PERSUASION FROM AN EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD'S PERSPECTIVE: PERRY AND PIAGET

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In 1973, Lee Odell observed that "if significant improvement in writing comes only as students grow intellectually, we shall have to understand and assist students with that growth. And to do so, we shall have to be familiar with recent work in the psychology of human development" (36). The literature that appeared over the next dozen years exploring the implications of developmental psychology for teaching writing is reviewed by Andrea Lunsford in "Cognitive Studies and the Teaching of Writing."

Several articles provide rationales for looking in particular at the theories of William Perry (Bizzell, Burnham, Krupa) and Jean Piaget (Barritt and Kroll), and a few articles have explored in detail how these theories help explain problems students have in their writing. Janice Hays explores how Perry's theory explains the lack of maturity in students' arguments. And both Andrea Lunsford and Annette Bradford suggest that one reason basic writers have difficulty handling abstractions is their not having mastered Piaget's stage of formal operations.

In this article, we look at how the theories of William Perry and Jean Piaget explain choices our students made in writing persuasive essays and at the implications of their theories for teaching persuasion to eighteen-year-olds.

THE ASSIGNMENT

We asked students to "persuade the other members of your workshop group to change their minds and/or behavior on any

topic of your choice." Our aim was to teach students why and how to make writing choices based on their audience. As James Kinneavy explains, all writing involves making a series of decisions based upon the subject matter, the reader, and the writer. Depending upon the writer's aim, one of these factors will have a dominant influence on the writer's decisions. In persuasive writing, the audience has the dominant influence (38-40)—the writer must make choices that will influence members of their audience to change their minds or behavior.

To encourage students to make decisions based on their audience, we had them question the group members to determine that two of the three were neutral or disagreed with the writer. Students then devised a set of questions for their group, interviewed the members, and developed a profile of each. They wrote journal entries exploring possible strategies for persuading these individuals. Students exchanged drafts, read them at home, and rated how persuaded they were on a scale of 1-5. After hearing the papers read aloud in their groups, they discussed how each could be made more persuasive. We told them that their papers would be evaluated according to how effectively they persuaded group members to change their beliefs or behavior.

But even with all of the above, this assignment turned out to be puzzlingly difficult; many first-year students seemed unable or unwilling to make writing choices based on what would influence their audience. Some students had trouble thinking of a topic, saying in conference "I really don't feel strongly about anything." Other students didn't want to "force" their ideas on anyone; they felt more comfortable presenting both sides of the issue and letting their classmates make up their own minds. Some students seemed uninterested in finding out what their peers thought about the topic. They treated their audience analyses as mechnical exercises: they had few questions, spent little time, and wrote a composite analysis, as if all the students were exactly the same. When they shared drafts, some of them ignored suggestions, seemingly not caring whether their peers were persuaded.

Some students seemed to make writing choices based on the subject matter rather than the audience. For example, Jenny wanted to persuade her group to stop eating meat. One would expect that Jenny would find out how much meat her classmates ate, why they ate meat, how much they knew about nutrition, and so on. Instead, she used the organization of her library sources

to organize her own paper, which included "three major standpoints in discussing problems with meat," "six major disease hazards," and "seven recommendations." Another student, John, wanted to persuade his peers not to drink excessively, a good choice of topics for his audience. But although the supporting details he found in the library weren't relevant to this audience, he used them anyway: "*U.S.A. Today* reports that fifty-four percent of convicted inmates in local jails who committed violent crimes drank alcohol shortly beforehand. These crimes included manslaughter (68%), assault (2%), sexual assault (52%), and murder (49%)." John's peers probably would not see themselves as potential convicts.

WHY DO SOME STUDENTS HAVE PROBLEMS WITH PERSUASION?

There are many possible reasons why students had problems with this assignment. Making writing choices based on the subject matter rather than the audience might reflect a past academic experience in which they have written expository rather than persuasive prose. Arthur Applebee found in his survey of the writing done in American secondary schools that rarely have students done much persuasive writing in a school setting (36-37). What they have done is write reports, summaries, and analyses (36-37).

