

## Argument as a Purpose-Oriented Genre: A Feminist Defense of Argument and Debate

Sarah T. Partlow, *Idaho State University*

Robert C. Rowland, *The University of Kansas*

Many contemporary feminist theorists indict argument in general and debate in particular as patriarchal. They view debate and argument as coercive, confrontational, and anti-community. The indictment of argument and debate as inherently anti-feminist, oddly enough, has been a common argument in contemporary debate. Many teams have used a feminist "critique" either as a means of rejecting the arguments presented by their opponent or as a means of rejecting an entire category of argument or a debate topic.

One common sign of theoretical incoherence is the presence of a performative contradiction. A performative contradiction is present when a theorist uses the very symbolic form or theoretical position that he/she is attacking in order to support the attack. In the case of the feminist indictment of debate/argument, theorists skillfully have used argument in order to indict argument. And advocates of a feminist "critique" in debate have used the techniques of debate/argument successfully to indict the activity. It is decidedly odd that feminist positions, built on the assumption that debate and public policy argument are patriarchal, have proved to be quite successful.

The existence of a performative contradiction suggests that there is some gap between the assumptions of theorists and their practice. And the existence of that gap between theory and practice in turn suggests that there may be a way of accounting for the feminist indictment of argument and debate, without rejecting argument and debate altogether. In this essay, we use the performative contradiction as a wedge to open the symbolic space for an alternative view of argument and debate that is consistent with feminist goals. We begin by sketching the feminist indictment of debate and argument. We then argue for a reconceptualization of debate/argument as a purpose-oriented genre of communication. When viewed from this perspective, the characteristics of debate/argument to which feminists object—reliance on hierarchy, disagreement, and so forth—are not defining characteristics of the argument/debate genre either in terms of process or product. We conclude by showing how the conceptualization of argument/debate accounts for the feminist and postmodern indictments and argue that the genre is at the very core of classically liberal efforts to empower humans and fight oppression.

### The Feminist Indictment of Argumentation and Debate

Feminist theorists raise several objections to argument and debate. Among these are: debate/argument is a coercive activity; debate/argument excludes participation and thus denies community; debate/argument is associated with disagreement and thus is often disagreeable; debate/argument is modernist and therefore indefensible. The last objection is based on the assumption that if all standards are relative then the goal of objective decision-making that underlies debate/argument theory is by its very nature absurd.

Initially, feminist theorists argue that argument and debate are coercive. Foss and Griffin suggest that argument is coercive because participants derive self-worth from "controlling people and situations" (1995, p. 3). This perspective paints arguers as manipulators who love nothing more than "rush of power" (Gearhart, 1979, p. 201) derived from coercing others. Indeed, Gearhart argues that attempting to influence others with language is as rhetorically violent as the use of "whips or rifles" is physically violent (1979, p. 195). Similarly, Foss perceives intercollegiate debate as a training ground for politicians that tends to "teach skills that are antithetical to . . . a civil and humane world" (2000, p. 95). Makau agrees that debate is designed to promote "success in the dominant culture" (2000, p. 102). Such training influences society as a whole by perpetuating what Tannen (1998) calls the "argument culture."

A second feminist critique of argument and debate focuses on their exclusive nature. Foss and Griffin (1992) argue that persuasion relies on a "patriarchal bias" which embodies "the experiences and concerns of the white male as a standard, thereby distorting or omitting experiences and concerns of women" (p. 331). This criticism is based on the belief in independent masculine and feminine epistemologies. Critics suggest that debate is grounded in a masculine rationalistic epistemology. Rationality "has been seen as a masculine activity at least since the time of Aristotle" (Orr, 1989, p. 2). According to Catherine MacKinnon, "Men *create* the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described" (cited in Gregg, 1987, p. 9). Feminist critics view argument and debate as a "male paradigm" in which "judgment should be based on universal principles and abstract laws that are characterized by 'objectivity'" (Blair, Brown & Baxter, 1994, p. 389). In this way, critics argue that debate and argument maintain a "patriarchal bias" (Hobbs et al., 2000, p. 80). Fundamentally, the problem according to these critics is that a masculine epistemology is used to judge everyone in debate thus disadvantaging female competitors.

