

July 1998

Chapter 10 : Problem solving

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Recommended Citation

Power, Mary R., "Chapter 10 : Problem solving" (1998). *Working Through Communication*. Paper 11.
http://epublications.bond.edu.au/working_through_communication/11

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CHAPTER 10: PROBLEM SOLVING

Quotable quotes

“The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas”. (Linus Pauling -Nobel Prizewinner–twice).

“Jumping to conclusions is the only exercise many people get”. (Anon).

“Thinking is the hardest work of all. Perhaps that is why so few choose to do it”. (Henry Ford).

“If you don’t know where you are going any road will take you there”. (The Koran)

“They that know nothing, question nothing”. (Anon)

“For every complex problem there is usually a simple answer and it is usually wrong”. (H. L. Mencken)

A brief introduction to problem solving in groups

Brainstorming—a non–evaluative pooling of ideas on a topic has been uncritically accepted as a way to solve problems. However, brainstorming in itself does not make best use of the combined thinking power of a group. Individuals working separately in the same time come up with more ideas than a group does working together. In part this is due to the censorship imposed on individuals by themselves when working in a group. A combination of individual contributions made prior to the group meeting and a group brainstorming session makes better use of individual ideas and group synergy. After the unfettered expression of ideas a more disciplined process such as one derived from the problem solving techniques described by Dewey in 1910 can work well. Dewey’s techniques were:

- expressing a difficulty
- defining the problem
- analysing the problem
- suggesting solutions
- comparing alternatives and testing against objective criteria, and
- implementing the best solution.

Such a process can be combined with what we know about how groups function and how groups exert pressure towards conformity to develop more productive methods of problem solving.

Groups will contain many different perceptions of the difficulty, its dimensions, causes and effects. Combining them helps broaden perspectives if group members are skilled enough listeners to hear or take notice of ideas which they don’t agree with.

If group expression is combined with individual preparation for the group meeting through the creation of idea lists, cause and effect lists, the group is likely to be productive. Analysis of ideas can be encouraged by asking for all the positives, then all the negatives about an idea or a solution. Discussion and evaluation combined with information–data, professional knowledge and experience–can lead to a re–evaluation of the original question or issue.

Individual Task

Find out the meaning of these short descriptions of common fallacies and match them with an example–

ad hominem means _____

an example is _____

ad absurdum means _____

an example is _____

Post hoc ergo propter hoc means _____

an example is _____

Ad verecundiam means _____

an example is _____

Straw man means _____

an example is _____

Ad populum means _____

an example is _____

What kind of fallacy is expressed in the following arguments?

If they start to control the language that is used in movies, they'll end up by saying which stories can be done and which actors can be used.

I didn't study for my communication course and I got a credit. You don't need to do any work for communication courses.

Improving Logic

Problem solving students need to exercise care when using examples or making decisions about causation.

Reasoning by example:

- Use cases to support generalisations
- However, if the cases can be proved to be unusual or not typical no support is provided. Hasty generalisations, based on insufficient evidence or too few cases, can be discovered, to be based on atypical examples.

Causes:

When one thing happens after another, the second is not necessarily caused by the first. Even when a causal relationship is discovered between two events, this relationship may not account for all effects. Multiple causes do not mean that one cannot find a solution to the presenting problem.

Discussion exercise

Researching your topic, thinking and defining terms

This task gives you practice in:

- Developing policy
- Analysing prejudice
- Examining the effects of stereotypes
- Developing logical arguments
- Arguing persuasively
- Ensuring others listen to your ideas
- Listening effectively to others
- Developing interview skills within group contexts

Who is a 'refugee'?

The following material, taken from *Two Way Street* (1993) helps illustrate the kinds of skills you will need to undertake the problem solving required of tertiary students. You will be asked to discuss these cases, to make decisions and justify them and write definitions based on these decisions and supporting arguments.

"From 1975–1990 Australia accepted over 200,000 'off shore' refugees (those who arrive unannounced and illegally in Australia from another country) and persons admitted under special humanitarian categories."

Australia accepts its humanitarian obligation to provide help for refugees; but at the same time Australia must protect its own national interests. Can these two apparently competing demands be included in an effective refugee policy?

Australia has a Refugee Status Review Committee whose task it is to consider appeals by people whose claim for refugee status has initially been rejected. Imagine that you are a member of this committee. Look at the following situations. In each case, decide whether you would consider the person involved to be a 'refugee' whom you think should be admitted to Australia.

Case 1. Sumati is a supporter of a democratic form of government in his native country. His country is, however, currently ruled by a military group, which suppresses political rights. He has been tortured by the governments secret police in the past, and was about to be arrested again for organising a peaceful protest march against the government. He escaped, and has come to Australia, seeking to be accepted as a refugee.

