

# A RHETORIC OF CRITICISM

by David Baker

Persuasion is the most powerful force in the universe. Humans may rule the universe, but persuasion rules humans. What we are persuaded to believe governs all of our actions. Everything that we believe, is the result of an argument that persuaded us.

As Professor Zarefsky so articulately summarized: I. A. Richards and Marshall McLuhan wrote of rhetoric as meaning, Richard Weaver advanced rhetoric as value, Kenneth Burke claimed rhetoric as motive, Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman argued rhetoric as a way of knowing. With those significant views in mind,

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I will advance a rhetoric of criticism as the most essential element of a student's education, the most significant offering across the range of the curriculum, the most important skill to be taught.

Simply, I believe that the skill necessary to critique the mass of information that students encounter each day is the most important skill of all. A rhetoric of criticism is basic to all intelligent understanding. Persuasion is the most powerful force in the universe, and because it is, a rhetoric of criticism is the most essential element of education. There is no course in the academic world that better equips students to deal with the

rhetoric of the world than the one we teach.

But, what is it exactly that we do? Perhaps the first task is to place the term "rhetoric" into a common context. Simply, no human institutions can exist without the power of speech. Isocrates in 354 B.C. argued that, "...generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. ... Through this we educate the ignorant and appraise the wise; for the power to speak well is the surest index of sound understanding,... With this faculty we both contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown;... And if there is need to speak in brief summary of this power, we shall find that none of the things that are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech..." Persuasive speech is the launching pad of ideas. We all advance our ideas, we all attempt to persuade others to our views, we all try to get our way. We are all then, debaters.

We advance a position and we defend positions against the arguments of the opposition. Perhaps we can, in this context, refine our definition of debaters as people. Perhaps we can also classify them. In our society, we refer to poor debaters as naive. Excellent debaters we refer to as scholarly. Abusive debaters we refer to as politicians, political spin-doctors, used car salesmen, red necks, and hormonally imbalanced sixteen-year-olds. It is our job to create scholarly debaters who are prepared for the challenges of their

lives.

We do not always reach our goal of creating scholarly debaters. I clearly remember a cold morning in the early 80's at Seminole High School in Oklahoma. I was judging an extemporaneous speaking contest. A young man entered the room wearing what was obviously his father's leisure suit: Bat wing lapels, and pants accordioned for about five inches at his feet. Suspecting that he was required to feed the cows prior to coming to the contest this morning, I settled in to hear his home-spun perspective on world events. "My topic is", he blurted, "Creationism should be taught in the public schools." My interest grew with the prospect of hearing his unique views on this subject. "I think we should", he said "because we Americans ain't nearly creative enough." What followed was a pretty good

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analysis of the technology gap between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Perhaps our educational aim is not always right on the mark, but even when we miss, good things happen.

Teaching students a critical method of thinking is perhaps more important today than at any other time. Daily, our students are attacked with

persuasive techniques. Our mission is to teach a rhetoric of criticism: to give students the power to process, evaluate, and critique the massive amount of information that comes their way.

Plato lived in a time when instruction in persuasion was reserved for the most pure of men--and only men. It was assumed that the good man and the good orator were one and the same. It was a society that clearly understood the power, and danger of persuasion. Today, the techniques of persuasion are everywhere. They are employed by people with a variety of motives. We can no longer count on the concept of the good man and the good orator. If we do not teach students how to evaluate information, then how can they be expected to defend themselves against the modern day techno-sophist? Without the ability to evaluate information, we leave our students open to persuaders who cajole our children to: "just do it", identify the term "cool" with Joe Camel, and take Rush Limbaugh seriously.

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Everything in our society is designed to make a sale in the marketplace of ideas. From consumer products to political ideology the competition to make a sale in this market is intense. There is the story told by Plato of the Egyptian King Thamus, who

was leery of the new technology of writing because it was (in his opinion) bound to weaken people's memories. Worst of all, Thamus warned, writing would lead to an overflow of undigested information, allowing those who were merely crammed with facts to pass themselves off as wise. Not to think critically, not to have a mastery of a rhetoric of criticism is to be unarmed in the marketplace of ideas. In his book *Technopoly* Neil Postman argues that, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." In an information society, we are all consumers of ideas. To those who sell consumer products, we are all potential customers; to those who sell political philosophy we are all potential voters.

Polarized positions on hundreds of issues are debated daily. The same questions that have been debated by our students over the years. Their knowledge on these issues is simply a by-product of the process of evaluation and research. Our students have taken an active role in forming their opinions. Our goal is not simply to impart knowledge; it is to empower our students to make intelligent judgments in light of adequate information. We seek to teach a rhetoric of evaluation, understanding, and criticism.