Third, argument is often associated with disagreement and therefore seen as disagreeable. Tannen argues that American culture promotes a "pervasive, warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue . . . as if it were a fight" (1998, p. 4). She suggests that people often approach debate as a fight in which "criticism, attack, or opposition are . . . predominant" (1998, p. 4). Foss and Griffin also conflate argument and debate with fighting (1995, p. 14). Foss notes the tendency "to respond to people and ideas in an adversarial frame of mind with communication designed to attack, criticize, and oppose" (2000, p. 95).

Fourth, critics reject debate as modernist since it attempts to use objective criteria in order to evaluate argument. Rowland elucidates the epistemological and axiological challenges posed by postmodern critics. In



terms of epistemology, postmodernist deny the "legitimacy of truth and knowledge as attainable concepts" (Rowland, 1995, p. 351). Postmodern approaches reject highly structured debate relying on rationality and truth seeking. Rather, they privilege "local, ad hoc, and historically contextual truths" (Donovan, 1992, p. 201). In terms of axiology, postmodern feminists criticize rationality arguing that all "transcendental claims reflect and reify the experience of a few persons—mostly white, western males" (Flax, 1990, p. 624-5).

The four primary feminist indictments of argument/debate would seem to rule out argument as a feminist vehicle for change. Yet, theorists who indict debate and argument rely on the techniques of debate/argument to build their case. If their use of argument can be justified (and we think it can), then it is appropriate to seek a reconceptualization of debate/argument that accounts for the feminist critique.

### A Reformed View of Debate/Argument

We suggest that debate/argument are best understood as a purpose-oriented genre of communication. Broadly speaking, rhetorical theorists and critics have taken one of two perspectives on genre. Many critics have treated the idea of a genre as a kind of heuristic metaphor (see Rowland, 1991). In this view, genres have no actual existence apart from the critic's theoretical claim. When Edwin Black wrote about the Coatesville Address as a "morality play," (1978, pp. 78-90) he was drawing an analogy to a form of theater. He was not saying that there is an identifiable category of rhetoric—the morality play—into which some texts should be sorted. Other critics have treated genres as conventional categories, usually based on situation, which have an actual existence. In this ontological view of genre, which is associated with the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1978; see also Rowland, 1991), there are a limited number of categories of discourse, which can be defined in terms of form and substance. An inaugural address is an inaugural address and a eulogy is a eulogy.

Genre theorists and critics operating from the ontological perspective have emphasized situational genres, but they also have recognized the key role that purpose plays in calling into existence an ontological genre, such as the eulogy (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Rowland, 1991; Miller, 1984). While ontological genre critics have recognized that purpose plays a role in the creation of the symbolic constraints that in a sense call the category into existence, they have not focused in any detail on cases where the genre itself is defined by purpose. In the case of purpose-oriented genres, a narrow purpose shapes the communication forms and processes that are appropriate for fulfilling that purpose. We suggest that argument and debate are best understood as a purpose-oriented genre.

The underlying purpose served by argument is not disagreement-resolution, persuasion, or exerting social control; it is problem solving. Argument is the generic form and process adapted for inventing and testing possible solutions to a problem of any type. Viewed from this perspective, the defining characteristics of argument are tied to the purpose of inventing possible solutions to a given problem and then testing the adequacy of those solutions. Three practical assumptions undergird the genre:

1. Potential solutions that are supported by strong evidence and reasoning are more likely to actually work than potential solutions that lack strong evidence and reasoning or that have less support;
2. Useful general and specific principles for distinguishing the strength and weakness of reasoning and evidence in different contexts can be developed;
3. One useful way of testing the relative strength of competing solutions to a given problem is by comparing them to each other in a dialectical process.

These principles are not based on some overarching theoretical perspective, but are what Rescher calls "*practical criteria*" (1977, pp. 96-97) for figuring out how to solve a problem.

The overall purpose of problem solving can be sub-divided into argumentative invention and argument testing. To come up with the best solution, you have to be able to consider various alternatives. Thus, invention is essential to problem solving. But invention without testing becomes aimless brainstorming. As Rescher notes, "A means for appraisal and evaluation is a fundamental precondition of rational controversy" (1977, p. 43).

