Activity: Debating English Major Topics

1. Group up with a debate partner. There are twelve cards with pre-prepared topics on them. Pass them around so every person can pick a topic.
2. Each person chooses the side they want to take on *their* topic; their partner will debate the opposite side. Choose which topic to debate on first. Each debate can include an opening argument, one rebuttal, and concluding remarks for both people. Then, move on to the second topic.

Adjust rules as needed for optimal enjoyment.

A Rhetorical View of Debate

While we might assume arguments are all about logic and proving your point, rhetorician Chaim Perelman's rhetorical view of argumentation that assumes:

1. **Words can only approximate experiences.** What we describe or agree to isn't neatly transmitted logical proof – it's rhetoric. Our conversations only transmit approximated ideas. Perelman explains argumentation in terms of what rhetoric works rather than what logic works.
2. **Fallacies aren't always fallacious.** Perelman believes that the only logical fallacy is mistaking a universal audience for a particular audience. In short, virtually every "logical fallacy" can be useful in a particular situation, but fail in the wrong situation.

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|  | Not Useful | Maybe Useful |
| **Ad Hominem** | "This man's face is dumb." | "This man has been known to deceive audiences." |
| **Slippery Slope** | "If we let students skateboard, they'll want to ride motorcycles in the buildings." | "If we let students bring food inside, they might attract rats." |
| **Tu Quoque** | "Sure I stole a set of silverware, but you took a fork!" | "Yes, I took a fork, but you still stole a set of silverware." |
| **Argument from Authority** | "I learned from my favorite YouTube personality that spinach makes you stronger." | "I should take this medicine a doctor prescribed me." |
| **Bandwagon Fallacy** | "Everyone was supporting the political candidate, so I did too." | "Everyone was running away from the bear, so I did too." |

Challenge: During your debate, find ways to use well-known logical fallacies to make your argument in a way that makes sense to you.

**Or** if you think that the concept of fallacies is useful, try to find the fallacies in your opponent's argument. Did the focus on fallacies help or hinder the debate?

Further Thoughts and Opinions

These are some thoughts from past experiences in debate. Take what works, leave the rest.

* **Your argument affects people.**  Chances are that whatever you argue for may affect another person adversely. In my opinion, you should be prepared to face a person affected by your argument. For example, if you're going to argue that people shouldn't skateboard at CalPoly, you should be able to firmly defend this opinion to a skateboarder at CalPoly.
* **Not all conflicts are debates.** While it's alleged that you can challenge anyone on the internet to a formal debate wherever there is a comment section, these reports are largely exaggerated. A formal debate is definitively agreed upon by two people beforehand by two opponents who agree to respectfully allow one another to speak.
* **Engage your opponent's strongest arguments, not their weakest.** It strengthens your argument and the debate. This is also part of assuming the best of your opponent rather than the worst. Consider Wayne C. Booth's Golden Rule in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*: "I must act so that the principles of my conduct are reversible, against myself, universally applicable" (1519).
* **Don't over-accuse someone of fallacies.**  Debate is about more than just pointing out one logical fallacy in your opponent's argument after another. If you find yourself stuck in this pattern, try describing how you feel their logic fails, rather than relying on the term.
* **Debates are a way to learn and grow.**  It's all right to learn from the opponent, to grant them credit for things you agree with, and even acknowledge defeat. Debating is just one way to explore a topic, and it may reduce it an either/or scenario that sometimes doesn't accurately represent the matter. It might be necessary to look at things from another perspective to see the whole picture.
* **You have a right to represent your opinion.**  Sometimes issues are complex, and both sides may have some valid opinions. Just because someone has a different but valid perspective, it doesn't mean you should concede yours. Nobody else knows your situation like you, so represent yourself as strongly as your opponent represents themselves, and may the best person win.

Thanks for participating!

Works Cited

Booth, Wayne C. "From Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent." *Modern and Postmodern Rhetoric,* Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 1493-1519

Perelman, Chaim. "The Realm of Rhetoric." Indiana, U of Notre Dame, 1982.