

AN AUDIENCE ANALYSIS CURRICULUM:
ITS THEORY, PRACTICE AND IMPLICATIONS

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When (the student) understands what persons are persuaded by what arguments, and sees the person about whom he was speaking in the abstract actually before him, and knows that it is he, and can say to himself, 'This is the man or this is the character who ought to have a certain opinion';-he who knows all this, and knows also when he should speak and when he should refrain, and when he should use pithy sayings, pathetic appeals, sensational effects, and all the other modes of speech which he has learned;-when, I say, he knows the times and seasons of all these things, then, and not till then, he is a perfect master of his art...

When Plato made this observation in the latter part of the *Phaedrus*, he had hoped that students of rhetoric would focus upon their audience (1952, pp. 271-171). Yet, despite the existence of the Cross Examination Debate Association, an organization which stresses persuasion and audience adaptation, audience analysis is still one of the most difficult arts for the debate student to learn and practice. Perhaps this is because audience analysis is still relatively new in academic debate. Or possibly the lack of literature or instructional materials have contributed to its neglect. A comprehensive examination of argumentation and debate texts clearly reveals that audience analysis remains a largely underdeveloped area of forensics instruction.¹ CEDA can assume a leadership role by offering a comprehensive curriculum in the art of audience analysis and adaptation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the major principles one should incorporate in effectively understanding, adapting to, and persuading the receiver of communication. In this case the receiver is the critic-judge of academic debate.

In order to explicate our thesis we will present a rationale for the careful examination of the receiver in academic debate, comment upon the planning and the practice of audience analysis, and discuss the ethical considerations as well. We hope this article will be used to improve the effectiveness of speech communication in general and academic debate in particular. We further trust that CEDA will champion the widespread practice of audience analysis and students will realize its applications outside academic debate.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REFOCUSING UPON THE RECEIVER IN ACADEMIC DEBATE

Frequently debaters simply argue with the other team and ignore the critic. Clevenger noted this phenomenon when he wrote: "In most formal and routine communicative situations our language behavior is more or less habitual and we seldom pause to consider either purpose or means in utterance (1966,

p. 23).” To adopt such a perspective in a debate round will result in misdirected, ineffective argumentation. One must remember that the debate is judged within the mind of the critic and not in the minds of the two competing teams (Thomas, 1981, p. 341). The change in focus required for more effective persuasion is not a simple task, however, because it is an innate human characteristic that speakers are concerned first with themselves. They are expressing their ideas, points of view, and attitudes (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 31). Thus, Anderson, Lewis and Murray concluded: “Only through conscious effort does one develop the habit of making the critic, not himself, the center of communication (Ibid., p. 31).”

Why do we place such an emphasis upon the receiver in the speech communication context? Numerous writers have argued that the receiver is the most important element in all speech communication (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 53), and specifically within the debate context (Sayer, 1980, p. 341; Thomas, 1981, pp. 340-341). Their reasoning is simple. A speaker's message can only be effective if the critic is willing to listen and understand its implications. The speaker's attention must be directed toward the critic because it is he or she who will make the final decision (Sayer, 1980, p. 341). Thus debaters should strive for a sense of communication with his or her critic(s). By a sense of communication we mean “a feeling or awareness that two or more minds are engaged in mutual action and reaction (Bryant and Wallace, 1960, p. 193).”

The goal of audience-centered communication is to bring about some desired response in the receiver (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 200). Within academic debate, the response the speaker attempts to bring about in the critic is a product effect. By product effect we mean an effect “that is left as a residue after the message has concluded (Clevenger, 1966, p. 41).” The residual, or product effect debaters generally endeavor to produce in the critic through methods of persuasion is the awarding of the ballot.

The addition of audience analysis and adaptation “should yield clearer messages, thereby helping your audience decide whether to accept or reject your claims (Patterson and Zarefsky, 1983, p. 282).” Moreover, the goals of academic debate are furthered by audience analysis and adaptation in that “the debater learns to communicate various forms of arguments in a variety of contexts to a variety of audiences (Ibid., p. 284).” Thus, as a result of debaters refocusing their perspectives from themselves and the other team to

the critic, the speaker's ability to communicate effectively is enhanced, the critic's ability to judge the validity of arguments is enhanced, and the debate process is better served.