Another explanation might be the artificiality of the rhetorical situation. According to Applebee's findings, most of the writing students do in high school is to the teacher as audience (48-49). And although we attempted to convince the students that their group members were their audience, still we gave the grade to the final portfolio, which included this paper. So students may have made decisions based on what would persuade the teacher rather than on what would persuade their peers.

Discourse community theory provides a third explanation. In their first year, students are busy learning the conventions of the academic discourse community in general and of the discourse communities in their various disciplines. Asking them to write a paper which ignores the conventions of the academic community in a course which exists within this community could have been confusing. For example, many students assumed they should use the same type of documentation as they used in their academic

research papers rather than considering what form of documentation would be the most persuasive to their peers.

All of these explanations assume eighteen-year-olds could learn how to write persuasively to their peers if given more practice, a genuine rhetorical context, or a less confusing rhetorical context. However, the theories of cognitive psychologists suggest that even with practice and a clear, genuine context, some students might have problems.

HOW DO EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLDS VIEW PERSUASION?

William Perry, in *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, identifies a developmental continuum based on students' assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge and values. He outlines nine distinct positions, with the basic movement being from dualism to relativism to commitment. Although Perry's work was done in the late 50's and early 60's and involved only a relatively small group of male students at Harvard, it does suggest many of our students might be in dualistic or early relativistic stages (55-56).

In early dualism, "The student sees the world in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad. Right Answers for everything exist in the Absolute, known to the Authority whose role is to mediate (teach) them" (9). But in the college setting, diversity of opinion or multiplicity is impossible to ignore. Some Authorities, the student decides, are not very good at their jobs or they are just constructing exercises " 'so we can learn to find The Answer for ourselves.' " In Position 3, or late dualism, the student sees diversity as "legitimate but still temporary"—in some areas we simply haven't found The Answer yet (9).

In Position 4, early relativism, multiplicity seems so extensive the student concludes that in this vast realm " 'anyone has a right to his own opinion,' or that relativistic reasoning is a special case of 'what They want' within Authority's realm." Relativism in some form continues through Position 6; it remains for the student in Positions 7-9 to perceive the need for commitment in a relativistic world and to work out his or her own style of commitment.

To illustrate the importance of the student's changing world view, Perry opens his book by asking us to imagine a situation in which a professor delivers a lecture on "three theories explanatory of ______." Students A, B, and C, with their differing

assumptions about the origin and nature of knowledge, perceive the lecture in entirely different ways (1-2). Likewise, when we ask our students to "persuade your classmates," they may understand the assignment very differently.

A student in a dualistic stage may infer he is to go to the library to find The Answer and use Authority to support it. For example, the introduction of Stuart's paper on the Contras suggests he sees the world in polar terms: "In reviewing the situation in Central America, specifically in Nicaragua, it is often hard to distinguish between good and evil . . . . On one side of this battle is the Sandinistas . . . . On the other side is a small resistance group known as the Contras." In order to determine which side was good and which was evil, Stuart relied on the testimony of one Contra, Miguel Bolanos, who defected from the Nicaraguan government. Bolanos accused the Sandinistas of destroying private enterprise, denying freedom of speech, and attacking the church. Stuart concludes: "Now that you know the facts, I think you will agree that it is of utmost importance to continue aid to the Contras." Stuart seemed to think that if he went to the library and located one Authority, he would be finding out "the facts," and that if he quoted from that Authority, he would be able to persuade his classmates. Although in rating Stuart's paper one of his classmates listed all of the "facts" about Nicaragua that were confusing to him, Stuart's revision still relied solely on this one Authority.