Case 2. Hu Yong–Da is a lawyer from China. He came to Australia as a student, and remained here after the Tiananmen Square massacre. He borrowed heavily to come to Australia for lessons and air fares, and had to work illegally to raise money to survive. He was arrested during a raid on his home by immigration officials, and he is now in detention awaiting processing of his application for refugee status—he is a member of the Chinese Alliance for Democracy, a group which opposes the government of China's suppression of democracy. His request was lodged in 1990, and has yet to be heard.

Case 3. Consuela is a refugee from El Salvador. She is unable to work because of injuries suffered from torture in her homeland—she has a bullet in her pelvis, was blinded in one eye, and has limited use of her right arm after losing a breast as a result of her treatment. One of her daughters is missing in El Salvador. She wants to come to Australia with her husband and two children.

Case 4. Nguyen is not politically active. Her husband was killed when caught in a fight between government forces and a rebel group. She fled the country because the constant danger of fighting, disruption to economic life, and lack of sanitary conditions in her village mean that she can barely feed herself and her two children.

Case 5. Tariq has been visiting Australia. He knows that he will be conscripted into the army to fight local guerrilla rebels when he returns to his own country. He has some sympathy for the rebels' ideas, but he would never join them in their fight to change the government. He applied to be accepted as a refugee.

Which of the five, if any, do you think should be accepted by Australia as refugees? Justify your decision.

Based on your class discussion of the issues involved in the five cases above, try to write a definition of what constitutes a refugee, and which can be used in making decisions in other cases.

Thinking Critically

Critically consider the following statement:

Public awareness of speech communication safeguards democracy; the audience, not the speaker, is responsible for the morality of the message.

Teaching people about how to give a persuasive or an informative public speech is amoral. It is not good or bad in itself. The skills taught can be used for good or ill, but the wider the community awareness about how speeches are constructed, and the factors that influence their acceptance, the higher the standard of speeches and audience analysis of them will become. A wider dispersal of knowledge about the techniques of formal speech making will safeguard democratic institutions.

What am I being asked to believe or accept?

Those who argue that knowledge about speech making skills is amoral are asserting that a higher level of knowledge in the general population will prevent abuses. This is like saying that had the German people understood how their emotions were being aroused (by means of rhetorical devices through allusions to their past, by use of stereotypes and unsubstantiated assertions), and that only one side of the argument was being presented, otherwise Hitler would never have been able to assume the influence he had. It also assumes that responsibility lies with the consumer to detect misuses of speech making skills.

What evidence is there to support this claim?

Much education is based on this claim. It is clear that, for example, understanding the tactics and strategies of a skillful salesperson who attempts to sell you a new perm, make-up or a used car can render you less susceptible. Consumer education can, therefore, make people more cautious, more skeptical, less trusting and gullible.

Is there another way of looking at this evidence and this argument?

This argument assumes that knowledge is a safeguard and that we need not teach a morality of speech making. An opposite view is that knowing how to manipulate the emotions or distort an argument is highly dangerous information and ought only to be given to those with the highest principles. An example of misuse might be a politician who, realising that he is talking to the converted, to members of his own side who will believe him, may give only the evidence that appeals to his audience and ignore conflicting evidence. His speech will be effective but he has used his credibility with this group to avoid giving the whole of the argument. Eventually people begin to distrust a politician or a parent or a teacher who appeals to prejudices or to established views and does not include all evidence.

Other considerations

Democracy depends upon the group making a reasonable decision based on accurate information from a variety of sources. If the information providers distort or reduce the information available, the basis of democracy is weakened. The information provider, the persuader or the politician who distorts arguments or uses faulty reasoning misuses his or her credibility. Sometimes speakers consider that the end justifies the means; that, for example, taking drugs and drinking alcohol are such dangerous activities for young people that they are justified in exaggerating the effects of all drugs and alcohol. Politicians who believe that the long-term future of the country depends on their party achieving power may arouse emotions not relevant to the facts, may base their arguments on the personalities of opposing politicians, may oversimplify an issue, and in order to enhance their credibility may imply they have knowledge and experience they in fact lack.

What conclusion is most reasonable?

The ethics of public speaking are not those of the view of *caveat emptor*, that is, "let the buyer beware". Rather they are, as Bradley (1991) suggests, such that they hold the speaker responsible for maintaining credibility. The speaker should at all times demonstrate trustworthiness and competence. When there is widespread knowledge of the techniques of public speaking it is not difficult for audiences to realise that a speaker is attempting to persuade them. In general, they will be flattered that the speaker has attempted to use his or her entire repertoire. However, they will very easily

distrust all future utterances from a person who has manipulated them by abusing audience confidence by presenting incomplete or inaccurate facts, has argued fallaciously or has appealed to stereotypes.