THE PLANNING OF AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

The planning of audience analysis is a two-fold process: acquiring the knowledge about one's critic and then using that knowledge to change one's communicative behavior. Adaptation, or change, can occur in two ways: through the choice of content and through the style of delivery.

If we assume the immediate objective of communication in academic debate to be the rendering of a favorable decision, the means to achieve that purpose lie partly in audience analysis and adaptation. Scholars of argumentation agree that such analysis requires an extensive inventory of knowledge. Mudd and Sillars advised that one must:

examine the beliefs, attitudes and values of an audience to find out what arguments, what motivation, what means of enhancing one's personal credibility will be most effective, and what kinds of supporting material will best clarify the proposition under discussion (1975, p. 11).

In other words, one must know the receiver as well as one can (Bryant and Wallace, 1960, p. 290; Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 127). In particular, it is important to know the debate critic's paradigm, since failure to perform up to the judge's expectations may mean a loss (Thomas, 1981, pp. 340-341).

The first method of adaptation, the choice of content, is predicated partly upon one's knowledge and observation of the critic. When debaters have knowledge concerning a critic's attitudes towards the issues on the topic they can use that knowledge to guide themselves in the selection of content. Argumentation literature concludes that one must consider the critic in the selection of material (Clevenger, 1966, pp. 35-36; Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 35) both in terms of content (Mudd and Sillars, 1975, p. 87; Freeley, 1981, p. 104) and in terms of the amount of evidence necessary for the critic's adherence (Mudd and Sillars, 1975, p. 86). Indeed, the debate may often be limited to a particular issue the critic is keenly interested in (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 221).

The second method of adaptation is through one's style of delivery. Delivery includes the way a message is spoken and presented to an audience and incorporates the nonverbal cues the speaker presents as well (Anatol and Applbaum, 1974, p. 106). By nonverbal cues we mean:

all nonlinguistic or extralinguistic aspects of behavior that contribute to the meaning of messages: body movement, gesture, proxemics, facial expression, eye contact, posture and certain paralinguistic cues associated with vocal quality and intonation (Mortensen, 1971, p. 210).

Unfortunately, debaters infrequently modify their rate of speaking, type of language, and nonverbal characteristics for different judges. For example, one should not speak at a rate suited for a flow judge when confronted by a lay judge, nor should one employ extensive debate terminology when speaking before a critic who judges primarily individual events.

Research data supports the belief that effectiveness in delivery contributes to the debater's persuasiveness in achieving message acceptance (Klopf and Cambra, 1979, p. 85). It should be quite evident that no speaker can achieve meaningful communication unless he or she can deliver his or her message effectively, and effective delivery is partly predicated upon audience analysis and acting upon the knowledge derived from it.

THE PRACTICE OF AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

The practice of audience analysis in academic debate is the attempt to accurately infer which arguments or particular style of delivery have led and/or should lead to the awarding of the ballot. After identifying the stimulus which elicited the past response of a critic, it is then presented again on the assumption that judges are generally consistent. Any generalization is useful only if there is a consistent response to the same or similar stimuli. We will show critics are generally consistent and we will suggest five sources of audience information which can be useful in adapting to debate judges.

Our experience and experimental studies have shown that a listener's response to selected stimuli is generally consistent. The receiver's behavior with respect to an incoming message is capable of being predicted (Clevenger, 1966, p. 9) in light of past responses to the same or similar verbal or non-verbal communication (Ibid., p. 8). The individual has "a 'habitual' way of reacting to certain situations (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 55-6)," a predictable reaction to the content of the speech or a particular speaking style.

Critics in general, and lay judges in particular, have a need to be consistent. They tend to evaluate their behavior with respect to this need (Mortensen, 1972, p. 137). Moreover, it is our experience, and experimental studies have verified our thesis, that critics will often avoid information

which is inconsistent with their attitudes (*Ibid.*, p. 137), or discount the impact of some incompatible information (*Ibid.*, p. 138).

Critics of audience analysis argue that presenting the same stimuli repeatedly, whether in terms of content or style, will lead to a lack of creativity among debaters. Students, critics retort, will employ only those arguments which have proven successful. We believe, however, that use of the audience analysis and adaptation process does not preclude use of new stimuli. The inherent uncertainty in any generalization should deter debaters from relying totally upon the critic's past behavior. In addition, one must remember that the consistency of a critic's attitudes and beliefs is not absolute. Sometimes a contradictory perspective will be unpredictably accepted by a judge due to new evidence or a new means of approaching the particular issue. Moreover, judges may unexpectedly accept new positions simply to prevent repeatedly granting adherence to the same argument or style of delivery.

