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What's So Funny About Stephen Toulmin? Using Political Cartoons to Teach the Toulmin Analysis of Argument

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With the Toulmin analysis, determining an argument's warrants can be especially tricky and frustrating for students. Using cartoons is an effective strategy for teaching the importance of warrants in a way that students can easily understand and enjoy.

With a title such as "What's So Funny about Stephen Toulmin?" it would seem appropriate to open with a quirky joke about Stephen Toulmin and Socrates sitting under a tree or maybe something like "Stephen Toulmin walks into a bar." However, I was unsuccessful in this creative enterprise, which led me to two conclusions: that I'm not good at writing jokes, and, more important, perhaps, that Toulmin really isn't that funny after all. Yet, because I hope to illustrate how cartoons can be used to teach argumentative concepts for analysis, I still thought it appropriate to open with some humor. We'll start, instead, with some old jokes as a means of introducing the application and usefulness of the Toulmin model to argument.

So here's the first one:

> Q: Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?
>
> A: Because he was dead.

Let's think about this joke in terms of a Toulmin analysis: If the claim is that the monkey fell, then the support for the claim is that he fell because he died. The warrant, or unstated assumption that bridges the claim and the support, is that dead monkeys can't hang on to tree branches.

Why is this joke funny? Some would argue that it's not. But whether you laughed or groaned and rolled your eyes, the reason is likely because the warrant is so obvious—we wouldn't expect something so painfully obvious to inform the punch line of a joke.

Let's try another:

> A baby polar bear says to his mama polar bear: Mama, are you sure I'm a polar bear? She responds: Yes, dear, why? He replies: Because I'm freezing.

While this is not another laugh-out-loud joke, we can again look at it in

terms of a Toulmin application. Our claim is that the baby doesn't think he is a polar bear. The support is that he is cold. Therefore, the audience assumes that polar bears aren't supposed to be cold. To understand this particular joke, we have to know a thing or two about polar bears—such as that they live in cold climates, that they have physiological means of keeping themselves warm, and so on. The joke is the audience's "surprise" that a baby polar bear is cold. To get the punch line requires more knowledge (although not much more) than knowing that dead monkeys can't keep their grips on tree branches. If we do not know anything at all about polar bears, the joke couldn't possibly be funny, and we would have to explain the punch line—which is a sure way to ruin any joke.

My point here is that, while most composition instructors would agree that the Toulmin analysis of argument is neither easily taught nor the most interesting rhetorical concept for students to study—Toulmin's graduate adviser was said to be "deeply pained by the book" *The Uses of Argument* and, albeit for different reasons, I suspect many of our students are pained by it as well—the use of humor and cartoons, especially the likes of those found in editorial pages of newspapers and magazines or in the *New Yorker*, helps to bring not only understanding, but also a certain degree of levity, to the classroom. Because cartoons comprise both words and pictures, students must be able to critically read verbal and pictorial cues to determine what the claim is, how it is supported, and what assumptions are being made by the author and the audience. In addition to aiding students with these Toulmin concepts, the use of cartoons also helps them to better understand important components of argumentation including audience, tone, and context—concepts essential to creating strong arguments, and in the case of jokes and cartoons, essential to making us laugh.

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The Toulmin model of argument was introduced in 1958 by British philosopher Stephen Toulmin in *The Uses of Argument* and adapted by compositionists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Consisting of six parts—claim, support, warrant, backing, rebuttal, and qualifiers—the model provides a means for composition students "to describe the process by which arguments [are] generated in real discourse" (Fulkerson 45). The application of Toulmin's analysis to cartoons is a great way to get students thinking about the first three parts of an argument as discussed by Toulmin, including what is explicitly stated as well as what is implied.[1] Discovering the warrants, I have found, can be the biggest challenge of teaching the Toulmin model. Frequently, students have a hard time understanding that an essential part of an argument is quite often not written on the page but must be inferred, most often unconsciously, by the audience. Anyone who has taught the Toulmin analysis knows that some students can spend an incredible amount of time treasure hunting for the warrant. It is such an interpretive element that students are often afraid to say what they *think* it is, and instead hunt for something that looks like

what they suppose it must be. And because it follows the way people think rather than formal logic, there is no one right answer—another source of frustration for many students.

Nancy Wood's third edition of *Perspectives on Argument* [2] emphasizes the connection between warrants and audience. Wood states that "since individual audience members vary in their backgrounds and perspectives, not everyone will state the warrants in exactly the same way" (134). She makes clear to her readers that "warrants originate with the arguer, but they also exist in the minds of the audience" (135). If the audience shares the warrants with the author, it will accept them, and the argument is likely to be convincing. Conversely, if the audience does not share the warrants, the argument will not be convincing. In the case of the polar bear joke, if the audience did not share the joker's warrant that polar bears are not supposed to be cold, the joke would fall completely flat. Understanding that warrant, however, makes the joke "laughable."