So we argue against the statement:

Public awareness of speech communication safeguards democracy; the audience, not the speaker, is responsible for the morality of the message.

However, we admit that an audience educated about rhetorical and persuasive devices helps keep speakers honest.

Your task

Apply the 'thinking critically' questions to an essay answer done by a fellow student and give them the report under these 5 headings. Get them to do the same for you

1. **What** am I being asked to believe or accept?
2. **What evidence** is there to support this claim?
3. **Is there another way** of looking at this evidence and this argument?
4. **Other** considerations.
5. **What conclusion** is most reasonable?

Sources of information

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Bradley, B. (1991). *Fundamentals of speech communication: The credibility of ideas*. (6th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Wm.C. Brown. (pp. 54-58).

Letters and Resumés

For many people their first, and sometimes their last, encounter with a firm or job applicant is through a letter or resumé. Because of the importance of this first impression you may want to consult one of the many business communication texts which provide proformas for you to study and analyse when you are planning an important letter. Current word processing packages have templates which give your letter or resumé the look a professional typist would give. However, the appropriate tone of a letter for a particular occasion is not as easy to achieve automatically. Tone requires attention to the same considerations of audience and interpersonal interaction that face to face communication does. Recently a colleague resigned from a professional organisation because he felt that it was no longer meeting his needs. He received two letters. One addressed him in an adversarial manner using the words "I take issue with your remarks about..." and the other said rather oddly "I am pleased to accept your resignation..." when all that was required was a polite and regretful acceptance of his resignation and an acknowledgment of his reasons for doing so, together with an expression of a hope that he might rejoin the organisation later on. Naturally enough he has shown these letters to many of his colleagues as evidence of the lack of communication skills in the organisation from which he has resigned.

Writers of business communications should remember that whatever they write may continue to exist long after they have forgotten the mood or emotion that sustained them during the writing process and that written communications are an opportunity to make friends rather than enemies. Having the last word may be satisfying, but it is hardly wise or courteous. Business communications should be clear, concise, appropriately enthusiastic and polite.

Team tasks

In groups of three prepare an outline of a letter for one of the following letters:

- Advising someone they did not obtain a job
- Acceptance of resignation
- An apology for forgetting to go to a meeting
- Condolences to a colleague who has had a death in the family
- A change of meeting time
- Dismissal of an employee
- New arrangements for travel claims in your firm
- A reference for a job application

For which of the above would you use some other form of communication such as memo, e-mail or telephone call be more appropriate? Which of these messages would you prefer to communicate face-to-face?

- Bring three examples of business letters you have received to class.
- Find one text each dealing with business communication that gives proformas, or suggested layouts and punctuation for business letters
- Compare your nine letters and the proformas and decide on a style and layout your group prefers.

Individual tasks

Look through the employment section of Saturday's paper and find an advertisement for a job that you would like to do when you finish your course and for which you would then be appropriately qualified. Develop a Resumé or Curriculum Vitae listing your most recent achievements first and write an accompanying letter to the firm which placed the advertisement. Use proformas from your word-processing package or from examples in general tests.

In class compare your resumé with others in a group of three and revise yours in accordance with what you have learned from others and from the sources they found.

Discussion exercises

When writing a letter of complaint should you use an inductive structure (details first, then the main idea) or deductive structure (main idea then details or explanations)? Why?

As a group write a letter complaining about your computer company's service, the quality of your new expensive boots in which the stitching has come apart, or something else you are bothered about, requesting action. Remember that you do not want to make a lifetime enemy of the reader. You want the reader to do what you request.

Rewrite it using a different structure from the one you used (inductive or deductive). Which is better for this purpose? Why?

Would you use an inductive structure or a deductive structure for the following letters?

- Refusing credit
- Congratulating workers on reaching production targets
- Enclosing a Christmas bonus
- Regretting that there will be no Christmas bonus this year
- Terminating employment
- Announcing voluntary redundancy packages for staff
- Accepting an award for being the student of the year.

Write a letter on one of these topics and pass it on to another group and have them comment on its effectiveness.

Writing tasks

Write a letter to yourself from the company you applied to for employment in the task above regretting that they are unable to give you a job. Make the reader (yourself) feel good (or as good as possible) about not getting the job this time.

Journal suggestions

Reflect on:

- (a) a letter you found difficult to write
- (b) a letter you remember because it was considerate or because it annoyed you.

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