



Professional Learning  
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## Learning in Practice

Volume 4 Number 1 December 2020



### A short course in Philosophy & Rhetoric: Developing a framework for thinking, speaking and acting in a complex world

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**Dr Matthew Hill** is the Director the Barker Institute with a focus on professional learning, research and innovation in the School. He teaches Physics and the new Science Extension course at the School which introduces students to scientific academic research. Matthew's doctorate reflects his passion for science education focusing on Representational Fluency amongst physics students at school and university. He has published in leadership, education and science journals and been involved in course development and teaching at The University of Sydney and The University of Western Sydney. He has also completed a Graduate Diploma in Divinity at Ridley College in Melbourne.



**Jason Saikaly** has been Head of Library Services at Barker College since 2013. In 2020, he was also appointed to the role of Coordinator of Philosophy & Rhetoric (Year 9). Jason holds a BA (English/History), a GradDipEd (Secondary Education), a Masters in Library & Information Management and a Master of Business Administration. Prior to his current role, Jason was Head of Library Services at Masada College (2008-2012) and, before that, Head of Library Services at a private boarding school in New Zealand (1994 – 2007). Professionally, Jason is most interested in the impact genrefication has on reading patterns and habits and in the impact online resources have on the role of specialised librarians.

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# A short course in Philosophy & Rhetoric: Developing a framework for thinking, speaking and acting in a complex world



Learning in Practice  
2020 Vol. 4 (1)  
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## Abstract

Philosophical thinking is a crucial skill if students are to understand themselves and their place in the world. A Barker College education trains students to think, speak and act in ways true to their own values and in a way that engages those around them. Since 2016 all Year 9 students have experienced a short course entitled 'Philosophy & Rhetoric' built around persuasion which has sought to develop students' discussion skills, metacognitive skills, deeper thinking, logical thinking, and independent thinking. In 2020, under new leadership, the course has applied persuasion to various ethical frameworks to provide a scaffold for students to complete when they are seeking to truly understand a complex issue.

## Introduction

From 2016-2018 there was a push for students to be developing philosophical thinking at the School as part of the Hearts & Minds program (Hill 2017). The vision was twofold. First, that students would develop a skill set particular to effective rhetoric and persuasion and thinking at its best that could be employed both during and after their time at Barker College. Second, that this developed skill set would encourage strengthened participation in regular classrooms and across all subjects.

## Philosophical Instruction

Philosophy education is based on proposing questions which '(a) lack answers, (b) lack decision procedures for finding such answers, and (c) nevertheless deal with issues that students find intensely meaningful' (Lipman 2014, p. 13). Therefore, participation in philosophical activities requires students to develop critical thinking that is both deep and logical (Winstanley 2009). When students seek to answer philosophical questions in community, they learn how their discussion skills can be improved (Fischer 2009) and are required to provide independent thought (Winstanley 2009). As students are asked to reflect on their own thinking they are engaging in a metacognitive process. In this way Philosophical Instruction develops the skills that Barker College hope that the Hearts & Minds program may provide for their students.

## Iteration 1: Applying a rhetorical framework to everyday situations and Year 9 subjects

### Logistics

Every student in Year 9 attended a Philosophy & Rhetoric class once per fortnight throughout the year. Teachers throughout the School volunteered to take the course.

### Content

The course was written in 2016 and focussed on persuasion. Students reflected on why some arguments come across more convincing than others and considered Aristotle's three modes of rhetoric as a framework. The purpose was not only that they may be more persuasive themselves when participating in class discussions and examination responses for any school subject, but that they may also be able to better assess arguments presented to them in the classroom or beyond such that they may ensure that they are being persuaded towards ideas that are true and meaningful. The specific knowledge and skills outcomes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: 2016–2019 course objectives and outcomes.

