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Commentary on Fulkerson

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In Response to: Richard Fulkerson's *Problems in systematic analysis of "full-length" arguments, and some possible contributions from contemporary composition theory*

Professor Richard Fulkerson addresses a pedagogical challenge that we all face in our critical thinking and argumentation courses: how to teach our students to represent accurately the main argument structure in long passages. This structure consists of the interconnections among premises, intermediate conclusions, and a final conclusion. This is sometimes referred to as the *ma*crostructure or schematization of an argument, in contradistinction to the *mi*crostructure, which would be an argument's overall logical structure emerging from the logical structure of its premises and conclusions.

Prof. Fulkerson's metaphorical way of describing our pedagogical challenge would appear to set us up for failure. For how is it possible to "deal with *only* the *skeleton* of the argument, yet without leaving out anything crucial to [the argument's] *life*" (my italics)? If we have the skeleton of some entity, then we no longer have anything crucial to the life of that entity. Other similarly used metaphors would also create unreachable goals. For example, if we use the metaphor of construction, then if we expect a diagram to represent *only* the *framework* or *framing* of an argument while retaining other parts of the argument, we are expecting the impossible, just as it is impossible to construct a plan of *only* the framework of a building while still including other aspects of the building. Metaphors have their function, but we want them to open doors in our investigation, not close them.

His other metaphor suggests similar obstacles when he speaks of the "*portrait* of [an] article's main argument structure" (my italics). The concept of portrait suggests much more than a skeletal description, for a portrait includes both form *and* content. We are not looking for a portrait, but rather broad strokes, or a sketch that will give us the contours of an argument that will facilitate its evaluation. But even with these metaphorical emendations, are our expectations still too high? For we seem to want a quick and easy of way of accurately sketching an argument in long and usually complicated passages.

Professor Fulkerson describes seven approaches intended to give the broad strokes of the overall structure of arguments, and identifies some of their weaknesses.

The Standard Form Layout, in which we just write out all the explicit and implicit premises and conclusions, would seem to be too long.

The Toulmin and the Pragma-dialectical Models are also both cumbersome, and furthermore have some theoretical problems.

The Tree-Diagram becomes chaotic when dealing with passages of a thousand or more words.

He describes in the interest of thoroughness the Main Path/Faulty Path because it captures a certain aspect of the macrostructure of arguments that are usually neglected in the preceding models. Though he does not mention any of its weakness, my understanding of it is that it in turn fails to capture what the other models express.

The application of the Fisher model would appear to be limited to only the kind of theoretical discourse that Fisher uses to illustrate the application of his approach.

To what extent are some of these weaknesses objectively measurable? If a complex and long argument is *accurately* represented by, for example, a tree-diagram, what exactly makes the diagram "cumbersome" or "chaotic"? Is it actually its complexity and length, or is it rather the absence of time, energy, concentration, and patience on the part of those using or learning to use the tree-diagram? I do believe that we should always look for more efficient means of representing the structure of complex arguments, but let us not forget that many real-life arguments are long and messy, and it does take time and work to identify what is important, and to represent it accurately. We must be careful not to confuse the perceptions and reactions of impulsive and impatient students with the theoretical or even practical weaknesses of the argumentative tools they are learning.

A further approach, considered by Prof. Fulkerson, and usually neglected by most instructors of critical thinking, in helping students to identify the macrostructure of arguments in long passages, is that of summarizing those long passages. One obstacle is that it is typically not easy to summarize long passages. One factor that contributes to that difficulty is the way most everyday long passages are written. For example, paragraphs are usually not reliable units of development. Another reason, overlooked by Prof. Fulkerson, that explains the difficulty of teaching or learning how to summarize what is important in a long argument, is that one must first *identify the conclusion*, its content, and the kind of conclusion it is, and then *evaluate* the available evidence in order to determine what premise or groups of premises provide the most significant support. The ability to summarize a long argument presupposes that the person doing the summary is already sufficiently skilled in argument identification evaluation.

A skill more basic than summarizing that our students need is that of organizing their reading of long passages. This is where Prof. Fulkerson proposes to us the kinds brushes that will help to give us the broad strokes to begin identifying the contours of an argument. He proposes that we teach students to identify the kind of conclusion an argument has, and then to look for the argumentation scheme that is typically used to support that kind of conclusion. These schemes serve as general guidelines that help us to identify what is providing the support.

I suspect that these approaches would improve students' reading and reasoning abilities, but it seems that we still need a way of helping students to focus their attention *from* the overall text *to* the content of a main conclusion and its associated argumentation scheme. For this proposed approach seems to be part of the *mi*crostructure of an argument, not its *ma*crostructure.

I would like to suggest a few ways of helping students to apply Prof. Fulkerson's approach. I will use his example (in the Appendix) to illustrate one approach. **(a)** It consists of visually representing different parts of a passage ("chunking" the passage), and having students answer the following question: What is/are the function/s of each passage? For example, what is/are the function/s of passages (1) to (4) in Fulkerson's example? There are different ways of raising the same kind of question: What is the author *doing* in each one of those passages? What is/are the author's goal/s in each one of those passages?