Argument as process or interaction is essential to both sub-purposes of the genre. Through the process of argument people test the quality of competing perspectives. And the process also often serves an inventional function. We "invent" a new argument in response to a position developed in an argumentative process. Of course, invention also may occur in a non-argumentative process. One can "invent" a possible solution to a given problem in a dream, an alcohol-induced hallucination, and many other contexts. But we sensibly do not accept such a "solution" without testing it in an argumentative process.

A definition of argument as product is essential to keeping the process on track. For the argumentative process to function, either in interaction among people or internally within a given individual, there must be some definition that distinguishes argument from other symbolic forms. Without this definition of form, any kind of symbol use could be considered appropriate in an argumentative process. But if any kind of response is acceptable, bursting into a rousing rendition of a Barry Manilow song as part of a discussion of National Missile Defense for instance, neither the inventional nor the testing sub-purpose can be achieved. A definition of argument form is needed to determine what isn't argumentative and what is, therefore, not relevant to inventing and testing solutions to a given problem. (It is barely possible that Manilow singing "Mandy" could be relevant to some claim, but one shudders to think of the poor souls involved in this exchange). It is for that reason we have claimed that a definition of argumentative form based on the presentation of evidence linked by reasoning to a claim is essential to the genre achieving its defining purpose. From that definition of form, general practical rules for testing reasoning and evidence as well as field-dependent standards can be developed.

Viewed as a purpose-oriented genre, argument is simply a general method for discovering and testing possible solutions to any problem. It matters little whether the problem is how to brown meat without setting off a smoke detector or how to design a health care system; the basic principles are the same. And these basic principles apply within the context of debate, which can be viewed as the very paradigm of an argumentative process.



### Argument, Debate, and the Feminist Indictment

When argument is defined as a purpose-oriented genre for solving problems and debate is treated as a particular process enacting the genre, the feminist indictments of argument/debate easily can be accommodated. Initially, debate and argument have nothing to do with gender, except to the degree that they are tools, which can be used to address problems of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression. Arguments don't have gender and a claim that women tend to avoid argumentative form is essentialist stereotyping. Clearly, when women act as problem solvers (whether as professionals, as stay-at-home moms, or in any other context) they rely argumentative form and process as we have defined them. Certainly, feminist critics of argument and debate have done so, thus enacting the point that argument is a powerful tool for solving problems including the ongoing oppression of women. The very fact that they can use argument without resulting in oppression or patriarchy is proof that the form/process are not in and of themselves oppressive. It also indicates that the form and process of argument provide valuable tools for exposing oppression, a point that was well known to first wave American feminists, such as Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone, two of the most skillful arguers of their era. Feminists in contemporary debate are relying upon the empowering potential of argumentative form when they present a feminist critique or otherwise argue about the relationship between gender and public policy.

The treatment of argument and debate as masculine is also essentialist and has no relation to the problem solving function of argument as a purpose-oriented rhetorical genre. Problem solving symbolic forms have no relation to gender or sexual roles. Nor are there "male" or "female" standards of rationality or types of evidence. When viewed as a purpose-oriented genre, standards for defining and judging evidence and reasoning are not based on some "objective theoretical principle." They are simply practical rules that people have found helpful in distinguishing between useful and useless (or less useful) arguments. Such principles are essential for successful decision making in every context, from the home to the biophysics lab, and they have nothing to do with gender. A male cook and a female biophysicist both need to take into account the field dependent rules in their respective activities.

Nor is argument related to a hierarchical view of human nature. The test in an argumentative process is not who you are, but what you have to say and how it relates to what others say. It is true that non-argumentative symbolic forms (as well as bad arguments) will be rejected, but that rejection is tied not to a hierarchical social role, but to whether what was said helps identify a useful solution to a problem. Argument/debate is only elitist in the very narrow sense that arguers need to have something sensible to say. The feminist performance of argument illustrates how that requirement provides oppressed groups a means of challenging dominant elites in any society.

