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Cultural Commentary:

The Art of Persuasion

by Barbara Apstein

Jeff, one of my advisees, appeared in my office about a week late to register for spring semester classes. "I'm sorry to tell you," I said, glancing at the computer screen, "but the classes you want are full."

"I know I should have come earlier," Jeff replied, "but I can usually manage to get into classes even if they are closed." He paused and smiled. "I can be very persuasive. I have my methods."

I tried to imagine what his methods might be. Jeff was a good talker; he had bright eyes and an animated expression. I could easily imagine that a professor whose class was fully enrolled might size him up as an intelligent, articulate young man who would add some intellectual spark to class discussion. Or perhaps Jeff would present some compelling reasons for joining the class: he might reveal a life-long love of the works of, say, James Joyce. Or he might evoke sympathy by explaining that he needed to hold two jobs in order to earn enough money to pay his tuition and car insurance. I realized that I myself had occasionally waived the rules for persuasive students like him.

Aristotle analyzed the art of persuasion almost 3,000 years ago in his *Rhetoric*, distinguishing three categories. *Logos*, the origin of the English word *logic*, is "the power of proving a truth by means of persuasive arguments," in other words, the appeal to good reasons. *Pathos* is "the power of stirring the emotions of one's hearers," the appeal to emotion and shared values. *Ethos* is "the speaker's power of evincing a personal character which will make his speech credible," make him or her appear trustworthy. This analysis remains useful today, whether we are talking about the public sphere, where, to an extent that Aristotle's contemporaries never imagined, Americans of the 21st century are swamped with persuasive appeals from advertisers and politicians, or the private sphere.

Where student-faculty relations are involved, the three kinds of persuasion usually occur in combination. Take, for example, the issue of absences and late papers. Most professors present strict, no-nonsense policies on their

course information handouts: "only three absences are permitted"; "lateness will be considered an absence," "absences due to illness are excused only with a doctor's note," and so forth. In practice, however, there are some good reasons for missing class:

I had to go to a funeral (or wake).

My car wouldn't start.

I was in an accident.

I had to appear in court.

I had to take my roommate to the emergency room.

I was sick (most frequently, the flu or strep throat).

In some instances, students and faculty may disagree on what constitutes a good reason:

I had a dentist appointment.

I had to drive my aunt to the airport.

I had to go to my cat's funeral.

I went to Disney World with my friends.

Even a good reason, however, may not be enough to convince. Unless the student has established a credible *ethos* by attending class regularly, being attentive, handing assignments in on time, and doing well on exams, his or her excuses may be greeted with skepticism. A student with a strong *ethos* and a sketchy reason is more likely to be trusted than one with a weak *ethos* and a good reason.

Pathos also comes into play, especially when a student is obviously upset. And sometimes the sheer number of reasons for missing a class or an assignment compels trust. When the problems are overwhelming, it's hard to believe that anyone would make them up, as in the following note:

"Please excuse my absences from your class and for missing our scheduled appointment on Wednesday. On Tuesday we had a major computer failure at my job, and I did not get out of work until 3:00 A.M. I decided that it would be better to just stay awake and try and make it through my classes and then go home to sleep. However, I fell asleep in my 8:00 class and decided that it would be best if I went home after that. The next few days were spent mostly in the hospital, as my boyfriend's sister tried to commit suicide."

Of course, a good reason is not necessarily a true one, and it is generally acknowledged that the rate of student illnesses and family deaths increases sharply at exam time. Although the chances of being found out

may seem remote, occasionally a “bereaved” student is caught lying. A colleague recently reported that Susan, a student in her *Writing I* class, after the sudden, unexpected death of her father, had composed a touching tribute to him, for which she had received a high grade. The paper had been late, unavoidably, as the funeral and mourning process had taken their toll. A few weeks later, at a dinner party, the colleague was introduced by mutual friends to Susan’s parents—both very much alive.

Persuasive appeals play a role in other kinds of student-faculty interactions. The growth of the internet and its vast assortment of online documents has made plagiarism an enormous problem in the academic world. The fact that professional writers occasionally make the news by plagiarizing their articles doesn’t help.

On college campuses, an accusation of plagiarism usually leads to an awkward and unpleasant confrontation. The accused student almost always appears shocked to discover that someone else’s paragraphs have appeared in his or her paper. The persuasive effort begins with good reasons, generally involving computer malfunction or careless error:

“I don’t know how that got in there!” [staring in disbelief at the offending passage].

“I cited the source of that -- didn’t I? I meant to.”

“That was in my notes, but it wasn’t supposed to be in my final paper. I must have *printed the wrong file by mistake*.”

However, occasionally this process is inverted and a student actually succeeds in being persuasive by producing a bad reason. Debbie, a student in my *Writing II* class, submitted a research paper consisting largely of chunks of text which had been cut-and-pasted from various internet sources. I was not looking forward to confronting Debbie, and I had prepared a speech explaining “fair use” of other writers’ work, the seriousness of academic dishonesty and the penalties she was likely to incur. However, she surprised me.

“How much of this essay did *you* write,” I asked in a censorious tone.

“Not much, to tell the truth,” she replied. “Most of it I took off the internet.”

No excuses; this was unusual. However, I persevered:

“Do you know what plagiarism is?”

“Oh, yes,” Debbie responded. “I do it all the time. I can’t help it. Several teachers have spoken to me about it...”

“But...but...”



I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“You see,” she went on, “the thing is, when I read something, it sounds so good. I can’t think of any way to change the wording. The author’s wording is perfect. Maybe I should just put the whole paper in quotes?”

Who could make this up? By not even pretending to have a “good reason” for plagiarizing, Debbie established a credible *ethos*; I believed her. Her sense of helplessness, the confession of plagiarism addiction, also created an element of *pathos*, a sympathetic desire to help Debbie learn how to explain other people’s ideas in her own words.

Successful teaching, too, depends on the art of persuasion. Teachers must try, from the very first day of class, to establish a positive *ethos*: we must convince students that we are trustworthy as well as being knowledgeable; that our assignments and tests are fair and reasonable; that we are committed to their learning. We must provide good reasons (*logos*) why our subject is important, worth the time and effort they will need to understand it—a particularly challenging task in required courses. Perhaps most difficult, but found in the best teachers, is the element of *pathos*, the ability to stir emotion, to communicate enthusiasm for one’s subject and to convince students that they can succeed.

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and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review