Rogerian Problem-Solving and the Rhetoric of Argumentation

NATHANIEL TEICH

Rogerian principles of communication and problem-solving offer important supplements to teaching traditional argumentation, especially in advanced composition courses. In suggesting that students adopt Rogerian principles, I find that practical, personal topics are most successful because they directly relate to students' lives beyond the writing class. Accordingly, I ask students in my advanced composition course to write balanced pro/con arguments on an issue and then to write proposals for solving an actual-world problem that concerns them personally. The Rogerian approach to solving problems, I explain, requires both the use of creative imagination to understand empathically others' views, and the willingness to change one's position in order to achieve solutions which are mutually satisfactory to those involved. Thus, in these writing assignments, students can experience the socially desirable act of attempting to understand and empathize with the ideas and feelings of others and to compromise for joint resolution of problems.

Since the 1950's, Carl Rogers' ideas for facilitating oral communication have been influential in problem-solving, from conflict resolution to decision-making. Rogers did not propose a new or alternative rhetoric for composition, although some composition theorists have responded as if he had. Nonetheless, Rogers' principles can be productively applied to writing. However, before discussing the application of Rogerian principles to the advanced composition class, I wish to address several theoretical concerns.

Rogerian Principles and Traditional Argumentation

Rogers' "person-centered approach" for better communication evolved from his "client-centered therapy," not only from the therapist-patient situation, but also from "small face-to-face groups... exhibiting industrial tensions, religious tensions, racial tensions, and therapy groups in which many personal tensions are present." However, he acknowledged that his approach transcends interpersonal communication and suggested that it should be tried in situations involving larger groups, classes, nations, and negotiating teams representing such populations (334).

Although there has been renewed interest in using Rogerian principles to improve classroom interactions (between teacher and student, among students in peer groups) and to help writers clarify
their intentions through dialogue in conferences, the debate continues concerning Rogerian versus Aristotelian rhetoric and the transfer of Rogers' principles from oral to written discourse. Maxine Hairston, as well as Young, Becker, and Pike, present steps to follow ("phases" or "guidelines") in structuring a written Rogerian argument. Lisa Ede's objections to abstracting Rogers' ideas may serve as a useful corrective where his ideas have been reduced to a formula and mistakenly elevated to the status of "a rhetoric"; however, her objections do not preclude using Rogerian principles to supplement traditional rhetorical methods for writing to solve actual-world problems.

At the heart of employing Rogerian principles in constructing a written argument or proposal is an act of creative imagination. In Rogerian terms, one must exercise empathic understanding to put oneself in the place of others and to experience the feelings and emotions which inform their views. As I shall discuss below, certain conditions must obtain for appropriate and effective use of Rogerian principles for communication. As a prerequisite to achieving Rogers' goal of "real communication," however, the parties must share a common interest in resolving a problem or dispute by a mutually satisfactory solution.

Unfortunately, without noting the theoretical contradictions, some rhetoricians, beginning with Young, Becker, and Pike, have combined strategies derived from Rogers' empathic and non-directive approach with traditional persuasive strategies as a means for "winning" arguments (Ede 45). Over the years, the influence of Young, Becker, and Pike has become more narrow, defining a species of "Rogerian argument" whose goal is "to induce changes in an opponent's mind in order to make mutually advantageous cooperation possible" (283). What Young, Becker, and Pike have not sufficiently emphasized, though, is the possibility of changes in the rhetor's own mind and position. This possibility is the very crux of Rogers' specific prescriptions for effective interpersonal communication. Rogers announced this "rule" for communicating, in the context of oral argumentation, as an extension of his concept of "empathic understanding."

Rogers' Rule
Simply stated, Rogers' Rule is:

Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker's satisfaction. It . . . would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker's frame of reference—to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him. . . . However, once you have been able to see the other's point of view, your own comments will have to be drastically revised. You will also find the emotion going out of the discussion, the differences being reduced, and those differences which remain being of a rational and understandable sort. (332-33)
Rogers' optimism about employing his rule demands further scrutiny, which I shall provide in the section on problem-solving applications. But first, I will examine Rogers' principles and the implications of the rule itself.

