discussion note

Informal Logic and General Education

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The wide-spread debate over the meaning, nature and significance of General Education is being translated into programmatic revisions at many colleges and universities. The debate and the programmatic revisions which are flowing from it provide an ideal opportunity for those interested in informal logic. In the following discussion, I will describe the relation of some of the issues surrounding general education to informal logic and also ways in which informal logic can be incorporated into the general education curriculum. Much of what I say will depend on the experiences I have had with the more than four-year debate over the revision of general education at S.U.N.Y. College at Plattsburgh. Each college and university is unique in many ways, of course. But the experience here involved issues and decisions which have, I think, fairly wide application.

One of the central issues which any attempt to define a general education curriculum must meet is whether it is possible, in the late seventies and early eighties, to achieve agreement on the content of a curriculum to be applied to all students. A variety of levels of debate are distinguishable here. With respect to a particular discipline or subject matter, it may be possible to win agreement that all students should know something about X. It does not follow from this, however, that faculty will agree that a student ought to take a course in X. Or if it is agreed that students ought to take a course in X, it may not be agreed that students should be required to take a course in X. Because of the disagreement at these different levels of debate, it proved hopeless, at least at this college, to design a program around specific required courses.

On most campuses there is a natural competition for student time between the student's major and the broader demands of general education. The revision of general education in such a way as to heighten this competition is, again in our experience, a sure way to defeat such revision. However, if general education is approached in such a way as to complement the various major programs, then this hurdle can be overcome. In fact, it might be argued that if general education is valid, then it must do this; otherwise, the admittedly vague notion that general education teaches what is applicable (or important) regardless of major (that is, for all) becomes a hollow sentiment that will persuade no one.

Finally, it is frequently argued that because the goals of general education are frequently vague it is nearly impossible to tell whether a curriculum and individual courses within that curriculum are achieving what they intend. By contrast it is much easier to determine whether courses in the student's major discipline are successful (which is not to say that such determination is always made!). There was strong pressure on our campus, then, to identify an instrument of evaluation for each course proposed for general education.

The program which emerged as our solution to these, and of course many other issues, is a program which provided central opportunities for informal logic. Ignoring peculiarities of the program which are unique to our campus it can be described as follows: The total program is divided into three components. A) The Learning Skills Component, B) The Distributive Component, C) The Integrative Component. Students are required to take four courses in (A), five in (B), and three in (C). Informal logic has direct application to (A) and (C).

The Learning Skills Component requires a course in the areas of Writing Skills, Communication Skills, Analytic Skills and a one-credit course in Library Skills. A variety of departments teach courses which are accepted as fulfilling the requirement in each of these areas. In particular, a new course in informal logic was designed for the Analytic Skills area. (Other courses also satisfying this requirement include a number of mathematics courses, statistics courses, computer science courses, etc.) An attempt was made to tailor this informal logic course to the strong programs on this campus, for example, business, the sciences, and the arts. A number of the new texts include sections on the application of informal logic to just such areas as these (e.g. Toulmin, et al.; Fogelin). Thus it was fairly easy to persuade faculty teaching in these areas that such a course would be of use to students majoring in such programs and in fact would supplement their major program. Thus, while providing a clear place for informal logic, the program does not require that all students take a course in informal logic and in this way the first difficulty mentioned above is overcome. Additionally, by designing the course in such a way that it complements a variety of popular programs, the issue of competition between general education and the major disciplines was addressed.

The need for evaluation of the course was met by adopting a nationally standardized test of reasoning skills which while not matching our particular course exactly, nevertheless does identify a number of spec-

ific skills associated with informal logic. The test we are employing is the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal.[1] It is being given in one version as a 'pre-test' at the beginning of the course and as a 'post-test' at the end. The difference in student performance on these two versions will provide some measure of the effectiveness of the course in meeting its goals. (We are planning to establish a control group of students who will take the test, but who will not be taking the course, as a way of making this a more accurate measure.) The data collected should be very helpful in persuading our more empirically minded colleagues of the effectiveness of this informal logic course. Additionally, it will provide valuable information to both the instructors and students.

Informal logic will also have application in the Integrative Component of our new general education program. In terms of the understanding of 'integration' here (obviously there are many complex issues in this approach to learning and education) our program interprets the concept as a process concept going well beyond the idea of mere 'relatedness' which sometimes characterize attempts at integrative learning. In order to underscore this distinction, the program directs faculty who wish to teach courses in this component to specify the 'mechanism' of integration to be employed. The philosophy faculty believe that informal logic can serve admirably as just such a mechanism and that it can be employed for that purpose in a very wide variety of academic contexts. To give but one example: A program now being prepared for this component by Dr. Charles Krecz of our department, will be concerned with religion. It will involve a course in each of: the philosophy of religion, the sociology of religion and an anthropology course in primitive religion, as well as an informal logic course which will concentrate on methodology, structure of exposition, analysis of types of reasoning, etc. of each particular discipline's approach to the study of religion as well as analysis of reasoning in religion drawing from the data provided by the material in the other courses.

Other areas in which informal logic can serve as the mechanism of integration might include "technology and values," "the arts and environment" and so on. In fact the possibilities are about as great as the imagination and interest of faculty and students. Of course such an approach has the further advantage for those interested in informal logic of exposing them to a variety of different areas where the special characteristics of reasoning in those areas can be analyzed. Such contact should help maintain vigor and 'freshness' in informal logic.

Obviously many campuses will not be able to move in the precise directions we have. However, I hope I have illustrated the fruitfulness of looking for ways in which interest in informal logic can be pursued in the context of the debate on general education.

critical reviews

CHALLENGE & RESPONSE Carl Wellman

Trudy Govier
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This book was published in 1971. It has not received very much attention from philosophers, possibly because Rawls' Theory of Justice, published almost at the same time, preoccupied many of those interested in moral philosophy. Challenge and Response deserves more attention than it has received, I think, and it certainly merits careful study by those interested in informal logic. Wellman sets out to answer the meta-ethical question 'how can moral judgments be justified?', but before approaching that question, raises the prior one: 'what is justification?' The first half of his book is devoted to answering this general question, and, as such, contains much which is relevant to theorists of argument.

After some one hundred and thirty pages of close argument, Wellmann arrives at his view of what justification amounts to:

> In my view justification is to be understood essentially as a process of responding to challenges made. It may be observed and described as a psychological struggle in which one person tries to force another to back down, or one person struggles to come to terms with his own doubts and conflicting convictions. But it is more than a psychological struggle because at its core are certain critical claims to truth, validity, to be upsetting, to be reassuring, and to be adequate. Therefore the actual outcome of any particular psychological struggle never settles once and for all the issues being fought over in the process of justification. It is this peculiar ambivalence of justification that enables what we actually do in discussion and thinking to serve as a test of critical ideals like truth, validity, and being justified. (pages 132-3)

Much justification (though not all, in Wellman's view) proceeds by argument. Wellman has some novel and interesting things to say about arguments and arguing, and it is to these that I'll devote most of my attention here. He maintains that there are legitimate arguments which are neither inductive nor deductive (he