilateral, monological, verbally aggressive social order that devalues traditionally feminine qualities in communication. We don't like much of what intercollegiate debate is currently producing. On this point, perhaps, the contributors to this forum have some general agreement. But what of solutions?

Certainly, curing our ailments will require some patience. I agree with Professor Foss on the problems of pursuing change in the rules and regulations of current debate organizations. Let me be clear, I do not propose that existing intercollegiate institutions legislate against people debating as they choose. And so, for example, I would not seek constitutional change to censor masculine styles of advocacy. Alternative institutions then? Well, we ought to be able to create additional options – extracurricular, experiential,

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<sup>1</sup> I hope the reader will not misunderstand my position. I am not claiming that we should ignore problems in academic debate because they are not unique to debate. To the contrary, problems in the institutions of which debate is a part are all the more reason to destabilize those practices where we live, and work, and play. Nor am I arguing that all instruments of an oppressive system are recyclable – "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lourde 11). But argument is a tool of deconstruction and affirmative re-construction that we ought to reclaim in the service of cultural evolution and social transformation.

experiments in invitational communication. I hope that one or more of these innovations would be committed to exploring the invitational potential of argumentation. New organizations would be terrific, but I think we would do best to embrace new options as complementary: supplements to, rather than substitutes for, intercollegiate debate.

The potential of new forums notwithstanding, helping to direct cultural evolution in academic debate seems a worthwhile undertaking. The culture of debate should be radically transformed. But if Professor Foss is right that "what we resist persists" then transformation should be based on an affirmative model. She is absolutely right, it seems to me, in suggesting that:

If we want a future world in which people respect one another, do not try to dominate one another, and work cooperatively, we have to respect one another now, engage in non-dominating acts now, and work cooperatively now. If we want to have interactions among students on the basis of communication skills that contribute to the creation of a civil and humane world, then we have to engage in such interactions now. (97)

The principle of "living in the world the way we want the world to be" (Foss 96) is not, however, at odds with living debate the way we wish it to be. Unless academic debating is inherently at odds with an invitational worldview, we can begin living an invitational debate practice now. This may involve modeling – and, yes, arguing for – evolved visions of what it means to do the "better" job of debating. While disinterested reporting of reasons is a possibility, it is my belief that even a passionate articulation of arguments for alternatives to the dominant conception of debate need not be hastily equated with a desire to "make others acquiesce" (Foss 96) to what such arguers believe is best. A hopeful vision might entail faith in the possibility of movement without manipulation, beyond persuasion, to a mutually evolved appreciation of cooperative debate and the potential of "arguers as lovers" (Brockriede).

#### Argument as Answer

Debate is in trouble because its practitioners have lost their focus on argumentation. Unfortunately, good people who value debate and who are trying to save it are concentrating only on its symptoms. These symptoms, such as debaters talking at incomprehensible rates or competitors occasionally being rude to one another, cannot adequately be dealt with until we treat the heart of the problem. (Trapp 23)

The heart of the problem with debate, like the heart of the problem in the "argument culture" generally, is an inadequate conception of good communication. When what is valued in speech is the power of coercive monologue we might expect some unhappy consequences. Alternatively, a norm of communication as invitational dialogue promises to transform culture and intercollegiate debate. Given a satisfactory understanding of "the better job of arguing" intercollegiate debate is poised to play its part. This contention relies on the belief that, although often coopted by the dominant culture, argument is not its tool of choice. To the contrary, ironically, genuine argument counters Tannen's "argument" culture.

It is important, at this point, to address issues of semantic equivocation. What is argument? Must argument invariably involve an effort to change others that violates their value and integrity or can arguments function beyond persuasion? Must invitations always be, well, uninviting or may we offer arguments as reasons for accepting an invitation? Does argument presume a right to impose our perspectives on others or can argument sometimes function to empower self-persuasion? The short answer, I believe, is that argument is not the enemy. Argument can be our friend. That having been said, some important concerns should be considered.

#### Argument as Opposition: Reconstructing Competition

Given that conflict is often conceptualized as win/lose in our culture, it is little surprise that argument too is often seen as competitive, undisciplined, and nonproductive bickering: "Unfortunately, most informal argument is of this type. As a result, the term 'argument' often carries a disdainful connotation" (Pfau, Thomas & Ulrich 149). Spurgin observes that "to many people *argument* connotes unpleasantness: quarrels and disagreement, raised voices and smashed vases" (1). It is this connotation of argument as adversarial interpersonal exchange that Tannen seems to have in mind when she refers to our "argument" culture. Contentious people may have something similar in mind when they self-select law school, the "debate" team, or an argumentation course.