Hairston, as well as Young, Becker, and Pike, have endorsed the use of Rogerian principles as a new, alternative attitude or stance which the rhetor can take. Hairston acknowledges the gap between the origins of Rogers' principles in oral dialogue and their transfer to written discourse, but asserts, "We can use ... Rogers' approach to rhetoric in composition because the attitude is transferable, and ... that is the unique and crucial element" (376).

The true Rogerian attitude involves the intent to establish specific conditions, which Rogers identified from his practice of humanistic psychotherapy, as necessary and desirable for communication. Rogers developed three basic conditions necessary for effective therapy and relationships: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. Although Rogers' attitude and principles developed out of the clinical setting of therapist and patient in oral discourse, we are no more limited in applying them to writing than in applying the traditional rhetoric of oratory. Hairston (376), Bator (431), and Lunsford (150) mention this issue briefly; only Ede considers the matter of origin to be an impediment (46).

The difficulties of applying Rogerian principles to written discourse arise not from their origin but from the individual situations of each act of communication. Unlike traditional rhetorical strategies, Rogerian principles cannot simply be applied to any communicative act, especially argumentation. Rather, their applicability depends on the specific rhetorical situation: the parties involved, their communicative intentions, and the specific matter at issue. In other words, the use of Rogerian principles is not a function of forms or modes (oral vs. written, dyadic vs. triadic) and techniques (following rules or algorithms); rather, the use of these principles is situational. It is a function of intent and substance within the specific rhetorical situation. Within "intent," I include, as does Hairston, the attitude or stance of those seeking to communicate.

Rogerian intentions directly oppose the forensic rhetor's intent "to win advantage" and to gain "persuasive control over the opposition," as Bator describes it (428-29). But Bator places Aristotelian rhetoric too strongly in opposition to Rogerian principles, thus attributing stereotypical behaviors to those adopting traditional rhetorical principles. I refrain from opposing "Aristotelian" and "Rogerian" as labels, but rather identify forensic or adversarial persuasive strategies as non-Rogerian. Rogers held that traditional persuasive strategies are incompatible with the attitude he seeks to foster. He stresses that "good communication" depends on empathic understanding of the ideas and feelings of others:
Real communication occurs... when we listen with understanding... to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about... Mutual communication tends to be pointed toward solving a problem rather than toward attacking a person or group. It leads to a situation in which I see how the problem appears to you, as well as to me, and you see how it appears to me, as well as to you. (336)

Rogers' reference to a practical situation defines the general rhetorical purpose for Rogerian communication. It presupposes a situation in which a real problem needs to be resolved for interpersonal or broader social and public reasons. These situations call for functional communication. The rhetorical purpose is "relational" and "instrumental" (Zappen 100, 106), not strictly "academic." The students' topics noted in the next section of this paper exemplify the practical and personal real-world writing that can be produced from Rogerian assignments.

Rogers' Rule and Risking Change

The ability to use Rogerian principles is dependent upon the attitude the writer is capable of adopting toward the specific subject or problem. For some issues, a writer may be unwilling to adopt Rogers' Rule and risk changing his or her position. Accordingly, the use of Rogerian principles for argumentation is more specifically dependent on the rhetorical situation than is the use of traditional Aristotelian strategies. All aspects of Rogerian communication—intent, purpose, and product—are governed by the presupposition that the parties are willing to compromise.

Unfortunately, neither Hairston, nor Young, Becker and Pike, nor the subsequent proponents of Rogerian principles, nor their critics have emphasized sufficiently this key factor. As Rogers points out, when using Rogerian principles,

You run the risk of being changed yourself. You... might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality. This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face. (333)

Thus, Rogerian principles clearly are very different from the traditional strategies of accommodation and refutation.

