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How Coaches Maintain the Status Quo: 
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and Universal Audience to NPDA

Crystal Lane Swift

Abstract
Chaim Perelman is explored as a rhetorically significant figure, beginning with a bit of background, delving into his theory, and finishing with some of his critics. His theories are still applicable today. All in all, Perelman is primarily concerned with the relationship between argumentation and value judgments. Overall, coaches and debaters alike could benefit from revisiting Perelman. This paper serves as a starting point to the current meta-debate over values and audiences within intercollegiate NPDA, where the same issues regarding value judgments and the universal audience are still raised.

Introduction
There is tension in the world of National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) debate today, regarding how students ought to be trained to debate. I maintain that no similar perspective (e.g., performance every round, only rhetorical kritiks matter, if a team does not address every stock issue they automatically lose, left or right is always best, etc.) on debate is the most helpful for building students’ real-world argumentation skills. However, I clearly take a more traditional approach than some of my forensic colleagues. In any case, the most long-term useful skills that debaters can learn from NPDA are precision and audience adaptation. It is my argument that we are currently in a crisis in NPDA. Coaches are bickering and fighting with one another over which coaching and judging practices are hurting debaters the most. It is exactly this bickering which is hurting debaters the most.

Let me preface this position paper to those who may automatically categorize it as “complaint scholarship” and shut down before hearing me out. Interestingly, our community purports to be open-minded and progressive, and simultaneously, we have stringent behavioral expectations in the form of unwritten rules/norms. When scholars write out against these expectations, many are accused of “complaint scholarship” or being a “sore loser.” This is a similar feel to forensic conferences and tournament meetings. It is these “complaints” that lead to changes in our community, many of these are changes for the better. For example, NPDA would never have been born if not for “complaints” or genuine concerns about the trajectory of Cross-Examination Debate Association (CEDA) and National Debate Tournament (NDT), at that time. More recently, the individual event-listserv has been overloaded with debate over the potential changes to interpretation of literature events which are all essentially rooted in “complaint” or observation about what is going wrong in those events.

In a time when many forensic programs are facing stagnant or shrinking budgets, in-fighting will only hurt us more. Hence, I argue, we must return to
our rhetorical roots, as well as to the nature of NPDA debate that emphasizes the public (which would include the diverse judges who exist in our community), to help us to prove ourselves to our departments, show the larger community that we are creating productive democratic citizens, and point the finger at ourselves for once, rather than at each other. Early justification for NPDA debate as described by Sheckels and Warfield (1990) included argumentskills, public speaking skills, oratorical skills, extemporaneous skills, exposure to a more global world, interaction with students from various institutions, and responsibility. However, as described by Cates and Eaves (2010), NPDA is now at the point CEDA was twenty years ago. Rather than creating yet another debate format, I argue we can save NPDA by making a return to our rhetorical roots.

Obviously, resolving this conflict is beyond the scope of one paper, one book, one person. Therefore, my immediate goal is to spur discussion (not bickering) regarding our pedagogy and take one baby step to re-grounding forensics in its rhetorical roots. I believe Perelman, who was interested in practical reasoning, is a good place to start. Consequently, I will explore Perelman’s theory, apply his theory to contemporary argumentation, and draw impacts from this analysis.

**The New Rhetoric**

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca co-authored a seminal work, *The New Rhetoric* (1969), to establish a different interpretation of how people can and should argue. As Perelman (1968) clarified, “Our view entails that all argumentation is rhetorical” (p.168). This rhetorical interpretation of argumentation grounds their view of logic. In their co-authored work, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) explained:

> The new rhetoric does not aim at displacing or replacing formal logic, but at adding to it a field of reasoning that, up to now, has escaped all efforts at rationalization, namely practical reasoning. Its domain is the study of critical thought, reasonable choice, and justified behavior. It applies whenever action is linked to rationality. (p. 40)

The theorists aimed primarily at adding a pragmatic dimension to an otherwise fairly esoteric formal logic. As Perelman (1968) explained regarding their theory:

> Anything that one characterizes as a fact is indissolubly bound up with its acceptance. I insist that we speak of fact, of objectivity, only as long as there exists an agreement to accord to the content of a proposition this status of recognized fact; if the status is put to question, the "fact" becomes a "theory," an "opinion," an "hypothesis," or even a simple "illusion." (p.170)

This is a shift from the removed, more theoretical realm to a theoretically informed, but pragmatic realm.
Essentially, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric* (1969) places argumentation using formal logic within a practical context. As the authors explained, “for argumentation to exist, an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment” (p. 14). There must be an agreement within and about the community before there can be debate on a given issue. It is from this agreement on basic premises, which an arguer can begin discussing an issue, or as the theorists state, “it is in terms of an audience that an argumentation develops” (emphasis in original, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 5).