Additionally, argument and debate are only indirectly related to disagreement. The existence of disagreement is often the problem that calls into existence argument defined as a purpose-oriented genre. But not all argument involves disagreement. In many cases, argumentative processes are defined by brainstorming and little disagreement is present. Moreover, when the goal of argument is to resolve disagreement, disagreeable communication should not be accepted. Argument is fundamentally about testing evidence and reasoning in a

given context. Expressions of anger or name-calling should play no role in this process. Thus, argument should be understood as a method of resolving disagreement in the least disagreeable form possible. This may be why feminists in debate have found that the process provides such an effective vehicle for confronting societal oppression.

Finally, the postmodern objections to argument as a species of modernism are sidestepped when argument is viewed as a purpose-oriented genre. The advocate of this perspective cheerfully will admit that argument and debate cannot be totally objective and that there are no absolute Platonic principles defining argument, only practical criteria. But this does not in any way invalidate the utility of those principles or the ideal of objectivity as a goal for decision-making. Just as all agree that a shovel is useful for planting tulips, all agree that the capacity to make/test arguments is useful for solving intellectual puzzles. It is for this reason that feminist opponents of argument/debate so routinely use argument/debate in advancing their position. The goal of making decision making as objective as possible can be defended in a similar manner. What woman would want to be tried by a jury composed of misogynistic men? For an oppressed class such as women, the ideal of objective decision-making is an essential means of fighting gender oppression.

It is important to recognize that argument is only one among many potential purpose-oriented communication genres. It, therefore, is not the appropriate form/ process for achieving all communication purposes. If the purpose is social support or consoling the bereaved, argument probably won't be the proper response, because the generic purpose is not problem solving. A sensitive person should be able to choose among genres of communication in order to achieve her/his purposes.

### Conclusion

A purpose-oriented generic interpretation of argumentation/debate practices suggests that argument/debate often function s as a form of feminist communication. Argument/debate are useful tools for exposing irrational hierarchy or prejudice. It is white men who should oppose argument/debate, because of the capacity of the genre to expose their self-interest and the oppressive nature of irrational tradition and prejudice. The founding mothers of the feminist movement in this nation—Stanton, Anthony, Stone and many others—recognized the power of argument and debate. They understood that societal barriers against inclusion of women in the community could not stand against rational examination. Their insight remains as valid today as it did 150 years ago.

### References

- Black, E. (1965). *Rhetorical criticism: A study in method*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Blair, C., Brown, J. R., & Baxter, L. A. (1994). Disciplining the feminine. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 80, 383-409.
- Campbell, K.K., & Jamieson, K. H. (1978). Form and genre in rhetorical criticism: An introduction. In K.K. Campbell and K.H. Jamieson



- (Eds.), *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action* (pp. 9-32). Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Donovan, J. (1992). *Feminist theory: The intellectual traditions of American feminism*. New York: Continuum.
- Flax, J. (1990). *Thinking fragments: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism in the contemporary west*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foss, S. K. (2000). Response. *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate*, 21, 95-98.
- Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1992). A feminist perspective on rhetorical theory: Toward a clarification of boundaries. *Western Journal of Communication*, 56, 330-349.
- Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for invitational rhetoric. *Communication Monographs*, 62, 2-18.
- Gearhart, S. (1979). The womanization of rhetoric. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2, 195-201.
- Gregg, N. (1987). Reflections on the feminist critique of objectivity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 11, 8-18.
- Hobbs, J.D., Hobbs, J., Bile, J. T., Lowrie, S., Wilkins, A., Milstead, V., & Wallace, K. C. (2000). Intercollegiate debate as invitational rhetoric: An offering. *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate*, 21, 76-95.
- Makau, J. M. (2000). Response. *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate*, 21, 102-105.
- Miller, C.R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-167.
- Orr, D. (1989). Just the facts ma'am: Informal logic, gender, and pedagogy. *Informal Logic*, 11, 1-10.
- Rescher, N. (1977). *Dialectics: A controversy-oriented approach to the theory of knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Rowland, R. C. (1991). On generic categorization. *Communication Theory*, 1, 128-144.
- Rowland, R. C. (1995). In defense of rational argument: A pragmatic justification of argumentation theory and response to the postmodern critique. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 28, 350-364.
- Tannen, D. (1998). *The argument culture: Moving from debate to dialogue*. New York: Random House.

Copyright of Conference Proceedings -- National Communication Association/American Forensic Association (Conference on Argumentation) is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.