Generally, rhetoricians have not emphasized sufficiently this crucial component of the rhetor's willingness to change. For example, Hairston quotes Rogers' passage (above) and proposes that "the writer must suggest a reasonable solution that he believes both parties can live with" (376-77). But she does not expand upon these points. Even Flower does not stress that Rogers' approach is grounded in the parties' overt acceptance of a situation in which they must be prepared to compromise. In Flower's text, this fundamental principle appears indirect and conditional:

One of the hidden strengths of a Rogerian argument is that... it... may even end up persuading the persuader. It increases the possibility of genuine communication and change for both speaker and listener. (180)
Bator, however, asserts that "the goal of Rogerian rhetoric is to induce change in both the reader and writer" (431). While Bator is mistaken in regarding Rogerian principles as "a rhetoric," he makes a useful distinction by maintaining the "differences between Aristotle and Rogers" to differentiate when it is appropriate to confront "opponents" and when it is more advantageous to strive for change through mutual acceptance and understanding by each party of the other's views. (427)

For Bator, the Rogerian approach "is applicable especially to rhetorical transactions outside of the advocacy situation" (427).

For the advocacy situation, the rhetor has the full arsenal of forensic strategies that he or she can use to achieve the persuasive goal of winning. But for other, often interpersonal, situations, the "I win/you lose" outcome may become a "no-win" situation. The goal of Rogerian communication is a "win/win" outcome. While traditional advocacy may also produce this result, its forensic means may not produce genuine understanding of ideas and feelings or mutually satisfactory resolutions. Thus, traditional advocacy clearly is not adequate in all situations.

The difference between Rogerian principles and Aristotelian rhetoric cannot be accounted for by reducing the Rogerian to the Aristotelian, as Lunsford has attempted. She recognizes the operational difference between Rogerian empathy and Aristotelian advocacy and has tried to explain it away as "the perennial disjunction between communication and persuasion." She acknowledges that,

Rogerian argument [is] associated with communication, understanding, cooperation, and truth-seeking; traditional or Aristotelian argument . . . with pat formulae, with tricking, winning, refuting, with intimidating and prevailing over an opponent. (150)

Walter J. Ong, in Orality and Literacy, discusses this disjunction in his description of the origins and development of rhetoric. He concludes that from its classical origins "rhetoric retained much of the old oral feeling for thought and expression as basically agonistic and formulaic." Notice that Ong's definition is "agonistic" not "antagonistic." To Ong, "the orator speaks in the face of at least implied adversaries"; thus, rhetoric remained "essentially antithetical" and "kept the agonistic pitch of discourse exceedingly high" (110-11). According to his definition, however, rhetoric need not always be adversarial. The agon of the rhetor can be struggle for something (truth, good reasoning) not necessarily against another as hostile opponent.

So long as traditional rhetoric continues to be perceived as adversarial and antagonistic, it will be counterproductive in interpersonal and larger social situations marked by deeply held beliefs, values, and opinions, regardless of whether the dyadic or triadic form fits the situation. In dyadic interpersonal argumentation,
the issues may be so deeply personal that one can win the tactical argument, but lose the larger battle of the relationship. In triadic public argumentation, one party may fail to change others' behaviors, values, and public policy, even though winning a tactical skirmish by forensic advocacy. A "basic premise" of Rogerian communication, as stated by Hairston, is that "you do not convert people to your point of view by threatening them or challenging their values" (373). Thus, reducing what may be perceived as the threat or challenge becomes the first principle. After this, Rogers' Rule and its situational implications follow.

While Aristotelian advocacy could accommodate Rogerian principles, we should not assume that Rogerian principles (or those of humanistic psychology generally) can be fully appropriated by Aristotelian rhetoric. Because Rogerian principles are more narrowly situational, dependent on intent and content, they cannot be reduced to the Aristotelian, but they may be absorbed by the latter. That is, the Aristotelian rhetor could appropriate Rogerian principles; however, the reverse would not be true. Adversarial principles are incompatible with Rogerian communication.

Rogerian Principles for Problem-Solving Assignments

Proposing functional solutions to actual problems does not usually take place in the typical persuasive essays produced for writing classes. But the artificiality of conventional persuasion assignments can be overcome by having students select topics of personal interest for Rogerian problem-solving. The most successful topics reflect interpersonal or broad social and political problems requiring decisions for action: for example, to put a moral belief into practice, to interact in a living group, to buy X rather than Y, to chop down the trees rather than preserve wilderness, to ban or not ban a textbook.

