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Commentary on El Komos

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PROFESSOR MAGED EL KOMOS'S "PERELMAN AS EDUCATIONAL FACILITATOR: THE REALM OF RHETORIC AND THE ACQUISITION OF RATIONAL DISCOURSE"

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My goal is to examine a few factors that affect the effectiveness of Perelman's *New Rhetoric* in developing reasoned communication in students with a low level of literacy. I will address Perelman by means of the six postulates described in Professor El Komos's paper, "Perelman as Educational Facilitator: the Realm of Rhetoric and the Acquisition of Rational Discourse". My comments will complement his ideas, and they are partly based on the enjoyable conversation I had with him on our bus trip from Toronto to St. Catharines. My comments will be short, for due to last minute cancellations of a participant in this conference, we were both asked to present material on very short notice prior to the conference.

Professor El Komos's two examples of the well reasoned but badly written paper, and the badly reasoned but well written paper, show that standard communication skills are distinct from reasoning skills. The same examples can be modified to show the interdependence between the *acquisition* of these sets of skills. Attempt to imagine a situation where someone acquires a language without acquiring any reasoning skills, or where someone acquires reasoning skills without acquiring any language skills. Such situations are not only psychologically but also logically impossible.

In some respects teachers at all levels of education (i.e. elementary, secondary, college, university) seem to be aware of this psychological impossibility. For it is clear to them that if they were to focus on the acquisition of reasoning skills independently of an acquisition of language skills, they would reinforce ineffective communication. However, in another respect, they appear to be totally oblivious to this interdependence, because they typically teach language skills independently of any explicit teaching of reasoning skills. This partly explains the literacy problem among many graduates at all levels of education. For this pedagogical practice simply reinforces the superficial reading, writing, and listening which it is supposed to eliminate, and it renders students more susceptible to confused and incoherent thinking. This standard practice of teaching languages also partly explains what I call, "refined illiteracy", that I have too often observed among the so-called educated: a kind of articulateness and confidence that make it difficult for some people to see the weaknesses in their own reasoning.

If a teacher disregards the interdependence of the acquisition of language and reasoning skills, s/he can misapply Perelman's six postulates. Consider the first postulate, "argumentation proceeds informally and not according to forms and rules of deduction and induction". Even if teachers accept this postulate, the common pedagogical wedge that separates the acquisition of language and reasoning skills disposes teachers to miss many opportunities to teach argumentation in the instruction of ordinary and even elementary language skills.

This common pedagogical practice also inclines teachers to neglect the inferences or standards of reasoning upon which rest the correct applications of the postulates. Consider the following examples: the correct use of the third

postulate, that one must "proceed from premises which an audience accepts" in order to persuade its members, requires that one obtain proper evidence that one's audience holds certain beliefs; the correct application of postulate four, that "it is important to establish evocative presence for ideas and values attaching to the premises", presupposes that one has good grounds to establish such a presence; the effective application of postulate five, that "ambiguity is never entirely avoidable in arguments because language uses is inevitably equivocal in some degree", requires that one be able to determine when ambiguity (or vagueness) is relevant; the proper application of postulate six, that "liaisons among ideas and attitudes are created and dissolved by various verbal techniques", rests on the evidence that certain techniques "create" or "destroy" ideas. The correct application of these postulates are founded upon much implicit reasoning. If we help our students to become aware of this underlying reasoning and to evaluate it, the applications of Perelman's postulates will be more effective in addressing the literacy crisis than if we simply discard this reasoning.

The third and fourth postulates, respectively, that "arguments are always addressed to audiences", and that we must "proceed from premises which an audience accepts" in order to persuade its members, are very important. For our careful use of these postulates and the cultural diversity of our students can help them explore other points of views and to reason fairly from those points of view. Exercises based on these elements facilitate opening and broadening our minds, and liberating ourselves from our sometimes excessive attachments to our personal, professional, or cultural perspectives.

However, I question the usefulness of Perelman's notion of the universal audience in addressing today's literacy crisis. I see it as just a label representing our standards and methods of reasoning throughout one's schooling. It is pedagogically more effective just to appeal to the relevant specific standards or methods at the appropriate time than to appeal to a concept that encompasses many standards and methods that are probably not all relevant to the resolution of a specific problem.

To summarize, I have identified a common pedagogical approach that has contributed and continues to contribute to the current illiteracy problem: the failure to merge the acquisition of communication and reasoning skills. I have also argued that if the application of Perelman's six postulates is to be effective against the illiteracy problem, then language teachers at all levels must change their ways of teaching so as to combine the acquisition of both sets of skills.

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