"Shared warrants," Wood says, "are crucial to the success of an argument

> Political cartoons from student newspapers provide an effective means for discussing warrants.

because they are the most significant way to establish common ground between reader and writer in argument" (137). To illustrate her point, Wood includes a *New Yorker* cartoon of a teacher reading to young students. In response to the cartoon, Wood asks questions that illustrate how different audiences will have different perspectives and knowledge and therefore potentially different warrants. She queries: What is the teacher's claim, and what are her warrants, the warrants of the children, and the warrants of the audience? Finally, she asks, "Why is this funny?" This last question, "Why is this funny?" works well to bring students' attention to the connection between warrants and audience. We could also ask the question, "Why is it not funny?" and discuss the differing interpretations students might have.

Political cartoons from student newspapers provide an effective means for discussing warrants as well as the other parts of the Toulmin analysis within a particular context. One reason is that the claim of a cartoon is almost always the headline for the editorial found near the cartoon. Another reason for their effectiveness is that the topics of the cartoons are campus issues that students are familiar with such as grades, parking issues, student elections, the choice of graduation speakers, and so on. The cartoon in Figure 1 comes from James Madison University's newspaper *The Breeze* and relates to issues of Title IX and sports scholarship funding.

The headline in this case states, "There's more than meets the eye with administration's sports plan." Considering this headline along with the visual presentation of the cartoon and the relevant contextual knowledge (what student athletes, coaches, administration, and the local news have discussed) helps us to simplify the claim to state more directly: Category I sports have an unfair advantage over Category II sports. Students have to "read" the pictorial clues to determine the support for this claim. They would decide that the support is that Category I is driving a fast-looking racecar while Category II is a worried-looking runner

FIGURE I. Cartoon by Seth Casana courtesy of *The Breeze* (James Madison University).

tied to a huge rock. Students would also notice that while the car's nose is at the starting line, our runner is positioned some distance behind that line. Two possible warrants for this cartoon are that that these two depictions suggest unfair advantages and that the real-life situation is similar to the race. A third warrant could be that the new sports plan creates unfair competition between the two sports categories. Students would then have to determine whether they "get" the warrants, and if they are valid for this audience and this context. Does a match between a racecar and a tied-down runner equal an unfair race? (Most would likely answer "yes" to this question.) Does this depiction accurately represent the actual situation? This last question would elicit varying answers depending on student involvement or interest in Category I or Category II sports. Their responses would also change if they weren't interested in competitive sports at all. The same holds true for students' response to the third warrant. Is it true that the new plan creates unfair competition between these sports categories? Turning the warrants into questions works well to illustrate the variability of the audience's perspectives and the impact that variability may have on the success of warrants and ultimately on the cartoon's humor and/or message.

Given a local issue with which students are familiar, they are able to enter easily into the argument. Context then becomes an important element of the classroom discussion. If people outside the school community were to open the paper to this cartoon, there is no reason that they would not be able to understand it in principle, but we could ask students questions such as who else but JMU students, faculty, and staff would know the significance of President Rose as a referee and Athletic Advisor Boerne cheering the competitors? We can ask how knowing or not knowing that information affects the "reading" of the cartoon. Knowing who the target audience is, we could consider how this cartoon would have to be modified for a larger audience or a different target audience such as state legislators or

private donors to the university and so on. Students could consider how the warrants might be interpreted or accepted differently in each case.

> Upon realizing the different reactions and interpretations possible, the students begin to understand that the Toulmin analysis follows the way people think.

While student newspapers work especially well for this exercise, because students are generally immersed in the context of the cartoon, many times the *New Yorker* cartoons are not as easy for students to get. (And I have to be honest and admit that there are some that I simply don't get either.) This is usually because the warrant doesn't work for the students—they don't share or can't determine the knowledge that serves to bridge the claim and the support. Because the warrants involved in these cartoons are not as obvious, each student picks up on different possible warrants. Again this encourages a discussion of the range of assumptions and knowledge that may exist within a single audience. Upon realizing the different reactions and interpretations possible, the students begin to understand that the Toulmin analysis follows the way people think. And Wood's attention to audience reiterates why there may be several warrants that work equally well in addition to some warrants that don't make a joke humorous—or at least meaningful—for some members of that audience.