In the classroom, a student may write a coherent argument or proposal which receives an A grade, but this does not mean that in the actual world the reader will decide to follow it in total agreement. Therefore, rather than indulging students' propensities for mounting forensic arguments to crush opponents, I ask students to choose realistic problems for which there could be a solution proposed for the mutual satisfaction of the parties. I suggest that they draw topics from their own experience: problems of communication, social interaction, or community matters they are involved with. They must first write a balanced pro/con essay in which they attempt to understand empathically the opposing positions. As a result, students struggle to develop functional topics and solutions, not exercises in persuasion in which the writers are not prepared to understand others or change their own positions if need be.

If you cannot adopt Rogers' Rule or risk changing your views, I caution students, then you should reconsider your choice of topic. Consequently, students tend to avoid arguing about such potentially loaded topics as abortion, gun control, nuclear power, world disarma-
ment, religious preferences, and political partisanship, because these problems are usually bound up in categorical issues of belief and value.

Re-Presenting Rogers' Rule with Corollaries
To aid students in selecting an appropriate problem, I give them the following injunctions:

*Rogers' Rule:* Restate (orally or in writing) the ideas and feelings of others, whose views are different from yours, before you finally state your own. Your goal in restating the views of others is to present an account which they would accept as satisfactory. The means to achieve this goal is your empathic understanding, through which you try to see from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him or her, to achieve the other person's frame of reference. (331-33)

*Teich's Corollary:* Do not choose a topic or take a position on it unless you are prepared to be persuaded by cogent reasoning or empathic understanding to change your mind. This should eliminate arguments grounded on fundamentally inflexible positions of faith, ethics, taste, or prejudice.

*Wayne Booth's "Self-Denying Ordinance":* 'I will try to publish nothing about any book or article until I have understood it, which is to say, until I have reason to think that I can give an account of it that the author . . . will recognize as just.'

Beyond the applications of Rogers' Rule, I cannot present students with neat strategies for conducting Rogerian arguments; such reductions contradict the nature of Rogerian principles. There are no pat "steps" to follow. In fostering the practice of Rogerian principles in writing, an instructor can provide opportunities for students to develop their empathic understanding by imaginatively attempting to walk some distance in another's shoes. This proverbial wisdom embodies the Rogerian goal of cognitive and emotional understanding of others' ideas and feelings.

The topics selected by students might range from the trivial to the sublime, but they all come from their own experience. For example, one of my students, who lived in a small town dependent on logging, discussed the pros and cons of a proposed ban on logging to prevent environmental damage. He illustrated the people's hardships by narrating real incidents, and he presented information on short- and long-term environmental consequences to the region. His proposal for stricter enforcement of existing environmental regulations upon the lifting of the ban was not unlike the actual outcome of this matter. Another student, a mother living in married student housing, proposed a ban on spraying chemical herbicides on public school playgrounds abutting the housing area. She modified her position as a result of assuming the administrator's frame of reference and responsibility for keeping walkways and special playing fields free of weeds.

Many students complained about the difficulty of treating an opposing point of view fairly. Several acknowledged the struggle to
find a voice or voices in which to present both sides of an argument. Some solutions have been to increase the use of dialogue, narrative, and alternating parallel structures, all of which are sophisticated and effective formal devices for exposition and argument. For example, one student offered a series of proposals for the seemingly simplistic problem of getting those in her cooperative residence house to clean their dirty dishes. Yet, in several dialogues she showed a consideration of others’ feelings through a high degree of empathic understanding. Another student offered guidelines for individuals to work within their religious organizations to form coalitions with other groups on human rights issues. In this more sophisticated issue, the writer adopted several stances to understand the various positions of different interest groups on a number of specific activities.

Topics for problem-solving writing assignments can be found in all areas of life, from an individual's personal interactions to social action, public affairs, and business management. The potential benefits are both personal and social. Students will have an opportunity to develop their affective as well as intellectual skills. They will also experience the practical difficulties as well as the achievements of attempting to solve real-world problems through the socially responsible activity of arguing for mutually satisfactory solutions.