The process of competitive debate forces students to face issues squarely. It is this kind of rhetorical ethic that is needed if we are to resolve the issues facing the world. As Raymond F. Dasmann wrote in his book *An Environment Fit for People*, "Once you could run away from the problems that seemed to confound and confuse life in the places where people congregated. You could go back to the farm and forget the city. You could go off to

the colonies and forget the home country. You could head for the South Seas. But today the mushroom clouds from atomic blasts climb into the air not far from Tahiti. Bulldozers and chain saws roar in the upper Amazon. There is no place left to hide. If you want a world fit to live in, you must fight for it now." There was a time when students could run away. A time when evaluation, understanding and criticism were an option. No longer. Our students **must** face the issues of their day. They have nowhere to run. A rhetoric of criticism is critical not only to their success but to our collective survival.

Nature is powerful. Persuasion is more powerful. Growing up in a farm community in Southern Oklahoma, I have seen nature's power. I have seen entire communities destroyed by tornadoes. I once walked across an entire five acre hay field while stepping on nothing but refuse from a tornado that devastated the city of Wichita Falls, Texas. I have seen hailstones larger than baseballs. (I have also arm-wrestled my father. I know nature's power.) Those whose homes were ravaged by wind remain because they are persuaded that they belong there. (In spite of an 0 and 40 record, I still believe that I can whip my father.) Persuasion is an awesome force.

Jim Jones persuaded over seven-hundred people that they

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should drink arsenic-laced Kool-Aid as an expression of their religious beliefs. David Koresh persuaded dozens of people (many with college degrees) that they should burn to death for their religious beliefs. Governments around the world have persuaded millions of women and men that they should give their lives in defense of a particular political philosophy.

A recent report in *Newsweek* noted that ninety-six percent of six year old children could identify Mickey Mouse. Ninety-four percent could identify Joe Camel. Faced with that kind of advertising success, I think that teaching children to think critically is a good mission, a worthy goal. Teaching children to investigate is an essential skill. Without an ability to weigh the evidence, evaluate the intent of the authors, critique the critics, students are helpless in the marketplace of ideas.

While I am honored to be speaking to one of the most distinguished group of educators in the United States, we are not the best teachers in the land. The best teachers in the world do their work on Fifth Avenue in New York, inside the Beltway in Washington D.C., in churches around the world, behind the school house, and at dinner tables. Advertisers, politicians, clergy, peers, and parents effectively persuade children on issues related to political philosophy, religion, sexual behavior, personal values, and consumer choice. It is our job to arm those children with the power of a rhetoric of criticism.

Persuasion is more significant than truth. In spite of the fact that every credible scientific study in the world has concluded that the

consumption of tobacco is a health hazard, millions of children annually are persuaded that tobacco use is "cool". They are persuaded to use tobacco even though they are aware of the disastrous consequences. Even though they know tobacco can, and probably will, kill them.

If scientists were to discover that reading Shakespeare caused a slight increase in the risk of brain tumors, do you think there would be anyone left in the average English Literature Class? Do you think that after that discovery, children might be caught behind the barn with their *Riverside Shakespeare* in hand spouting sonnets in spite of the medical risk? Can you imagine a child caught red-handed proclaiming, "It's not my Shakespeare! I am just keeping it for someone else!" If I could package my lessons in the language and imagery found in tobacco advertisements, I too might be able to claim a 94% retention rate. I am giving C's to students in Public Speaking who are making A's in chemical abuse.

In the past, teachers have counted on the isolation of the classroom as a barrier between the world of commercial persuasion and the world of academic criticism. We have had the luxury of a captive audience. We have been able to teach our lessons without direct competition from *M.T.V.* Once all the walkmans, *Playboys*, and *Cliff's Notes* have been confiscated, we

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have pretty much been the star of the show. We have controlled what our students read. We have held the power of the grade as a mechanism to focus their attention. No longer. Now, corporate entities have invaded the classroom with commercial messages disguised as educational material.

Lifetime Learning Systems is now the corporate archetype for educational/promotional materials. Lifetime Learning markets corporate advertising to schools under the guise of educational materials. For example, according to Proctor & Gamble's in-class "Decision Earth" program: "Clear-cutting removes all trees...to create new habitats for wildlife," "P & G uses this economically and environmentally sound method because it most closely mimics nature's own processes." Lifetime Systems finds a willing audience of frustrated teachers whose budgets have been cut, and who are desperate for hands-on material. Lifetime Learning fills the need with corporate sponsored material (and product samples) from companies such as American Express, Frito Lay, The National Live Stock and Meat Board, The National Rifle Association, Coca-Cola Corporation (that hurt), The National Pork Producers Council, Pepsico Incorporated, The Snack Food Association, and dozens of others.