The concepts I am most interested in from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric* (1969) are the universal and particular audiences. “Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of. Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 33). The universal audience is the audience that a speaker creates in his or her mind, and the particular audience is the actual audience present. These two audiences invoke different approaches, or, as put by Perelman (1968) “the attempt to convince as a particular kind of persuasion—a kind in which the persuasion addresses a universal audience” (p.169). The response to an audience is based on which the speaker is talking to.

These concepts, while distinctly definable, are not independent from one another. As explained by Constantinides (1999):

> By characterizing audience using the two interdependent constructs of the universal and the particular, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca forge a powerful tool for analyzing audiences. By defining the universal audience with respect to social conditions, a speaker identifies values universally considered valid. Based on the social function and setting of the anticipated audience, the speaker can further clarify the viewpoint of that audience, one that instantiates a universal concept. Moreover, the dialectical relationship between the universal and particular resonates such that the speaker can tackle between the abstract and the concrete, resorting to the first to justify a concept and the second to particularize that concept. (pp. 55-56)

Essentially, the universal audience will determine definitional material and general concepts that will be accepted or at least acceptable, while the particular audience will determine parameters for examples and support that will sway that audience.

**Application of Perelman to Contemporary Argumentation**

In the interest of transparency and spurring a continued conversation in this area, it is important for me to be upfront and explain that the connections I am making between Perelman and NPDA are presented through analysis and anecdotal or autoethnographic data. This is a position I am taking as the start to what I hope will become a longer, more in-depth discussion on the matter. Many great forensic scholars have written starting pieces using a similar approach, such as Snider’s (1984) on ethics and game debating, German’s (1985) on rhetorical
criticism methodology, Klope’s (1986) on duo interpretation, and plenty of others (i.e., Adams & Cox, 1995; Aden, 1991; Epstein, 1992; Kuster, 2002; Swift, 2012; VerLinden, 1987; VerLinden, 1997). In other words, I am building an argument here, which can be accepted, rejected, tested, or simply ignored. What follows is an inductive analysis and application of the above theory to my own lived experience in NPDA debate.

Through an understanding of the universal and particular audiences, it is possible to apply this theory to contemporary argumentation and debate. From both experience and a read of the literature in this area, it is clear that contemporary intercollegiate parliamentary debaters and judges are quite diverse in ability and perspectives. However, because of the uniting factors of the community (i.e., the rules from NPDA, the agreement to participation in this community, etc.), the universal audience would be an excellent start for NPDA debate training. NPDA debate is community-oriented and public by comparison to other formats of academic debate (Johnson, 1994; Kuster, 2002; Preston, 2006; Swift, 2007a; Swift 2007b; Swift 2008; Swift In Press). A suggested way to keep this community and public nature is to incorporate judges from outside of debate (Kuster, Olson, & Loging, 2001). The use of judges from within the community ensures that NPDA’s norms continue, the way that they do in individual events (Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997; Maddex, 2005; Swift 2006). As put by Bartanen and Frank (1999):

In the rhetorical tradition, students are expected to face diverse audiences, knowing as well that different audiences and individual audience members require different kinds of proof. Because audiences and audience members hold different values and use a variety of modes of inquiry, students were taught the art of adaptation. Students were expected to study sociological pluralism and the various logics at work in the world. (p. 43)

From this perspective, it would follow that NPDA debaters would be trained using the universal audience. However, currently, the trend in NPDA debate seems to be to replicate a particular audience as a universal audience. This happens in two ways: 1) Coaches preferring a particular judging paradigm over others, and 2) Graduating students filling the role of assistant coach.

