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# Commentary on Konishi

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# Commentary on Takuzo Konishi's "Toward a History of Argumentation: Canadian informal logic"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Takuzo Konishi's paper represents a draft of a history of the development of informal logic in Canada since the 1970s, based on interviews with some of the participants and on some of the documentation held by the University of Windsor's Leddy Library archives.

As a participant in those events, I welcome a history of them. Very recently I met a young graduate student studying in the University of Windsor Philosophy Department who was surprised to hear that people she had been taught by had played any role in this intellectual movement, let alone any inkling of the ideas and events that gave rise to it. As some of us who were active in the development of informal logic approach the grave, or the mantelpiece, there is some comfort in the thought that our efforts might be remembered at least for a while. So I applaud Mr. Konishi's project.

At the same time I would underline a potential weakness in the methodology of oral history, one of which Mr. Konishi is certainly well aware. Let me illustrate it with an anecdote. A few years ago I was recalling an outstanding class of students in informal logic that I taught in the 1970s. Several of its members, whose faces, names and participation in class I clearly remembered, had gone on to solid careers in law, business, and journalism. I did not recall precisely in which year this outstanding cohort took my class and so I decided to look it up in my records. I discovered there was no such class. I had amalgamated some outstanding students from that course over about a four year period, putting them together in my memory in the same class when they in fact came from three or four different classes. To be sure, I might be worse than most, but I believe memory is both creative and porous.

## 2. SOME OBSERVATIONS

In this section I offer simply a list of comments about Konishi's paper.

Konishi's threefold distinction of the routes into *Informal Logic* is useful. It's important to recognize that theorists arrived from different locations in theory and practice. He is right that Johnson and Blair's description of the origin of informal logic as

entirely pedagogy-driven is inaccurate. I think it was an excessive generalization of their experience and that of a number of their colleagues (e.g., Scriven, Govier).

On the need for Canadian examples, it is understandable that Johnson and Blair came to this view from different perspectives. Johnson was (and remains) an American citizen; Blair, a Canadian, was identifying with an outburst of Canadian nationalism among some Canadian academics at a time when Canadian universities were being inundated with U.S. academics and the associated cultural imperialism of American-centric perspectives.

Konishi says that textbook writing was a serious scholarly endeavour because there were fewer publication outlets than now. I think the textbook was a place of scholarly innovation not so much because there were no journals in the field, although there weren't. Johnson and Blair did not try to publish informal logic material in journals. Johnson's area of scholarly specialization was Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; mine was ethics and political philosophy. We regarded the development of teaching materials as separate from scholarly publication. And at that time we were each teaching three different 26-week courses, September to April, the equivalent of three courses each semester. We didn't have the time or inclination to work out a theory, do the research to ground it historically, and try to publish it. We knew that we were innovating, but the immediate imperative was next week's class, or in time, next semester's classes. The textbook was the location of theoretical innovation because, in our case, the theory of the textbook was driven by classroom experience.

Konishi speculates that if *Logical Self-Defense* had not been published there would have been fewer monographs and textbooks in the field. Perhaps, but note that in the 15 years between 1970 and 1984 there were at least 27 texts written to service roughly the same market of which *Logical Self-Defense* was just one. He speculates that there would have been fewer conferences. There might have been fewer conferences without the participation of Blair and Johnson, but it's hard to say whether their participation would have not occurred without the publication of their textbook.

I agree with Konishi that had Charles Hamblin come to the First International Symposium, informal logic might well have developed differently.

Konishi makes a point worth considering when he observes that the creation of the journal, *Informal Logic*, might have kept informal logic out of the philosophical mainstream and thus solidified the divide between formal and informal logic. On the other hand, by providing an outlet it probably contributed to the creation of scholarly work that would not otherwise have been generated. Furthermore, informal logic research might have been buried by defensive negative reactions from formal logicians and formalist philosophers. It might be safer now to publish elsewhere than it was in the 1980s.

