

Converging in Class with Examples of Fallacies and Logical Booby-traps from Real Life

Persuasive Messages

Recommended Courses: The Basic Course, Public Speaking, Persuasion, Argument and Debate, Interpersonal Communication

Goals and Objectives:

At the conclusion of this activity, students should have the ability to:

- ✓ Differentiate between a logical fallacy and a logical booby-trap
- ✓ Understand the difference between formal and informal fallacies
- ✓ Name several common fallacies
- ✓ Recognize these fallacies and booby-traps in the real world

Rationale: Students are constantly exposed to persuasive messages in the real world. Many of these messages promote logically flawed reasoning or contain logically flawed arguments. Creating and evaluating persuasive messages is a keystone skill in our field. Persuasive speeches are fundamental components of the basic course in communication, and most communication departments offer semester-long classes on persuasion. Persuasive messages which employ or promote fallacious reasoning may be less effective, and can be considered unethical.

How to Conduct the Activity

Overview. The activity is conducted over two days and works particularly well over a weekend, when students often consume additional media.

Day 1

1. Introduce key concepts.

Students will need to understand the following key concepts: premise, argument, fallacy, validity, testimony, formal fallacy, and informal fallacy.

2. The instructor demonstrates how fallacies and logical booby-traps work.

The naturalistic fallacy works well. Many products are advertised as “natural” or “all natural.” Students readily understand once it is pointed out that things which **are not** natural **can** be good (examples: a classroom education, riding a bicycle, sunscreen), and some things which **are** natural are dangerous anyway (examples: arsenic, tobacco, poison ivy, mountain lions). *Caution: Avoid using products where naturalness is logically relevant, such as food products, as this is not fallacious reasoning. Cleaning products are good choices.*

3. Assign students a fallacy.

Students pick a fallacy from a larger typology of common fallacies (Curtis, 2013, for example), or are assigned one. If students pick their own fallacies, the instructor should ensure that common fallacies are not excluded. Common fallacies include the hasty generalization, false dilemma, weak analogy, slippery slope, the naturalistic fallacy, and post/cum hoc ergo propter hoc fallacies. The red herring family of fallacies (ad hominem, bandwagon, straw person, appeal to misleading authority, etc.) is also common.

Between Classes:4. Students identify examples outside of class.

Students may use print advertisements or video examples. Videos should be less than one minute long (most advertisements meet this easily). Students should not use examples that require long blocks of text. The example can be an example of a logical fallacy (an argument), or an example of a logical booby-trap.

Day 2:5. Students show the examples they found.

Students show the examples that they found in class and explain why the argument is fallacious. If your room has a projector and document camera, you can use this to display print examples for full class analysis. This is a good time to talk about the distinctions between formal and informal fallacies, which helps students distinguish between an argument's form and its content. It is also a good time to talk about the difference between fallacies, which contain an explicit argument, and logical booby-traps, which do not.

Debriefing: The majority of students will find decent examples of fallacies. Some will come back with good examples of fallacies, just not examples of the fallacies they were assigned. This is ok, and is a good opportunity to talk about how some fallacies are related conceptually. You may not have time to show all of the examples during class, particularly if they are videos that students can only find again by clicking on a link they e-mailed to themselves.

Limitations: The activity requires a classroom projector and computer for video examples. The activity can be completed without these, if students do not bring video examples.

Variations:

- ✓ Assign for credit or extra credit through the semester. Cap the number of examples you will accept for each fallacy. This works well in a persuasion class.
- ✓ Include a short paper where the student analyzes and corrects the flawed argument.
- ✓ Have students identify the fallacies in teams.

Reference

Curtis, G., N. (2013). Logical fallacies: The fallacy files. Retrieved October 01, 2014, from

<http://www.fallacyfiles.org/index.html>

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