(b) A different way of having students identify the function of passages is to ask them: How would you title the different topics in the article (paper, chapter)?

Where would you insert those titles in the article (paper, chapter)?

(c) Students' reading ability would probably improve if they developed the habit of keeping the following kinds of questions in the back of their minds:

What is the function/role of this sentence (or paragraph) within this topic area in the passage? What is the author trying to do with this sentence (or paragraph) within this topic area of the passage?

How does this sentence (or paragraph) relate to the preceding sentence (or paragraph), or the preceding group of sentences (or group of paragraphs) within this passage?

How does this sentence (or paragraph) relate the author's overall goal?

I have identified some minor inconsistencies in Prof. Fulkerson's metaphors, and questioned his use "cumbersome" and "chaotic" to describe some approaches for representing the argument structure in long passages. However, he has brought our attention to the neglected skill of summarizing, and suggested one promising way of helping students to identify the argument structure of long arguments. I have offered a few suggestions that would help students to read long passages in a way that would help them to apply his encouraging suggestions.

Identify the function of passages (1) to (4). Describe what the author is doing in those passages. What is/are the author's goal/s in each one of those passages?

Kilpatrick's Column, *Washington Post*. June 14, 1987. H7.

(1) "Legalize Heroin for Patients in Pain"

Hawaii's Sen. Daniel Inouye is tied up these days as co-chairman of the Iran-contra hearings, but several thousand pitiful and helpless human beings would like to send him a message: get on with those hearings, senator. You have other important work to do.

Inouye is principal sponsor of a bill, S. 143, that he hopes will become the "Compassionate Pain Relief Act" of 1987. The bill would establish "a temporary program under which parenteral (injectable) diacetylmorphine will be made available through qualified pharmacies for the relief of intractable pain due to cancer."

(2) Diacetylmorphine is heroin. For persons dying of inoperable cancer, many physicians believe it is the one drug that would best relieve the agony their patients suffer.

The idea of making heroin legally available to such victims is an idea that may be hard to accept, but it is scarcely a novel idea. Physicians in Great Britain have been prescribing heroin for such patients for several years. It works.

Inouye's bill sets forth certain findings that lay the groundwork for this proposal. Cancer afflicts one out of four Americans; it is the second leading cause of death. "In the progression of terminal cancer, a significant number of patients will experience levels of intense and intractable pain which cannot be effectively treated by presently available medication." The effect of such pain often leads to a severe deterioration in the quality of life of the patient and heartbreak for the patient's family."

At present, any use of heroin—even therapeutic use—is prohibited by law, although extensive clinical research has demonstrated the remarkable painkilling properties of the drug. The reasons that are given for opposing Inouye's bill lack both substance and merit.

(3) Opponents contend, for example, that if heroin is legally stocked in a hospital's pharmacy, attempts will be made to steal it. This is a possib9ility, of course, but it can be dealt with. A related objection is that a pharmacy's supply of heroin might be diverted in some fashion to someone other than the patient for whom it is prescribed. The National Committee on the Treatment of Intractable Pain makes the point that if all the heroin required under Inouye's bill were stolen or diverted—all of it—it would constitute only 2 percent to 4 percent of the heroin illegally on the street and available to other addicts.

Another objection—and this seems especially callous—is that a cancer patient might unexpectedly survive and turn out to be addicted. The bill is intended for the relief only of those patients suffering cancer "with a high and predictable mortality." There would be time to worry about addiction if the terminally ill patient surprised his doctors.

When the senator's bill was under discussion in the 99th Congress, some physicians testified that heroin is not better than other drugs for the relief of agonizing pain. The response to this objection seems to be yes and no. When given by mouth, in single doses, heroin and morphine may work equally well, but when given by injection, heroin may be more effective in certain patients. As for Dilaudid, it carries side effects that terminally ill patients positively do not need.

A final group of objections, gleaned from last year's debate, stemmed from the hopeful notion that eventually a new non-addictive drug, equally as effective as heroin, will be developed. Perhaps so, but for a patient suffering the kind of pain with which the bill is concerned, "eventually" is a poor substitute for "now."

The principal unstated objection to the Inouye bill is that members of Congress do not want to be politically identified with the legalization of heroin under any circumstances. This imputes to members both a want of compassion and an excess of cowardice. Surely voters are capable of understanding the vast difference between promoting heroin and prescribing it.

Inouye's bill contains abundant provisions against abuse. The drug would be available only to a special class of patients; it could be dispensed only by written prescriptions from licensed physicians. The program would expire after five years if it turned out to be unworkable.

(4) Isn't this worth a try? Three times in my life I have seen loved ones die of cancer, and two of them were in such pain they could neither weep nor scream. Injections of heroin might have let them go in relative peace. It's not a great deal to ask.