Another student, Nancy, wanted to persuade her group to be in favor of genetic engineering. When she interviewed them, they all were against the use of cloning to create human beings, saying "that's what God does" and "it goes against my morals, man isn't supposed to mess with genes of anything, especially himself." To address these reservations she relied solely on one quotation from Joshua Lederberg, a "Noble Laureate," who actually expresses in cold, mechanical terms her audience's very fears: "if a superior individual . . . is identified, why not copy it directly, rather than suffer all the risks of recombinatorial disruption, including those of sex? . . . Leave sexual reproduction for experimental purposes; when a suitable type is ascertained, take care to maintain it by clonal propagation." Perhaps Nancy thought a "Noble Laureate" must know the Right Answer and so quoting him would reveal this Right Answer to her group.

Whereas Stuart and Nancy felt confident about taking the "right" stance on an issue and attempting to persuade their classmates, some students weren't at all comfortable. Perhaps those students mentioned earlier who couldn't think of a topic were in the stage of early relativism. Recognizing that different conclusions can be reached on an issue and seeing no reason to make a commitment to any one of them, these students may have found this assignment difficult because it required them to make a commitment.

Other students in a stage of relativism might view the assignment as an exercise devised by the teacher. It might offer practice in using authorities to support an argument, but one conclusion might seem just as good as another. If everyone has a right to her opinion and no opinion is better than another, why try to persuade at all? Thus, the student might not seem very invested in her position or in the task of persuading. Sam, for example, revealed that he didn't think there was a Right Answer when he said in conference, "I'll write about capital punishment. I can take either side." In his journal, he called the assignment "busywork." Having ascertained his group's position, he simply took the opposite.

Inhelder and Piaget's analysis of the cognitive development of adolescents provides another explanation for why students seemed to ignore their peer audience. (Although Perry saw himself as building on Piaget and then going beyond him in the later stages of his continuum, a study by Bruce Perry et al demonstrates a lack of correlation between the two models of cognitive development.) In *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, Inhelder and Piaget suggest most eighteen-year-olds are in the process of mastering formal operations, or abstract logical thinking abilities (340, 343, 346-47).

What thought processes characterize formal operations? According to Piaget, a tendency toward hypothetico-deductive thought. Barry Wadsworth, in *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development*, explains "whereas concrete operational thought is logical thought, it is restricted to the 'concrete' world. Not until the development of formal operations does reasoning become 'content free' or 'concrete free.' Formal reasoning can deal with the *possible* as well as with the *real*" (169). Inhelder and Piaget assert that "the most fundamental property of formal thought

is this reversal of direction between *reality* and *possibility*" (255), explaining

> *Possibility* no longer appears merely as an estension of an empirical situation or of actions actually performed. Instead, it is *reality* that is now secondary to *possibility*. . . . In other words, formal thinking is essentially hypothetico-deductive. . . . conclusions are rigorously deduced from premises whose truth status is regarded only as hypothetical at first; only later are they empirically verified. This type of thinking proceeds *from* what is possible *to* what is empirically real. (251)

Given this tendency toward hypothetic-deductive thought, it is not surprising that many students would interpret "persuade your classmates" as "construct an argument"—would be interested in beginning with hypothetical assertions and creating a deductive argument which would lead to conclusions the writer would see as more "real" than any isolated concrete facts, including his classmates' "real" beliefs about the topic.

For example, to persuade his classmates that the drinking age should remain twenty-one, Rob constructed a deductive argument based on hypothetical premises: "To be given the legal right to do things, you must do them responsibly. You admit you don't drink responsibly. Therefore you shouldn't be given the legal right to drink." Although Rob's group members all told him this argument would not convince them that the drinking age in Vermont should be twenty-one, he saw no need to make any changes in his paper, perhaps thinking his logic made the paper irrefutable and so persuasive.

Similarly, Dan was convinced that logic alone would persuade anyone that there is no God. He asserts, "By applying simple logic, Atheism appears to be the only reality." He then presents several logical arguments, including "science and technology of today have rendered the possibilities of God obsolete," "if there really were a God, how could such an omnipotent being allow so much evil," and "belief in a super-being is inconsistent with the recognition of worth, freedom, and responsibility of man . . . . if man is totally free, then God can not exist." He concludes, "I can not see how a thinking individual . . . could honestly believe in an all-powerful being."