Understood as verbal combat, argument is problematic for many of us. However, an alternative to the patriarchal presumption of win/lose thinking has been offered by those embracing reason-giving in the context of conflict as the catalyst of win-win solutions. Rather than seeing themselves as antagonists in competitive reproductions of reality, reason-givers can strive to be productive partners in the coordinated construction of social meaning.

Seeing debate as a marketplace of ideas in which thesis and antithesis evolve to form a new but likewise tentative synthesis, these dialectical partners value argument for its emphasis on quality decisions, conflict resolution, and the creativity that diversity-enabled dialectic potentially sparks.

#### **Argument as Partnership: Beyond Persuasion**

Argument is often defined as "reason-giving" in communication. Such an understanding permits a decoupling of argument from persuasion. Spurgin, for example, contends that "to argue is to make a case for judgment or opinion, while to persuade is to bring about a desired response" (2). Persuaders may instrumentally seek acceptance of certain ends but arguers are focused on reason-giving as acceptable means. Soeteman explains that the efforts of an arguer to make a decision "as acceptable as possible" is different from a persuader attempting to make it "as far as possible accepted."

The later is a matter of causal influence. In that case, the one to be convinced is not a partner in discussion but an object of manipulation. The fact that in many discussions elements of just such causal influence can play a part does not prevent us from maintaining that the point of argument is not to produce involuntary acquiescence, but to seek voluntary agreement. (2)

Manipulating others, then, is not the aim of argument. Nevertheless, disclosed reasoning may occasionally be transformative.

Beyond persuasion, argument can empower partnerships for informed choice and personal growth. Reason-giving implies an unpacking of one's thinking for community consideration. Arguments ask listeners to enter imaginatively, if momentarily, into the patterns of another's belief. They identify connection, not simply conclusion. Arguments invite others to consider empathically the arguer's world rather than seeking compliance with the dictates of their worldview. Contemporary academic debate practices may be problematic, then, not because of too much emphasis on argument but too little. Taking argument seriously helps rehabilitate debate. Rather than abandoning argumentation we ought to reclaim and redeem it -- and its invitational potential.

#### **Agreeing to Disagree**

The implications of topic wording clearly deserve fuller investigation than can be conducted in this short response. Professor Griffin is right to question the polarizing

tendencies of current topics. In our contentious culture, we surely need better ways to "begin to discuss the issues without one side being against another" (Griffin 101).

If we took this approach, we could have discussions that center on the complexity of issues, what their implications are, who might be affected and in what ways, and on how one choice over another changes the issue itself. So, I think the issue of the "resolution" needs to be reconsidered from an invitational framework as well. (Griffin 101)

I agree completely that these are worthwhile goals. Certainly, contemporary social problems are not as simple as our dualistic debates often imply. Before discarding binary topics too quickly, however, we should consider their contextual effects. When combined with the requirement of switching sides, two-sided topics expand the possibilities for discovering that those with whom we disagree might have tenable positions after all. Empathic learning is encouraged, then, when students agree to disagree in the context of debate tournaments. A related issue, deserving much further exploration, is the problematic of counter-attitudinal advocacy created by mandatory side switching. I sympathize with the view that students should not be "forced" to advocate a position that they do not believe. As a practical matter, I believe that most topics are ambiguous enough to allow considerable opportunity to find positional comfort. But, more fundamentally, I'm not sure that I ultimately accept the contention that academic counter-attitudinal advocacy is undesirable.

The counter-attitudinal switch-sides structure of intercollegiate debate asks the student to imaginatively enter into another's world and to try to understand why they might see it as they do. This convention may yield invitational dividends. Foss and Griffin recognize value in asking communicators to seriously consider perspectives other than those they presently hold and they encourage them to try to "validate those perspectives even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own" (5). It seems to me that counter-attitudinal advocacy might be an excellent technique for encouraging just that. Debate tournaments ask students to agree to model open-mindedness, empathy, and personal validation of multiple views. No one should be forced to debate, but for those making the choice, agreeing to disagree encourages a consideration of the fallibility of one's own constructions of the world as well as empathy for other ways of seeing things.

### Judgment and Safety

Is an invitational environment of safety inherently nonjudgmental? "The question here is whether we can judge another and still create an environment where their decisions and choices are valued" (Griffin 101). I find somewhat compelling Professor Griffin's suggestion that being judged may erode feelings of safety. However, judges are not asked to evaluate other humans at debate tournaments, but rather, their arguments. A debate judge's decision is always just a human opinion. Especially given the extra-argumentative basis for much personal belief, the judge's decision about which arguments they thought were better in a particular context ought not preclude "letting the individuals involved choose whether those ideas are ones in which they want to participate" (Foss 97). Although it is true that no one else can decide for us if we feel safe and valued, it is still possible to learn from a judge's reasoning. Decision criteria that privilege certain forms of argument as generally more conducive to an environment of value and safety might form the basis of such a decision.

