

Expertise & ethics: An argument in 13 pieces

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1. I should introduce myself. I'm a writing consultant at the Bank of Canada in Ottawa. I'm interested in reading, writing, history and food, especially beer. I live in Ottawa, and was born and grew up in Guelph, a fifth-generation Canadian. I strongly support the idea of a wider body politic, which is implied when more people can understand, use, react against, and write themselves the documents of public life. This means that I'm interested in plain language, literacies, and citizenship, as well as learning and the notion of expertise.

2. Expertise should be self-critical; often it isn't. Take Plain Language. In its roughly 25-year history, the Plain Language movement has grown enormously. Successes include more widespread use of plain language in public documents, greater awareness of what plain language is and can do, and a growing body of how-to literature. Like many a 25-year old, Plain Language is in good health and focussed on action. It's relatively untroubled by doubt, self-scrutiny, or rhetorical theory. It's time, I believe, that it were.

3. Expertise should be able to keep at least two things in mind at the same time. Here are two.

- One view of language, which tends to dominate these days, I think, is that language interpenetrates and is constituent of knowledge: Rhetoric is a "means of discovering and validating knowledge. The purposeful use of language . . . can be seen as what makes knowing possible. This tradition also owes something to the sophistic tradition, namely the idea that language necessarily affects the truths that it is about. From this perspective, rhetoric aims at knowledge, or makes it available. Rather than producing persuasion without reference to truth, rhetoric aims at producing mutual understandings and therefore becomes the basis for inquiry into shareable truths. . . . In this view, rhetoric has knowledge as its goal, rather than operates on knowledge as raw material" (John Gage).
- Another view, equally valid in my view, but out of favour these days, or perhaps merely neglected, is that rhetoric consists of "techniques for successfully communicating ideas which are . . . discovered and tested by means which are prior to or beyond rhetoric itself. [This view] owes an obvious debt to the Sophists, in the sense that it treats persuasion sceptically, as having

no bearing on what is finally true." Language use is "independent of the means by which knowledge is generated and validated" (John Gage).

Expertise doesn't know how to operationalize the first view. Expertise, even rhetorical expertise, often unwittingly implies or reflects the second view, often, considering the material, inappropriately.

4. Expertise can be a cult, and cult members can be cruel. I first started thinking about ethics and expertise when I read about the 1990 award for "Public Doublespeak," a "booby prize" given out by the Canadian Council of Teachers of English. The passage was taken from the *Victoria Times Colonist* and concerned the looming (at that time) GST and its application. My views:

- the "winning" passage ([below](#), page 7) isn't doublespeak, even according to CCTE's own definition. If an inserted "GST," in square brackets, is removed, the passage makes sense. The insertion was obviously an error, probably on the part of the reporting journalist, the so-called winner was and is owed an apology by the CCTE "Taskforce on Doublespeak."
- the rationale for selecting and publicizing such a "winner" is suspect, possibly unethical; the rationale depends entirely on knowing that a piece of discourse is a deliberate lie or an attempt to bamboozle, beyond the ken of the adjudicators, in my view.
- castigating someone in public for the language they use is a serious business. It behoves us all to be circumspect in branding others with dunce caps for alleged language transgressions.

5. Plain language is problematic. I'm not sure we can ever say that a given piece of discourse is "plain" or "not plain" language with any certainty. Even if we could agree on what plain language is, and then agree that a given document is, in fact, in plain language, is no guarantee of the document being ethical.

- Sincerity central to the idea of Doublespeak is hard to judge. Sincerity attaches truth-telling to character and will. It allows us to conceive of lying, and has a role in our conceptions of irony and sarcasm. "The great enemy of clear language," George Orwell noted, "is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink." However, we live in an age that suspects and mocks sincerity, that prizes irony, that permits Lucien Bouchard to espouse, according to a biographer, "successive sincerities."

6. All stories, all narratives, carry an ethical burden. It can't be escaped. Plain language documents don't escape this burden by virtue of "plainness." Public documents constrain choice and incite action; the developers and disseminators of these documents must be held responsible.