Furthermore, Piaget and Inhelder explain that adolescent thinking differs from adult thinking because of the egocentrism which accompanies the development of formal operations. In Piaget's theory of cognitive development, each new gain in cognitive ability is accompanied by a corresponding type of egocentrism—in this case, an inability to see why reality should not correspond to the conclusions reached by (one's own) logic. Inhelder and Piaget explain that:

> The indefinite extension of powers of thought made possible by the new instruments of propositional logic at first is conducive to a failure to distinguish between the ego's new and unpredicted capacities and the social or cosmic universe to which they are applied. In other words, the adolescent goes through a phase in which he attributes an unlimited power to his own thoughts so that the dream of a glorious future or of transforming the world through Ideas . . . seems to be not only fantasy but also an effective action which in itself modifies the empirical world. This is obviously a form of cognitive egocentrism. (345-46).

Barry Wadsworth rephrases: "In adolescent thought, the criterion for making judgments becomes what is logical to the adolescent, as if what is logical in the eyes of the adolescent is *always* right, and what is illogical is *always* wrong. . ." (164).

With this view of the world as logically ordered, one would assume, as many of our students did, that a logical presentation of the material, or an explanation of how their logic led to the conclusions, would convince any audience about any topic. One would see no need to tailor the material or organization to the needs of individual readers. And one would see no need to use emotional appeals.

Perhaps this explains why Jenny assumed merely listing the health and economic reasons why one shouldn't eat meat would convince her group members to give it up entirely. She saw no need to temper her purpose from persuading her peers to give up meat to persuading them to eat less meat. She saw no need to address her group members' reasons for eating meat, or the practical difficulties they might experience in giving up meat. Jenny apparently assumed behavior is rooted in reason and that everyone would find her reasoning convincing. Mark was so confident that reasoning would persuade his group members not to be afraid

of sharks that he unwittingly included material that played on their very fears, including saying sharks are (only) as dangerous as pit bulls and naming all of the dangerous shark species, which (however) are greatly out-numbered by the non-dangerous species.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING PERSUASION

Perry's work suggests that many eighteen-year-olds are struggling to maintain their dualistic world view and so may not be open to an assignment which requires them to take multiple points of view. Inhelder and Piaget's work suggests that many are in the process of developing the ability to reason logically about the abstract or hypothetical, and so are interested in writing to an objective, logical audience. Does it make sense, then, to try to teach them persuasion at this time?

Perry and Inhelder and Piaget suggest that formal education can actually encourage cognitive growth (this assumption underlies much of Perry's book; Wadsworth 197, Inhelder and Piaget 337). According to both theories, cognitive growth is initiated by some experience of disequilibrium (Perry 37; Wadsworth 189), and both suggest that the disequilibrium which initiates the growth from adolescent to adult thinking is facilitated by interaction with peers. According to Perry, interactions with peers often cause students to question their assumptions about the nature and location of knowledge and values. For example, in discussing what happens to a student in Position 1 on coming to college, Perry explains,

> In our records, the confrontation with pluralism occurs most powerfully in the dormitory. Here diversity emerges within the in-group with a starkness unassimilable to the assumptions of Position 1 by any rationalizations whatever. The accommodations of structure forced by this confrontation make possible a more rapid and clear perception of pluralism in the curriculum. (69).

Inhelder and Piaget also suggest that discussion with peers encourages decentering:

> the tendency of adolescents to congregate in peer groups . . . is not merely the effect of pressures towards conformity but also a source of intellectual decentering. It is most often in discussions between friends, when the promoter of a theory

has to test it against the theories of the others, that he discovers its fragility. (346).