Tournament debate affords students the opportunity to participate in an academic experiment. It asks them to take some time out from the taken-for-granted to consider, in a purely academic way, the possibility that their constructions of reality may be tenuous and that other views are amazingly defensible. In such contexts, individuals should be safe but not their initial positions which are, after all, academic. Seen as exploratory hypotheses, academic arguments invite testing. So conceived, academic debate welcomes invitational habits of mind. As Foss and Griffin have noted, a perspective offered "represents an initial, tentative commitment to that perspective - one subject to revision as a result of the interaction" (8). While individuals must be safe, their ideas must be at risk if being "subject to revision" is to mean anything. The belief that our ideas are tentative, not entirely secure, may be an important element of an invitational context. Given that arguments are hypothetical, even counter-attitudinal, there is no reason why criticism by the "judge" of an argument ever need be interpreted as a criticism of the person who was kind enough to introduce that argument. An argument might have enormous heuristic value, even in a context in which it was ultimately dispreferred. Argument judgment and personal safety ought easily coexist in an environment where argument is understood as an academic exercise rather than a personal disclosure.

### Conclusion

To me, some of the most important work in rhetorical theory in the last twenty years has been done by our respondents. It is clear that the problems they have identified in the dominant culture, and in our habits of communicating, are serious ones. I agree with Foss and Griffin that we should move "beyond persuasion" but, rather than abandonment of argument, I believe that a return to argument may provide a better corrective. The invitational potential of debate could be further developed by considering Makau's construction of "cooperative argumentation" and debate. And as a stepping stone, from a presumption of debate as antagonistic clash to a more invitational practice, we might embrace Wenzel's suggestion that better dialectical argument is more candid, cooperative, comprehensive, and critical. In a "dialectical" environment, then, good arguments might look quite unlike the kind of exchanges that Tannen describes. More complete disclosure of arguments, for example, might be read as better debating rather than greater vulnerability.

We live in a largely competitive social world but labeling the dominant order the "argument culture" (Tannen) is, I fear, not very helpful. The equivocal nature of argument notwithstanding, I think we make a mistake to re-construct argument as win/lose competition. Such a move risks naturalizing a conflation of reason-giving and verbal aggression. Debate is a powerful instrument that is largely colonized by a logic of domination but is not itself one of the "master's tools" of oppression. To the contrary, I believe, debate enjoys certain counter-hegemonic advantages that make it especially suitable for rehabilitation. Debates provide examples of dialogical and reciprocal interactions that offer sharp contrast to the traditional public address of solitary speakers delivering unilateral monologues. The conventions of equal speaking time and an extraordinary emphasis on careful listening further suggests the appropriateness of argumentation and debate for reclamation.

Intercollegiate debate is worth reclaiming. This is not to deny the burdened presumptions of contemporary debate practice. But I believe that collegiate debating might yet evolve a responsive, cooperative, tentative, inquisitive, and open ethos. Debate does seem to attract some people who can't imagine being wrong, but it might just as naturally be seen as home for people committed to the principal that they can't imagine never being wrong. I have been wrong before and may be mistaken now. I'm aware that a self-serving bias distorts exposure, reception, and retention. Sometimes it is nice that someone is willing

to take the time to help me understand my own mind, walk me through it, and then help me retrace my steps. Since evolution is sometimes possible only when I subject myself to the question "Why?" it is especially nice when someone cares enough to help me reason through comfortable but questionable ways of thinking about matters of social conscience. Conversational questioning, by illuminating the construction of belief, can be a catalyst for critical self examination. Therefore, I sometimes wish to invite dialogue, through mutual, consensual, and reciprocal exchange, with partners who are likewise open to the possibility that they might benefit from an occasional reality check. In moving advocacy beyond persuasion to a consideration of reasons for believing, argument opens the possibility of reasoning together and thereby promises the possibility of movement beyond what may initially seem like competitive worldviews.

Come, let us reason together. I intend to invite critical and hopeful exploration of the possibly constructed nature of common sense and self-evident truths. Because such examinations involve a consideration of premises, presumptions, rationalizations and justifications – because, that is, they sometimes must explore the linguistic construction of reason-giving – I wish to invite argument. Since I am committed to the possibility of reason-giving as invitational partnership, I value debate. Inasmuch as I consider the critical self-examination of the cognitive construction of belief to be of great intellectual value, I support collegiate debate as a pedagogic tool. And, because I believe that prejudice is always possible, I see great value in the empathy-evoking potential of even counter-attitudinal "academic" debates.

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