First, it is important to note that all debate coaches have some degree of validity on their interpretation on what a debate should look like, what kinds of arguments are persuasive, and how he or she would like students to argue. Given this, it is natural that each coach will prefer a particular paradigm. However, when a particular paradigm is taught as the only paradigm, students begin replacing the universal audience with a [their coach’s preferred] particular audience. For example, when I was the Director of Forensics at my alma mater during my Ph.D. program, my most successful debate team, a team of former high school Tournament Of Champions debaters, pre-law students, and extremely bright and informed young men, had a specific view of the type of audience they wanted in a judge, while my assistant coach had another interpretation, and I had
yet a third interpretation. The students were looking for a policy debate oriented judge; my assistant was looking for an advocacy/performance friendly judge; and I was looking for a trichotomy stickler. It took tournament after tournament of realizing that the particular audiences we were looking for may or may not ever judge our rounds; so instead, we had to work on returning to the more traditional, more universal interpretation of the NPDA debate audience, without completely disregarding the particular audiences that we encountered. This turn we took is supported by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, (1969):

We believe, then, that audiences are not independent of one another, that particular concrete audiences are capable of validating a concept of the universal audience which characterizes them. On the other hand, it is the undefined universal audience that is invoked to pass judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to such a concrete audience. (p. 35)

The universal audience of NPDA is one that shares the values and understanding of all of the members of NPDA, while particular audiences within the activity are specific judges that we encounter in rounds along the way. Further, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) discussed the “centrality of values to all forms of discourse” p. 281). The affirming party must make use of value appeals in order to capture their audience. Any practical argumentative discourse involves a level of value discussion.

Even more specifically, in contemporary intercollegiate competitive parliamentary debate, there are typically three different types of resolutions that are debated: fact, value, and policy, supporting the notion that language stems from a community and from habit. The type of resolution that is the most controversial and arguably the most difficult to debate are resolutions of value. “A resolution of value compares value claims or postulates an expression of a ‘good’ that is subject to debate” (Meany & Shuster, 2002, p. 30). What determines what is truly good or bad must be presented as a comparison within the debate. In terms of specific argument techniques, Meany and Shuster (2002) pointed out that value comparisons are especially important in counterplan debates. When both teams in a policy round are arguing that an action be taken, it is essential that the judge is offered reasons to prefer one plan over the other. These reasons are argued in the form of values.

Additionally, in terms of judges themselves, because there is very little interest or accessibility to becoming a judge within the forensic community without first being a competitor, the coaches and judges of tomorrow come from the teams of today. This is not inherently negative, nor does the problem that I describe happen every time a former competitor becomes a coach. However, often the former student, now coach’s interpretation of the most valid audience comes from his or her coach. So, rather than expanding our universal audience, we tend to perpetuate the particular audience that our coach(es) prefer(s). Ultimately, this can lead to judging paradigms ignored or applied to more than one judge. For instance, Infante (1988) argued that adaptive communication skills...
are of the utmost importance in any form of debate. While he wrote that one must analyze one’s specific audience to make the best argument for that particular audience, he also conceded that “. . . there seems to be uniformity in the ways in which we organize and change beliefs and attitudes . . .” (Infante, 1988, p. 102). Hence, Perelman’s principle of the universal audience may not work for specific content. However, this principle can be useful in structuring arguments in general. “The message is adapted to the intended receiver” (Infante, 1988, p. 101). The speaker does, in fact, create the audience in his or her mind before making an argument as Perelman said.

As a judge, I have seen students read (or listen to) my judging philosophy and adapt, and I have seen them either not adapt at all (speak to a ‘universal’ NPDA judge) or adapt to someone else entirely. When I was judging at the NPDA national tournament, for example, a debate partnership from a southern university, whom I had seen debate numerous times, ignored my value of the trichotomy and ran a policy case on (what I saw as an obvious) value resolution. The opposing team, whom I had never seen before, from a university in the northwest, had read my philosophy and went for suicide-resolutionality (trichotomy), and in the Member of Government speech, I was told by the team I was more familiar with, “Obviously you don’t care if it was ‘supposed’ to be a value resolution.” This is similar to rounds (usually in the novice or junior divisions) when debaters make comments like, “clearly you’re pro-choice, fiscally liberal, anti-military, against the death penalty, against guns . . .” or whathaveyou. While the last two I listed actually are accurate, there is no possible way that the debater would know that by looking at me. Yes, the NPDA debate community, like most forensic communities, tends to be left of center, but those are particulars outside of the universal NPDA audience.