- This point is made eloquently and powerfully in an article in *College English* called "The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust" by Steven Katz. If you haven't read the article, I commend it to you. Katz says that a document can be reader-centred, written in transparent, plain language, and still be evil. Katz makes the point that an "ethic of expediency," which informs much technical writing, stems from an epistemology of objectivity, and vice versa: the notion of objectivity tends to justify expediency.
- One of Katz's suggestions for mitigating the effects of the ethic of expediency is to recognize "the essentially ethical character of all rhetoric, including our writing theory, pedagogy and practice." This suggestion may strike some as simplistic, but it strikes me as sensible and difficult. As intuitively sensible as it is, there would be some extraordinary implications were we to really take it to heart.
- Similar to this suggestion is Donald McCloskey's plea, at the end of *The Rhetoric of Economics*, to recognize the essentially rhetorical nature of economics writing: "Economics has a neurosis, the neurosis of modernism, which a rhetoric of economic inquiry can expose to rational inquiry. . . . [and end up making] economists more self-aware, modest, and tolerant, better in person and profession."
- Is it possible? Can simply acknowledging the ethical and the rhetorical dimension of discourse improve the world? I think so: it's necessary, and useful in itself. And it's hard work. It requires thinking about power, social relations and the long chain of consequences set in motion on publication of a document. If we're not prepared to do this, we're mere technical assistants, unwitting members of the cult of expediency.

7. Expertise often confounds *is* with *ought*. I've become a little leery about the presumption involved in telling (or advising) people what to do (this doesn't mean that I don't do it). I've seen a lot of consultants who blur, in their prescriptions, *is* and *ought*. By "is" I mean the knowledge base, ideology, forms of reasoning, etc. that constitute the ground from which they speak. By "ought" I mean the propositions, suggestions, recommendations, etc. that they put on the table.

8. The Web compounds the problem. Surf the web, look at sites dedicated to writing, language, document design, etc.; you'll be struck by how many of them are authorless. The same is true of many on-line writing labs, style guides, etc. No discernible

author, and therefore no *ethos*, the "moral element in character." As Wayne Booth reminds us in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, when we have no sense of the author, when we have no sense of the subjectivity in discourse, we don't know "what kind of company [we're] keeping." As Donald McCloskey reminds us, the company we keep when we read is important; it affects us for good or bad, just as our mothers told us.

- If it's important to put I or We into a document, if it's important to admit to and communicate a sense of subjectivity, it's doubly important on the World Wide Web, where voices seem to come from nowhere. Interestingly, I find that business sites are more apt to have an author and a sense of *ethos* than academic sites.

9. Deconstruction compounds the problem. The so-called "subject" has been on the retreat for much of this century. One tenet of deconstruction is that the thinking "subject" can't escape his or her own discursive practices, and therefore is imprinted by them, an object of them. Some academics have declared the thinking, acting subject, the "engine of liberty and freedom" in Enlightenment thinking, to be dead, "gone from history" (cf Diggins). And of course if the subject is dead, so is honest subjectivity. And ironically, so is "objectivity."

10. Despite what my mother told me, arguing is good. One way to ensure that language expertise has an ethical bearing is to abandon the (often tacit) view of public documents as, to use Chaim Perelman's terminology, "demonstrating." Perelman, you may remember, was a Belgian philosopher who, when asked to write a book on justice at the end of the Second World War, was struck by the limitations of formal reasoning. He read widely in the areas of ethics, politics and the law. He concluded that rhetoric, "conceived as a theory of persuasive discourse which stressed argument constituted the key for opening the door on values."

- Perelman sees two types of discourse and reasoning. A demonstration, associated with Aristotle's analytic reasoning, or formal logic, is "a calculation made in accordance with rules that have been laid down beforehand." The demonstration is "correct" if it conforms to a set of rules and incorrect if it doesn't. A "conclusion is held to be demonstrated if it can be reached by means of a series of correct operations starting from premises accepted as axioms." Demonstration is aimed at a "universal" audience.
- Argumentation, by contrast, is associated with Aristotle's dialectic reasoning, and aims "at modifying an existing state of affairs." It "presupposes a meeting of minds," and it presupposes choice, agency and power on the part of the reader / listener. It is useful, perhaps crucial, wherever "practical reasoning" is required (e.g., politics, economics, ethics, etc.) and wherever people do not

agree on "first principles or definitions." Argumentation is aimed at a specific audience, whose values and beliefs must be taken into consideration.

- I sometimes think that we North Americans are afraid of argument. Consensus is the Holy Grail of social life, and we containerize argument and make it phony ("Face-off," "Geraldo," etc.).
- To be successful, of course, argumentation requires an acceptance that one is speaking with contingent, as opposed to absolute authority, that one is speaking to an audience of people who also have contingent authority and freedom of action.