Additionally, if a critic has a large amount of experience regarding the issue or the topic he or she is more likely to be consistent with past responses. However, if a critic is relatively unfamiliar with the topic or issue the probability of achieving the same response to specific stimuli is less. Appilbaum and Anatol noted the fundamental principle that the longer the experience with a particular attitude, the less likely the attitude will be changed by a single conflicting instance (1974, p. 22).

Given the assumption that critics are generally consistent, audience analysis entails the collection of information regarding the characteristics of the critics. There are several major inventories of audience data which coaches and debaters can collect. The first is the personal observation of the critics' characteristics outside the debate round. Beliefs and attitudes can be observed indirectly (*Ibid.*, 1974) both in nonverbal and verbal behavior (Clevenger, 1966, p. 58). Outside the debate round the observation of verbal behavior is the most common indicator of the knowledge, attitudes and interests of the critic. Moreover, verbal behavior is a superior indicator of the attitudes and beliefs of a critic because it may reveal the intensity of his or her beliefs as well (*Ibid.*, p. 59).

Coaches should instruct debaters to learn and remember the characteristics of every critic in each judging pool and should assist them by identifying the potential critics to their students. The observation of debate critics in the pre- and post-debate contexts may result in useful audience data.

A second source of audience data is the process responses of the critic. Process responses are effects which occur during the speech (in contrast to a product effect which occurs as a residue), and they are the only immediate indicators of the possible acceptance of one's verbal or nonverbal message (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 42). The response is generally in the form of overt nonverbal behavior (Clevenger, 1966, p. 62). A critic may frown, shake or nod his or her head, etc. It is this overt behavior of the critic which is then used as the basis for inferences regarding the critic's attitude toward a specific message. Clevenger noted the inferences one generally makes from the critic's nonverbal behavior:

An auditor who is sitting straight in his chair, looking at the speaker, is thought to be more attentive...An auditor who scowls and draws his lips into a thin line is thought to be angry. One who shakes his head disagrees or fails to understand (Ibid., p. 63).

Clevenger has found that the inferences one can make from process effects are more than generally correct (Ibid., p. 63), and Sayer has observed that debaters can intuitively evaluate judges' nonverbal responsive behavior during the debate with up to 80.7% accuracy (1974, pp. 2-6). One must realize, however, that some critics do not respond nonverbally to a debater's messages and others nod their heads at everything said. The process effect which should be most noted is a sudden change in the critic such as from a stoic state to sudden activity.

The process of making inferences from the critic's overt behavior and then making adjustments in one's speech presentation involves employing feedback to change one's communicative behavior. Feedback may best be understood by thinking of the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the speaker as stimuli which elicit a process response from the critic. The critic's response, in turn, functions as a stimulus to which the speaker should respond (Anderson, Lewis and Murray, 1964, p. 42; Applbaum and Anatol, 1974, p. 7; Freeley, 1981, p. 237) through the modification of his or her content and/or style in ways which should elicit the desired product effect. Thus, correct adjustments in response to process effects may lead to the desired product effect (Clevenger, 1966, p. 42).

A third source of information is the comprehensive examination of debate ballots. Critics generally reveal their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs through debate ballots. Intuitive inferences can then be made on the particular critic's feelings about certain issues, decision-making paradigms, styles of delivery, etc. Coaches and/or debaters should save all their ballots as reference for future use. For example, a coach could quite easily assemble all

the ballots alphabetically by critic and then analyze and discuss each critic with his debaters before the next tournament.

A fourth source of audience data is judging philosophy books. Critics also reveal themselves with respect to evidence usage, decision-making models, etc. However, the major difference between analyzing judging philosophy books and debate ballots is that what a critic writes in the judging book is more likely to be idealized information.

The fifth source of audience information is the set of broad demographic variables such as age, sex, education, geographical origin, socio-economic background and group membership. These variables can be used as bases for inferences about the particular critic's knowledge, attitudes and beliefs (Clevenger, 1966, pp. 43, 56; Mudd and Sillars, 1975, p. 91). The major disadvantage of demographic characteristics is the likelihood of inaccurate deduction. Simply because a critic fits into a broad demographic category does not necessarily mean the critic possesses the typical characteristics of that category. Indeed, the person with the typical characteristics of that particular category may not even exist. Thus, in academic debate, deductions from demographic variables are likely to be less accurate indicators of the critic's attitudes and beliefs. As is the case with all inferences, the probabilistic nature of the generalization must never be forgotten. Inferences from audience data, depending on the size of the data base, etc., are just good guesses.