Lifetime's own promotional literature claims that, "If there's a cardinal rule in

preparing sponsored material,"...it is that it must serve the needs of the communicator first. But it also must have **perceived** value in the classroom." Another passage from the literature of Lifetime reads: "Imagine millions of students discussing your product in class. Imagine their teachers presenting your organization's point of view. Imagine your corporate message reaching their parents through literature the students take home. At Lifetime Learning Systems, we don't just imagine. We create the award-winning educational programs that make these marketing strategies work. A Lifetime Learning Systems teaching kit is a marketing tool that opens minds."

Persuasion is the most powerful force in the universe. Humans may rule the universe, but persuasion rules humans. A rhetoric of criticism, what we teach, is the only thing that serves as a buffer between students, and a world of persuaders. We seek to persuade about persuasion. We seek to empower students with an ability to evaluate objectively the mass of information that is designed to influence their behavior. Nothing taught in school could be more important.

For the past ten years I have been an instructor at the Dartmouth Debate Institute and the Dartmouth Juniors Workshop. The first session of that program, the workshop, is reserved for around forty students who are in the summer after their sophomore year. These sophomores-to-be-juniors come to Hanover, New Hampshire, to work on their skills as speakers, and to research the new debate topic. Frankly, their intellect is an embarrassment to the Dartmouth academic community. These students drive the college library staff to

gridlock. The are, by the Dartmouth librarians' admission, the single largest impact group on the library system for the entire year. I have observed Dartmouth students looking over debaters' shoulders, and asking their advice on matters of scholarly research. High school kids are doing research that overwhelms an Ivy League college library. High School Debaters compete in an activity that might best be described as full-contact Social Studies. They do not enjoy the luxury of time monopoly. Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern would not stand a chance against our students. Our students mock the shallow nature, and scholastically inept format of contemporary political debate. They compete in a world where they must where they must defend their ideas in a timed format against opponents who are well prepared to present an alternative view. Editorial authors enjoy the ability to spew their usually exaggerated opinions in a forum that would never survive the format of high school debate. Our students must answer questions, and deal with a respondents' opinions within minutes, not days, of their claims.

In the world of academia, high school debate students are exploring the academic universe, in vehicles designed with imagination, scholarly rigor, and deft perception, while the rest of the academic world is just starting to understand the uses of the wheel. Our students scoff at research assignments that dumbfound their classmates. Their research papers often dumbfound their teachers. Our students are conducting research that rivals Ph.D. level work on significant national and international issues. High School debaters enter college with research and

writing skills that warp the learning curve. Our students master a rhetoric of criticism that spills positively into all aspects of their academic and personal lives. A rhetoric of criticism empowers them to evaluate, critique and better understand the mass of information that is fired at them daily.

Once in a while, you should hear that what you do is important. Every so often, you should return from a grueling weekend of bad food, no sleep, and late nights knowing that you have made a difference in the lives of students. You will return from this tournament knowing that few try to understand what you do. You will continue to fight the war of budget, continue to seek opportunity for your students, and continue to advance a rhetoric of criticism. Someone will probably ask you if you had a good time in Atlanta--as though it were a vacation. You will probably tell them, yes. It is our curse, and our blessing. Your students will return years later with thanks for the skills that they learned. Those in this room know, but should be reminded. Once in a while, we should abandon our competitive nature and recognize that we are we. That-win or lose--our students are empowered by our influence. Persuasion is the most significant force in the universe. Humans may rule the universe, but persuasion rules humans.

We have the answer. Your [Barkley Forum] gold keys charge you with the mission of spreading the value of a rhetoric of criticism. Collectively, you have taught me that lesson. It is a message that is too important to keep to ourselves. My lesson to you is the lesson that you taught me. A rhetoric of criticism is the most important lesson of all. The Key

Coaches in this room should know that they are the most important teachers in the land. Every once in a while, you should hear that. What we teach, the power we wield is enormously important and potentially dangerous. From time to time we should be reminded of the awesome responsibility that our keys represent. That is my lesson to you. A rhetoric of criticism is critical to the future of our students, and our nation. Listen to me, hear yourselves.

*(David Baker coaches at The St. Mark's School of Texas. His debate teams have thrice reached the National Final Round, winning in 1990. This address was given to the Key Coach banquet at the Barkley Forum of Emory University in February, 1995.)*