

COMMUNICATION

Persuasion

Discernment:

Debate and the Process of Attitude Change

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COMMUNICATION

Persuasion (COMM 264)

Thomas Wagner

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Course Objectives

- 1) The primary goal of this course is to provide students with a solid grounding in theories, principles, and strategies of persuasion. Students will gain familiarity with findings from empirical investigations on persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining.
- 2) Learn how to analyze, respond to, and generate persuasive messages.
- 3) Gain an understanding of strategies and techniques of persuasion in a variety of contexts including law, politics, business, religion, and advertising.
- 4) Think reflexively about persuasive communication situations and apply theory to these situations.
- 5) Develop proficiency in the practical application of persuasion theories.

Connecting Jesuit Principles to Persuasion

My teaching goal was to help students recognize the link between Jesuit principles and the theories covered in my persuasion class. Persuasion is attitude change and the Jesuit practice of discernment can contribute to the way people make this change. In the persuasion course, we learn: what attitudes are, how they form, how they change, theories of attitude change, and the practical application of these theories through debate. The debate assignment in this course was an excellent opportunity for the students to examine how discernment is part of the process of their attitude change.

Discernment: Debate and the Process of Attitude Change

Attitude change is complex, and the practice of discernment is part of this process. Discernment goes beyond evaluating the pros and cons of an issue and looking into one's own feelings. Assessing the merits of the possible outcomes from a choice and considering one's emotions are part of the practice of discernment. In doing so, one's spirit contributes to making a good decision.

Debate Assignment

Debate Assignment

Learning the Practice of Discernment

As students at a Jesuit university, you are already familiar with the exercise of making good choices in your life. Making good choices requires discernment.

Discernment: “the process of making choices when the option is not between good and evil, but between several possible courses of action, all of which are potentially good”
(Mooney, 2004, p.6)

Goal of the debates:

1. Evaluate the arguments for issues using evidence and conviction.
2. Practice inoculation theory.
3. Practice the behaviors associated with good credibility.
4. Follow the guidelines/requirements for the debate.
5. Actively listen to the arguments for the issues debated.
6. Practice discernment for all issues to determine your attitude.
7. Reflect on changes to your attitudes in writing.

Guidelines:

| | |
|-----------|--------------------------|
| 3 minutes | Affirmative Constructive |
| 1 minute | Negative Cross X |
| 3 minutes | Negative Constructive |
| 1 minutes | Affirmative Cross X |
| 3 minutes | Affirmative Constructive |
| 1 minute | Negative Cross X |
| 3 minutes | Negative Constructive |
| 1 minutes | Affirmative Cross X |
| 2 minutes | Negative Rebuttal |
| 2 minutes | Affirmative Rebuttal |
| 2 minutes | Negative Rebuttal |
| 2 minutes | Affirmative Rebuttal |

Total: 24 minutes.

Remember, the affirmative is the one seeking change from convention. The negative always has presumption.

Reference

Student Reflections

CS

March 24, 2006

As a product of catholic education, I have been taught that there are right choices and wrong ones. If I looked hard enough at any situation, I would find the good and the evil. As I got older, I began to see gray in the decisions that faced me. As a result of the steroid debate in class, I now see gray, where I once saw black and white.

The negative side of the debate maintained that steroids should not be legalized. They argued about the safety of steroids: they are dangerous, can cause organ damage, cancer and tumors. They also stressed a love of the game and how young people would feel the need to start using steroids at a young age to be able to compete in the pros. Perhaps the negative side's most telling argument was that a supposed "82 percent" of fans think that steroid usage should be eliminated. All of these points were very well-described. The affirmative side, which argued for the legalization of steroids, argued that these very fans that claimed to wish away steroid usage do not come to games to watch mediocre plays: they want home runs, big touchdowns and slam dunks. I believe the affirmative position's most influential argument was when they compared the use of steroids to the use of alcohol and tobacco. These two drugs which are just as harmful, if not more so than steroids, are perfectly legal. So why not legalize steroids?

It was at this point that I really began to consider why steroids are not legal. If people argue it is for the health of the players, then why are tobacco and alcohol legal? Athletes consume plenty of these two elements and no one seems to care. If it is the athlete's health we are worried about, then why just their health? What about the millions of other innocent Americans who suffer as a result of legal drugs? The affirmative side raised the point that it is the athletes' free will to determine whether or not they want to consume such drugs. If certain players were not comfortable using steroids, they would not have to take them. This argument was very effective, and made me realize that I have a problem with why certain drugs are legal and some illegal when all appear to be just as harmful.

Therefore, I believe that the debate on steroid usage changed my opinion of one from an absolute "NO" for legalization of steroids to a "maybe". After all, if you are going to make other drugs that are just as harmful to the American public (not just sports figures) legal, then why stop there? If safety is going to be used as an argument, then all drugs need to be illegal, because they can all harm our bodies and our "love of the game". This debate effectively raised the issue of discernment for me. I feel that there is not a morally right answer in this case, and I can now see the benefits of both sides. As a result, I find myself deep in the familiar gray matter, instead of my previous black and white.

JR

March 22, 2006

All of the debates brought up relevant arguments and reasoning to back their position, which allowed me to think about these issues in ways I never had when forming my initial attitude. Out of all of the debates, the steroids debate forced me to critically analyze and call into question the attitude I held prior to hearing the affirmative and negative arguments. Listening to the affirmative arguments, many of the issues that were brought up had merit and were ones I had never considered before. Some of the most persuasive arguments in favor of legalizing steroids were the legalization of other drugs such as tobacco and alcohol, which are arguably just as harmful to people as steroids. It was stressed that steroids are not going to make someone without any talent or skill one of the greatest players, but is simply a means of enhancing the natural talent of an athlete or individual. Prior to hearing this debate, my attitude was completely in support of banning the use of steroids, but, after listening to the arguments of the affirmative side, I begin to consider the reasons for possible legalization.

The negative also had arguments that deserved merit and supported my attitude going into the debate. The arguments that helped strengthen my existing attitude were: steroid use with younger athletes

and the current legalization for medical purposes. The issue of fairness was one of the arguments I used to oppose the use of steroids, especially in athletics, but the affirmative was able to respond with a counterargument that was just as credible in defending that it leveled the playing field which makes things fairer. Although I don't think I would completely side with the legalization of steroids, my attitude is weaker and less absolute in condemning their use.

The arguments of both sides caused me to reevaluate my position on the issue of steroids. I now can see the merit of both arguments, instead of standing firmly in opposition to their use for any reason other than for certain medical purposes. My attitude was based purely on the little bits of information I had heard, which usually stressed the negative aspects of steroids use causing me to adopt that position. I had never weighed the pros and cons of the issue in depth, which may have been why I was so influenced by the affirmative's arguments in support of their legalization that were new to me. Their use of comparative arguments by the affirmative, such as the use of plastic surgery and other personal enhancement techniques used in society, made it difficult to discern between which side of the debate was right or wrong.

Discernment is defined as "the act or process of exhibiting keen insight and good judgment." After hearing this debate, it is much harder to discern which position is better or holds more merit. It is not a question of one being right or wrong, but rather, a matter of one holding more personal value than the other. If I had to discern between the two opposing arguments and form an attitude based on what I thought was important; I would have to stay with my initial opposing attitude towards steroid use. Although I see merit in the arguments presented in support of legalizing steroids, I also value the very nature of sports and heroism that it creates in our society. The legalization of enhancement drugs would undermine and threaten the very nature of sports and competition that is so important.