11. Opining, a kind of informal (or egoistic) arguing, is good. Opinionated writing, if you'll pardon the redundancy in that phrase, is a form of "knowledge in the making." The wonderful phrase is John Milton's: "Where there is much desire to learn, there . . . will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making" (*Areopagitica*). We come to know what we know, often, by believing and opining first.

- Then too, we could look at the other side of a document, the reader: "The reader deserves an honest opinion. If he doesn't deserve it, give it to him anyway" (John Ciardi). Certainly this idea has informed much of my writing.

12. Experts are often cross-dressers. They tend to dress arguments in demonstrating clothes. It seems to me that where many public documents fail and this is where ethical concerns come in - is in pretending to be demonstrations, when in fact they are arguments. For example, guidelines that masquerade as policy, suggestions that are called "rules," "findings" that pretend to absolute truth as opposed to reasoned interpretation, are all arguments dressed up as demonstrations. Teaching materials are, for the most part, arguments, and should plead, suggest, inveigle, make a case but all too often, their structure and voice are of demonstrations.

- When arguments masquerade as demonstrations, the result can be resistance and cynicism (think of some of the more strident anti-marijuana propaganda), confusion (consider pseudo-scientific diet books; or a unilateral declaration of independence in Québec), or a terrible, docile acceptance by an authority-accepting population (consider anti-Semitic poison, like *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*).
- In other words, dressing arguments up as demonstrations has ethical implications. In any demonstration, expediency increases in importance; audience becomes an abstraction and subordinate to the "truth" demonstrated; and the author tends to become a mouthpiece, a messenger from God, unapproachable, unanswerable.

13. On the other hand, treating many public documents as *arguments* helps (and only helps) to ensure that they're ethical, aimed at "producing mutual understandings and therefore . . . the basis for inquiry into shareable truths."

That's the end of my argument fragments of an argument, really, as I'm still refining my thinking in this domain. I would very much value substantive feedback.

Expertise & ethics

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Suggestions for providing ethical expertise

1. Recognize that all discourse carries an ethical burden. Acknowledge the power inherent in and sought by language, as well as the unequal distribution of social and political power and language facility.
2. Make expertise humane. In designing a public document, ask yourself if what might be deemed to be a "demonstration" might better be thought of as an "argument." Don't be afraid to argue, plea, inveigle, exhort, opine, etc.
3. Acknowledge the problematic nature of language, style, structure, "plain-ness" etc. Admit to complexity.
4. Contextualize expertise. In working as an expert, tell your client what kind of expertise you're drawing on, its methods, assumptions and limitations.
5. Be prepared to question and advise on rhetorical and ethical concerns, not just the surface (style, format, etc.) of text.
6. Give expertise a human face. Introduce yourself; use *I* or *We*. In any document that may be read by an unknown or distant audience, say who you are, describe your office and/or capacity, and note any context that could help locate the writer, the *kairos* and the motivation of the document for a distant reader. In the text, don't be afraid to reflect a sense of subjectivity.

7. Define your audience explicitly. In documents that may be read by an unknown or distant audience, be explicit about the intended (or original, or ideal) audience.

8. Consider the ongoing relationship that the provision of expertise can establish. As St. Exupéry's Little Prince discovered, we are responsible for our roses.

The winner of the 1990 Public Doublespeak award, as reported (word for word and including the unclosed quotation marks and use of ellipsis) in the Canadian Council of Teachers of English *Newsletter*, Vol. 24, No. 3:

". . . unsalted peanuts are [GST] tax-exempt because they are in their original state. Salted peanuts are taxed at 13.5% because they have had salt added and are considered 'manufactured,' she said. . . . It will tax items like peanuts as snack foods at a seven-per-cent rate except unsalted peanuts, which would be taxed at 'zero per cent' as a basic grocery because they could be used in cooking. Zero per cent is not the same as being tax exempt," Minogue explained. ("Nuts and bolts of GST explained with peanuts," *Victoria Times Colonist*, 14 June 1990: A2).

Perelman's Theory of the Rational and the Reasonable [after Golden et al]

Rational	Reasonable
<i>Degree of certitude</i>	<i>Degree of certitude</i>
mathematical model	legal reasoning model
immutable divine standards	contingent propositions
a priori self-evident truths	acceptability by audience
natural law	
Criteria for evalating	decisions & arguments
Formal validity	equitable and fair
logical coherence	conformity to common sense
conformity to precedents	

	consistency with social beliefs & values practical, relevant, social useful consequences
Applicability	Applicability
individual level universal level all social milieus unresponsive to education, culture, experience & time	situational level analogous circumstances responsive to education, culture, experience & time

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