The *New Yorker* cartoon in Figure 2 works quite well, as it seems the "argument" of the cartoon is immediately obvious. Here students must infer the claim,

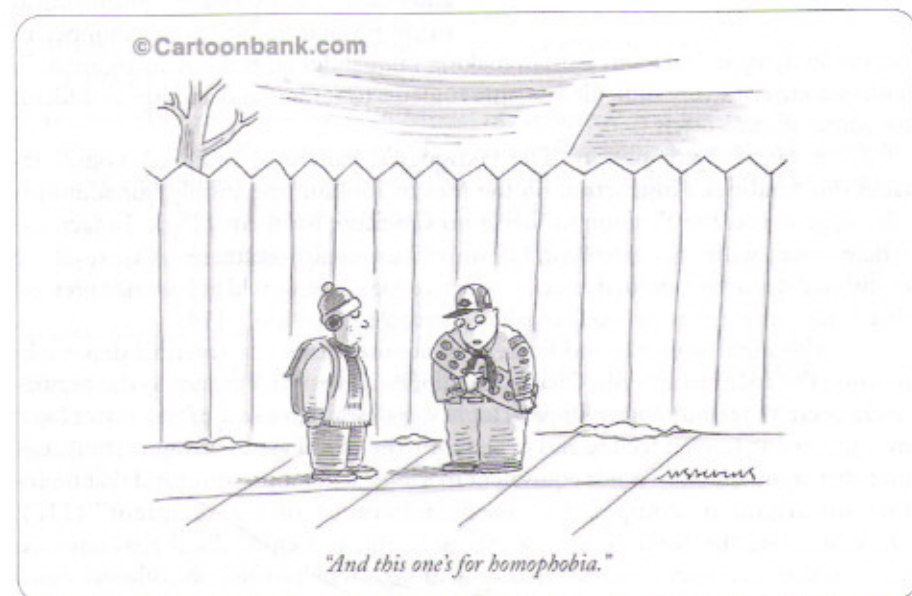"And this one's for homophobia."

FIGURE 2. ©The New Yorker Collection 2001 Mick Stevens from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

because it is not clearly stated in the caption or a headline. They would generally conclude that this cartoon claims that the Boy Scouts are homophobic. The support of that claim is a combination of the verbal and the pictorial; reading one without the other would not lead the students to the correct conclusions. As the Boy Scout points to one of the many badges on his sash, he explains to his not-a-Boy-Scout friend, "This one's for homophobia." Therefore, the support for the claim that Boy Scouts are homophobic is that this Boy Scout has been awarded a patch for just that. The warrant for this one comes quite easily, perhaps because the claim is so obvious. The warrant, students state, is that if the Boy Scouts give a patch for homophobia, it's a sign that they are homophobic. The warrant is what allows us to laugh at this cartoon. It's ridiculous to think that the Boy Scouts would award patches for homophobia, much as they would for lifesaving or swimming. However, knowing the context in which this cartoon is written, it may not be that far-fetched.[3]

> Understanding the Toulmin analysis of argument, and especially the warrants, as rhetorical, or audience-centered, rather than logical helps students to better comprehend the way arguments are constructed, received, and understood.

While using the Toulmin analysis of arguments to discover the humor behind a joke or cartoon works well for students, all this is not to say that the Toulmin analysis alone is the best way to analyze arguments. As Richard Fulkerson deftly points out in "The Toulmin Model of Argument and the Teaching of Composition," the Toulmin method is "cumbersome" in its application to full-length arguments and requires plenty of patience and practice; it is variable—producing as many possible results as the number of people applying it; "it fails to assist in making value judgments about an argument"; and, of course, it's very difficult for some students to understand and just as difficult for some of us to teach (55).

A. Harris Fairbanks, in "The Pedagogical Failure of Toulmin's Logic," attacks one textbook's instruction on the uses of Toulmin specifically, but additionally suggests that the Toulmin model is no substitute for formal logic. In fact, the article closes with the statement, "If we cannot evolve better ways of teaching traditional deductive, inductive, and abductive logic, we should at least not pretend that Toulmin's form is an intellectually acceptable substitute" (114).

Although Fairbanks and Fulkerson cite these issues as potential drawbacks to using the Toulmin analysis, Charles Kneupper argues: "In contrast to the persuasively coercive terminology of formal logic which leads to a sort of tyranny of logic over judgment, human feeling and perception, rhetorical views of argument recognize that argumentation is not equivalent to a logical demonstration and that therefore no argument compels the assent/adherence of the recipient" (118). Understanding the Toulmin analysis of argument, and especially the warrants, as rhetorical, or audience-centered, rather than logical helps students to better comprehend the way arguments are constructed, received, and understood. Applying

such an analysis to cartoons and revealing these issues can be quite helpful in making them aware also of the potential problems they may encounter in their writing. It asks them to give more thought to the assumptions they may or may not share with their audience as well as the various individual assumptions within that audience. This becomes blatantly obvious to students when some laugh out loud at the cartoons they examine and others say, "I don't get it." ◀

Notes

1. In this paper I only discuss the first three elements of the Toulmin analysis—the claim, support, and warrants—because they will always be found in any cartoon or argument. While backing may sometimes be included in cartoons, it is quite rare to find rebuttals or qualifiers.

2. I have worked with Nancy Wood on this textbook in the past, and biases aside I believe it does a good job of presenting the Toulmin analysis of argument to students in a manageable and understandable way.

3. This cartoon appeared in January of 2001, six months before the Supreme Court ruled that under the First Amendment the Boy Scouts could not be forced to accept gay troop leaders. At the time, the court case had been highly publicized.

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