I have four quibbles about Konishi's title, "Towards a History of Argumentation: Canadian Informal Logic." First, should the subtitle not be "informal logic in Canada," or is there a particularly Canadian version of, or flavour to, informal logic in Canada? Second, the paper is about the history of part of argumentation theory, not argumentation. Third, informal logic may be as much about reasoning as it is about argument, and to the extent that it is about argument it's arguably not so much about argumentation, though that depends on definitions. Fourth, Konishi's very useful list of questions for the research agenda needs to be expanded to include the investigation of the history of

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informal logic in Canada and the U.S.A. together. From the outset, the border made little difference. (It did make some difference, for instance it meant that there were Canadian branch plants of American publishing houses, which probably made the publication of some Canadian textbooks possible.) Of the 27 informal logic textbooks on my shelves that were published in the 15 years from 1970 to 1984, just six were published in Canada<sup>1</sup>; and most of those who attended the First International Symposium on Informal Logic were from U.S. colleges or universities.

The last quibble brings me to my penultimate point, which is a suggestion for further research. In generating a history of ideas, I think it would be interesting to know a few things about these 27 early textbook authors. One is, What were the philosophical influences on them? For instance, with whom did they study in graduate school. What philosophers influenced their intellectual development? Another is, What motivated them to write their informal logic textbooks? A third is, Did they think of themselves (a) as doing something radically different from previous textbooks, and (b) as doing informal logic? To the extent that informal logic arose from the textbooks—and Konishi is right to point out that this was not its only source—we need to know more about the textbooks, and not just one of them, nor just those published in Canada.

Finally, while Konishi alludes to the tension between informal logic and critical thinking that produced the compromise name of the association created to promote research in these areas—AILACT: the Association for Informal Logic *and* Critical Thinking—he does not take up the relation between the two in the history of informal logic. Some regard the two names as denoting the same thing. Others regard the two as different but related. And there are different views about what that relationship is. For instance, Michael Scriven has called informal logic the theory of critical thinking. My own view is that we should use informal logic to think critically about arguments but that critical thinking involves the evaluation of much else besides arguments and reasoning. In any case, I suspect that the way informal logic has developed has been influenced by the commitment of its originators simultaneously to the teaching of critical thinking.

### 3. CONCLUSION

I have just listed some mostly unconnected observations about Konishi's paper, some of them a bit critical. I would be remiss if I did not add that if any of these are defects, they are minor, and they should not be allowed to distract us from the paper's considerable virtues.

For one thing, the paper represents a huge amount of work. Many interviews were taped, and then transcribed. Interview questions were framed, and follow-up interviews scheduled when gaps emerged. In addition, there were several cartons of documents in the archives that had to be sifted through, and Konishi found all sorts of items, some of which I had thought were lost, such as a copy of the letter we send to McGraw-Hill Ryerson to try to persuade them to send the manuscript of *Logical Self-Defense* to a second set of reviewers after the first two had recommended against publication. We owe Konishi our thanks for doing all the hard work entailed by this paper.

While praiseworthy, hard work alone doesn't guarantee good performance, so let me add that I think this is a most valuable paper. Konishi makes an important point and

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<sup>1</sup> I list these in the Appendix.

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documents it well when he argues that informal had different beginnings for different people. I think he is right to see a thread running from the publication of *Logical Self-Defense* to the first symposium, thence to the *Informal Logic Newsletter*, thence to the second symposium, and thence to the journal *Informal Logic* and the founding of AILACT. (It keeps going, by the way. Hans Hansen helped me and Johnson organize the third symposium, and with his considerable organizational skills already in hand plus that experience he went on to be a key organizer of seven of the eight OSSA conferences, including this one.) And I found particularly illuminating Konishi's rhetorical analyses. For instance, I think he is bang on in his rhetorical insights into the letter in which we made our case to McGraw-Hill Ryerson, and also in seeing informal logic as an instance of dissociation from formal logic and the selection of the name as very much a rhetorically significant move, although that was not on our minds at the time.

So on behalf of the participants in this little adventure of ideas called the informal logic movement, let me thank Takuzo Konishi for turning his considerable talents to record its history. We all owe him a considerable debt of gratitude.

[Link to appendix](#)

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