Rogerian Idealism and Realistic Consequences

Rogers clearly expressed optimistic and idealized expectations about the practical effects of employing his rule. For example, Young, Becker, and Pike note "Rogers' optimism . . . that adequate restatement of each other's views would 'practically guarantee that some reasonable solution would be reached'"(290). Yet, in the context of the actual world, where real actions will be taken to implement a proposed solution, Rogers may not be simply a Pollyanna. He does not predict that opponents will be converted, but that "real communication" will be established.

Rogers has stated that his principles would lead to a focus on solutions, not to attacks on those with opposing beliefs or proposals. For Rogers, "genuine understanding" comes about when people attempt "to increase the amount of listening with, and to decrease the amount of evaluation about" others (335). Rogers has maintained that if both parties could see how the problem appeared to each other, then its ramifications would be open to inspection: "Thus accurately and realistically defined, the problem is almost certain to yield to intelligent attack, or if it is in part insoluble, it will be comfortably accepted as such" (336).

Today, this conclusion still remains naive or idealized. Rogers avoided the complicated dynamics of real-world advocacy, especially regarding "comfortably accepting" outcomes of conflict. As I acknowledged early in this essay, there are situations in which adversarial strategies are most appropriate. However, it would be a
mistake to dismiss Rogers as totally unrealistic.

Rogers' primary assumption is that all people have the capacity to define and deal with their problems if they can be provided with the conditions to enhance their growth. He may betray an excessive faith in human communication to bring about rational and equitable behavior; however, Rogers' purpose is to aid individuals and groups in arriving at solutions that everyone can live with. His approach is an important contribution to argumentation and problem-solving. His focus on control over the psychological conditions and context of a problem rather than victory over one's opponents helps us all work together to make better our individual and communal lives.¹⁰

University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon

Notes

¹In fact, Rogers told me in an interview in 1985 that the problem of transferring his principles from oral to written communication "has never been a primary interest" of his.

²As the term for his approach, Rogers eventually settled on "person-centered," which encompasses such subcategories as "client-centered therapy" and "student-centered learning."

³For a recent, concise statement, see Rogers' A Way of Being, Boston: Houghton, (1980), 114-16.

⁴Formalist approaches to argumentation, from the traditional logical/analytical approach to Toulmin's model, seek to factor out elements of intent, context, and content by reducing them to matters of structure. To the extent these elements are eliminated, the human and actual-world dimensions of the rhetorical situation are diminished.

⁵During my interview with Rogers in 1985, I asked him about the use of his principles like empathic understanding for the adversarial purpose of winning an argument. He asserted, "I regard that as quite the opposite of my thinking. . . . I feel that's a trick . . . using my thinking in that fashion."

⁶Young, Becker, and Pike's situational distinction assigned the effective contexts for Rogerian and Aristotelian strategies to dyadic and triadic situations, respectively (273-74). The two-sided situation involves the direct interaction of the parties. The three-sided situation may involve direct interaction of opponents, but their goal is convincing some third party or group (who may or may not take an active part) to adopt or change an opinion, or render a decision. These distinctions were accepted by Hairston (373), critiqued by Bator (430), and grappled with by Lunsford (49).

⁷Booth, in Critical Understanding, did not mention Rogers in relation to this injunction, although in Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent, he briefly noted Rogers' 1951 work (xvi-xvii).

⁸Rogerian communication is not reducible to a formula. Several rhetoricians have offered such reductions in their early work with Rogers' ideas (for example, Hairston, Zappen, and Young, Becker and Pike). These rhetoricians thus are open to Ede's charge that what has been called "Rogerian rhetoric is not Rogerian" and that their work "represents a distortion of Carl Rogers' own principles" (40). More-
over, Rogers strongly rejected the labeling of his principles as strategies, techniques or steps to be abstracted from the specific therapeutic situation and applied formulaically.

Walter J. Ong, who might differ epistemologically from Rogers, nevertheless expresses a related idea: "Communication is intersubjective. . . . I have to be somehow inside the mind of the other in advance in order to enter with my message, and he or she must be inside my mind" (176). Ong's "fictionalizing of readers" and Rogers' empathic understanding are complementary acts of creative imagination that provide additional dimensions to the communication process beyond those of the formalists and structuralists.

This essay incorporates some portions of my paper read at the advanced composition session, Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, 1984.

Works Cited