Specifically, the rhetor creates the ideal audience in his or her own mind, which makes it entirely real to the rhetor. It seems that some contemporary argumentation scholars would agree. For example, Lundsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters (2004) revealed that when making an argument, “you will almost always be an intended reader [or audience member], one who exists in your own mind” (p. 53). The intended audience can never be anyone other than the audience that exists in one’s mind. However, audience analysis can, perhaps, make the audience in one’s mind, and the audience in reality, share an increased number of similarities.

Implications

Instead of seeing the universal and particular audiences as interdependent and interrelated, the current trend seems to be to substitute a particular audience as the universal audience. This has two primary consequences: 1) Competitors’ audience analysis and adaptation is stunted, and 2) The students who are attracted to and stay in NPDA debate are limited.

First, when a particular audience (or judge) is substituted for the universal audience, students stop (if they ever started) learning to analyze and adapt to diverse audiences, and rather than valuing the diversity of audiences, this preference and practice of valuing homogeneity continues. I have heard debater after
debater (former teammates, students, friends, etc.) claim that they never lost a round; judges made wrong decisions. While this may boil down to egoism, it may also stem from an expectation that judges should and will judge a certain way, and when they don’t, rather than reflecting on the student’s performance, the conclusion is drawn that the judge was wrong (not a part of the particular audience the student was seeking). Audience analysis is needed, however, at all levels of NPDA. Though it is the most prestigious NPDA tournament, and expected to be an entirely homogenous audience, Swift (2007b) found that even the National Parliamentary Tournament of Excellence (NPTE) judges fit into the categories of tabula rasa, kritikal, ultra-liberal, stock-issues, communication-centered, and interventionalist. Continuing to prepare for the universal rather than particular audience may avoid this implication in the future.

Secondly, and arguably most importantly, this elitist approach to who should debate and how, may be already limiting the students who want to join NPDA debate teams, and those who would like to stay. As Diers (2011) aptly notes, our activity is dying, if not already dead. Sure, there are a number of reasons for this. A primary reason might be the very narrow, particular audience that some coaches teach students is the universal audience. For example, while one of the purposes behind developing parliamentary debate as an alternative form was in reaction to the research burden and speed-talk of CEDA and NDT, these practices are quickly gaining reward in NPDA. This alone is not scary, but if that is the only successful way to debate in NPDA, then our audience is shrinking, and so is our pool of potential competitors.

Conclusion

Because the world of parliamentary debate (as well as forensics generally, e.g., Swift, 2006) is obsessed with norms, the universal audience may be currently and effectively functioning. The universal audience is the ideal audience constructed in the rhetor’s mind. Unfortunately the ideal audience in many NPDA debaters’ minds actually represents one, very particular audience or judge. The coaches and judges of the activity dictate this particular universal audience in intercollegiate parliamentary debate to their competitors. Because the competitors are most likely to become the future coaches and judges, they are likely to instill the same mindset in their future competitors. Hence, the audience in the activity remains both particular and stagnant. Perelman (1968) reminds us:

It would seem that we are never sure of the rationality of our theses as long as we have not submitted them to the proof of communication and criticism, a proof that cannot be dissociated from rhetoric, in the expanded and non-pejorative sense of this word. Only on this condition can I distinguish between what I believe to be true (faith) and what I know to be true (science). Let us repeat that in our perspective, the one who is able to convince a universal audience cannot conceal from the audience the techniques of argumentation that he is using, because he is himself a part of this audience. Nor does anyone have the right to assert that rhetorical discourse is
unilateral. This assertion holds for certain rhetorical discourses, but not for all, and certainly not for those that interest the philosopher. (p. 170)

There is always a larger audience and a deeper understanding. In the end, the universal audience is one fabricated and perpetuated by we (yes, myself included), the members of NPDA. While we pay lip service to audience analysis, our coaching and judging practices tend to reward those who speak to those within the norm. This is not inherently poor practice. However, we ought to call these practices what they truly are—rewarding those who conform most closely to the norms, which is not always the same as the most sound argument or ‘the better job of debating.’

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