In the practice of audience analysis we freely acknowledge that some early inferences made upon a single observation or a single ballot could be wrong. Our purpose is to get students and coaches to use available audience information. As the process of audience analysis is used more often, the generalizations will become more refined and more reliable.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the history of rhetoric, people have employed, for good and for bad, rhetorical tools including the use of audience analysis and adaptation. Critics of rhetoric argue it is an essentially amoral discipline, one employed by the sophist or the demagogue to manipulate and control individuals (Nilsen, 1966, p. v).

The relevant question we ask ourselves is whether the use of audience analysis is ethically defensible. Traditionally, critics argue:

The problems of the speaker within communication are how to 'adapt' sufficiently to the audience so that he will be effective in influencing it, while, at the same time, remaining true to his own concept of truth he seeks to present (Oliver, 1957, p. 27).

Should a speaker plot and scheme concerning how to produce some predetermined effect upon an unsuspecting audience? Wouldn't it be better to just 'speak his piece' and let the chips fall where they may (Clevenger, 1966, p. 29)?

Critics of audience analysis and adaptation have argued the use of such techniques turn debaters into sophists, speakers without firm beliefs who merely tell the critics what they wish to hear. That is the way the argument against the use of rhetorical tools is couched for the general speech communication context. The quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric is important and deserves careful and detailed comment. Within the scope of this short note we will make the following two observations.

First, debate has been created by educators to develop certain thinking, writing and speaking skills, and it seems to accomplish these purposes. Searching for truth is not a central focus of academic debate in that we require debaters to argue both sides of the issues regardless of what they perceive to be the truth or their own personal beliefs. However, at the end of a topic's session, debaters can and do formulate a tentative conclusion of truth about the issues. Moreover, one is more likely to arrive at the truth by having extensively participated, researched, and debated both sides of the issues.

Second, critics of debate argue that the rhetorical tools taught in academic debate, such as audience analysis and adaptation, are misused in other contexts. To this we respond that the potential misuse of rhetoric is not different from the misuse of any other object or human ability (Mudd and Sillars, 1975, p. 12). We believe, therefore, that the solution to this problem lies in personal responsibility. Thus, to students employing these techniques outside academic debate, we would hope their own senses of morality will lead them to speak with care and honesty.

CONCLUSION

This paper has offered general advice for debaters who wish to engage in audience analysis, suggested the importance of refocusing upon the receiver in academic debate, proposed strategies for planning audience analysis, outlined the major techniques for practicing audience analysis and discussed the ethical implications.

While our presentation does not exhaust potential analysis and discussion on this topic, we nonetheless feel we have discussed the most important components and practical aspects of audience analysis as it applies to academic debate. Further research is required in the field and the attempts we have made here are but simple, brief elaborations of the complex relationships between the speaker and the receiver of communication.

Almost all participants — forensic coaches, critics and students — involved with academic debate have experienced the frustration of ineffective communication between the speaker and the critic. It is our hope that this article, by explicating the techniques for effective audience analysis and demonstrating the relevance of those techniques to improve communication, will inspire debaters, coaches and critics to learn, experiment, and further develop the art of audience analysis. As Plato concluded, until the student knows his audience he will never be the perfect master of his art.

ENDNOTE

¹Argumentation texts consulted included: Dick, Argumentation and Rational Debating (1972); Ehninger and Brockriede, Decision by Debate (1978); Freeley, Argumentation and Debate (1981); Klopff and Cambra, Academic Debate: practicing argumentative theory (1979); Kruger, Modern Debate: its logic and strategy (1960); Patterson and Zarefsky, Contemporary Debate (1983); Pelsma, Essentials of Debate (1937); Potter (Ed.), Argumentation and Debate: principles and practices (1954); Rieke and Sillars, Argumentation and the Decision Making Process (1957); Sayer, Argumentation and Debate: principles and applications (1980); Thomas (Ed.), Advanced Debate: readings in theory, practice and teaching (1981); and Young, Coaching Debate (1979).

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