

## **WHO CARES?: LEARNING PERSPECTIVE TAKING THROUGH STAKEHOLDERS**

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Courses: Public Speaking, Persuasion, Argumentation and Advocacy, Legal Communication

Objectives: Students will (1) identify relevant stakeholders for a public controversy; and (2) create and deploy arguments relevant to those stakeholders.

### **Rationale**

Most communication courses involve some component of audience analysis. Communication scholars teach our students to be attentive to a wide range of information including, but not limited to, demographic and situational audience factors (Lucas, 2011). The difficulty, however, is incorporating audience analysis into the undergraduate curriculum because few classrooms include the broad range of stakeholders involved in any given public controversy. This exercise is designed to encourage students to identify relevant stakeholders for a public controversy and create and deploy arguments relevant to those stakeholders.

As many scholars have noted, one of the pedagogical benefits to participating in debate is learning the skill of perspective taking through switch side debate (Cripe, 1957; Cummings & Rief, 2010; Ehninger, 1958; English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief, & Woods, 2007; Greene & Hicks, 2005; Harrigan, 2008; Hicks & Greene, 2010; Koehle, 2010; Mitchell, 2010; Muir, 1993; Munksgaard & Pfister, 2005; Murphy, 1957). Perspective taking helps build empathy and respect for different viewpoints. Most of the time, however, perspective taking is only framed in

terms of the arguments a debater deploys when switching his/her side on a proposition. This exercise asks participants to take on the perspective of his/her audience by constructing arguments for specific stakeholders. Additionally, while the benefits of perspective taking are often limited to the debate participants, in this exercise, students not participating in the debate assume roles of specified stakeholders, which enable them to also gain the benefits of perspective taking.

### **Activity and Debriefing**

In order to maximize the educational benefits of this exercise, students should choose a public controversy area to serve as the basis for class debates. The larger the class, the larger the controversy should be to facilitate identification of enough stakeholders to sustain the class debates. After selecting a controversy, the class should translate the controversy into a debate proposition with easily identifiable affirmative and negative sides. With agreement over the resolution, the class should:

- Identify a range of stakeholders involved in the controversy. Ideally, students will identify people directly affected by the controversy, agents with power to influence the controversy, and at least three stakeholders with an indirect relationship to the controversy.
- The instructor should divide the class into debate pairs. Depending on the size of the class, the instructor can create one-on-one debates or two-on-two debates.
- Each debate pair should draw out of a hat one of the stakeholders identified in the brainstorming session.
- Debaters should flip a coin to determine which side of the resolution they will defend in the debate.

- Each debater is responsible for generating arguments for the imagined stakeholder. The debaters are responsible for demonstrating knowledge of the stakeholder's interest through their argumentation.
- Members of the class not participating in the debate should conduct peer evaluations wherein they critique the debaters as if they are the stakeholders specified for the debate.

### **Appraisal**

The goal of this activity is to expand the benefits of perspective taking beyond the traditional switch side debate model by asking debaters to consider the perspective of a specific audience while simultaneously asking the rest of the class to assume the perspective of the stakeholder when evaluating the debate. When this exercise was conducted in a communication course at Wake Forest University, the students chose to debate about whether or not the federal government should tie state highway funds to state minimum drinking ages.

The major advantage of the exercise was that it required the students to make nuanced arguments for their imagined audiences rather than defaulting to their personal perspectives. For instance, the arguments and evidence relevant to the imagined debate in front of the executive board of Mothers Against Drunk Driving was entirely different than the arguments and evidence relevant to the imagined debate in front of a college fraternity. In both of these instances, the stakeholder bias was an extremely important variable in how students constructed their arguments. Students that excelled at the exercise were able to find creative connections to the audience that allowed them to make a persuasive claim without alienating the stakeholder's overall position on underage drinking.

The second advantage of this exercise was that the exercise exposed students to the wide variety of stakeholders involved in this controversy. The students brainstormed groups including: college administrators, state law enforcement agencies, parents, underage students, bar and restaurant owners, insurance companies, state budget officers, and many more. Several students commented that they had argued about the subject on numerous occasions, but that they had never realized just how many stakeholders were involved in the controversy.

### **Discussion**

The benefits of perspective taking extend well beyond the curriculum of communication courses. This exercise borrows from one of the most rigorous academic communities, intercollegiate debate, by incorporating the concept of switch side debate. Unlike traditional intercollegiate debate, however, this exercise asks students to adapt to the rhetorical demands of specified stakeholders. Additionally, this exercise extends the benefits of switch side debate to the audience since they are asked to divorce their personal perspective on the topic and inhabit the subject position of the specified stakeholders as well.

### **References and Suggested Readings**

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