In other words, both Perry and Inhelder and Piaget suggest that it is actually through peer interactions that students come to see the limitations of their own ways of thinking. First-year English, and in particular group work on the persuasive essay, would seem to be an ideal environment in which students can discover that what is convincing to them is not convincing to others, that their views of knowledge or the conclusions reached by their own logic are not always shared by others.

Theories of cognitive development, then, provide another justification for using the methods of collaborative learning described by John Trimbur in "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing." According to Trimbur, an assumption underlying the various forms of collaborative learning is that "students can learn together and from one another in new and potentially significant ways" (88). Perry and Inhelder and Piaget suggest that it is through working with each other, rather than through modeling the teacher or other professionals, that students will begin to develop from adolescent into adult (or, as Patricia Bizzell suggests in discussing Perry, academic) thinkers.

And so in assigning the persuasive essay, we are not just giving students experience writing with a different aim, we're also trying to encourage their cognitive growth.[1] And with this added purpose must come a change in methods. Theories of cognitive development provide an explanation of why standard textbook methods for teaching persuasion may not be helpful for some students. For example, most chapters on persuasion encourage the student to carefully analyze his or her audience. But one can't assume adolescents will think that such analysis is important. According to Perry's scheme, students in a position of dualism may think quoting from an Authority should persuade all audiences, while Inhelder and Piaget's scheme suggests that some eighteen-year-olds will think a presentation of their own logic should persuade all audiences, thus making analysis of a particular audience unnecessary. Chapters on persuasion also often teach persuasive strategies. But again, we can't assume students will reach the same conclusions as we would about which strategies will be effective. Students who think quoting an Authority is persuasive or students who think logic is persuasive may see no need to include emo-

tional appeals, or to identify with their audience's image before trying to change it, or to consider the opposition's response to their arguments. And students in early relativism may think that because people have a right to their own opinions, techniques intended to manipulate their thoughts and feelings are unethical.

How can we help our students with the difficult task of persuading their peers? Most importantly, they must view their peers rather than the teacher as the "real" audience of their essays. And this will not happen if the teacher is the evaluator of the papers: the groups must participate in responding to drafts, in conferencing with the teacher, and in evaluating the final drafts. Once students are genuinely writing to each other, they need to see the importance of analyzing their audience and of making writing choices based on that audience. To do this, students need to be given lots of time and encouragement to interact with each other—to get honest reader response so that they can find out each other's views. They have to be encouraged to tell each other not just whether their essays are "good," but whether their essays have "worked"—are members going to stop smoking? vote against the proposed bill? view fraternities differently? If not, why not? What would make them change their minds or actions? Such discussion can help students discover not only that their peers don't always agree with them but also that quoted authority or logic alone won't persuade their peers on every topic.

Even after incorporating these changes in method, however, we found that some papers still were informed by dualistic thinking and/or egocentrism. Here, Perry and Piaget provide us with a better understanding of these students and their writing. Rather than blaming our students for not working hard or questioning the quality of our teaching, we now attribute some of their problems to their present state of cognitive or ethical/intellectual development. In the end, theories of cognitive development turned out to be most useful in helping us practice what we preach when we teach eighteen-year-olds: consider your audience. As Perry puts it:

> if we apply the theory to ourselves, *to our ways of seeing*, then we can see the students better where they are, where they're coming from, and where they may have to go, and if we see the students better where they are, we then may

be able to invent better ways of communicating with them. ("Intellectual" 63)

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NOTES

[1]We are not suggesting that first-year English be designed so students are categorized and then pushed to achieve the next level of cognitive development (as Mike Rose cautions us against in a 1988 *CCC* article). Perry observes in a 1977 article "*pushing* people to develop is very different from *providing* for their development. We do not implement these theories [of cognitive development] by pushing the student" ("Intellectual" 62-63). In asking our students to persuade their peers, we hope to provide the disequilibrium which will encourage some students' cognitive development. We do not expect one writing assignment or even one course to move all students to a certain stage of development.

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