2019 Philosophy & Rhetoric Objectives and Outcomes			
OBJECTIVES The student develops knowledge and understanding about:	KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OUTCOMES The student:	SKILLS OBJECTIVES The student develops skills to:	SKILLS OUTCOMES The student:
1. Various features of a convincing argument	P1 Discusses why some arguments are more convincing than others P2 Identifies features that make an argument convincing	4. Communicate information in an effective manner that is persuasive to the audience	P8 Practises simple communication tasks utilising specific rhetorical skills
2. How logos, pathos, and ethos contribute to the persuasiveness of an argument	P3 Describes the factors contributing to the success or failure of logic in an argument P4 Demonstrates how appealing to emotions in an argument can persuade a listener to take action P5 Discusses the importance of the character or status of the author in relation to the persuasiveness of an argument	5. Engage with various points of view in a meaningful manner	P9 Develops arguments supporting points of view that they may not hold themselves P10 Practises discernment when listening to the ideas of others in the class or various texts
3. The function and role of arguments at school and in daily life	P6 Discusses various situations where the need for persuasiveness arises P7 Explores whether using persuasion techniques is ethical in various circumstances	6. Use rhetoric in academic, professional, & social situations	P11 Applies rhetorical concepts appropriately in sections of essay and short answer academic tasks P12 Applies rhetorical concepts appropriately in speech writing P13 Recalls rhetorical concepts when participating in online discussions

Students were taught the Aristotelian rhetorical framework in Term 1 and practised applying it to various situations through scaffolded activities in Term 2. Terms 3 and 4 involved a Semester 2 project where students could receive credit by completing any combination of 20 different activities demonstrating their understanding and newly developed skills. This allowed them to display their proficiency on outcomes P8-P12 and immediately apply the framework to their other Year 9 studies.

Tasks were worth different points based on their difficulty or length and included activities such as:

- Assessing sources as if an advertising executive giving feedback to a company.
- Writing a half-time speech when down 1-0 in an important football game.
- Analysing scenes from Macbeth (which was concurrently being studied in Year 9 English) through the rhetorical framework.
- Incorporating their new rhetorical skills in an assessment presentation for Christian Studies and demonstrating how this was implemented in their submission for the Philosophy & Rhetoric class.

Students were given opportunity to resubmit after tasks were marked and their cumulative total was displayed to the class. As well as providing choice, this project was exciting as it was not based on a deficit model but rather a cumulative total where every time students completed an activity their score would increase. There was no particular target, rather a challenge and an opportunity for students to excel and demonstrate their abilities.

### **Staffing**

To date, over sixteen different school staff have been involved in developing and teaching the course. Teaching specialties vary from English, Music, IT, Mathematics, Science, Design, Commercial Studies, Geography, History, and Library Services. Each student had one teacher. However, the diversity of the teaching team provided a richness to the overall Year 9 student experience where all students have made progress in each of the outcomes, but each class with slightly different approaches.

## **Iteration 2: A rhetorical and ethical matrix to scaffold student thinking and communication**

### **Content**

In 2020, new leadership of the course brought about a positive evolution particularly suitable to a world struggling to articulate the most ethical responses to a global pandemic. After introducing Aristotle's three modes of persuasion in Term 1, the course explored four ethical frameworks summarised as 'rights, rules, values and results (which) form our immediate awareness of right and wrong (Cameron 2011, p.15). This also complemented students wrestling with ethical questions as part of the Year 9 Christian Studies' course. The 2020 outcomes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: 2020 course objectives and outcomes.

2020 Philosophy & Rhetoric Objectives and Outcomes			
OBJECTIVES	KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OUTCOMES	SKILLS OBJECTIVES	SKILLS OUTCOMES
The student develops knowledge and understanding about:	The student:	The student develops skills to:	The student:
1. Various features of a convincing argument	P1 Discusses why some arguments are more convincing than others P2 Identifies features that make an argument convincing	4. Communicate information in an effective manner that is persuasive to the audience	P9 Practises simple communication tasks utilising specific rhetorical skills
2. How logos, pathos, and ethos contribute to the persuasiveness of an argument	P3 Describes the factors contributing to the success or failure of logic in an argument P4 Demonstrates how appealing to emotions in an argument can persuade a listener to take action P5 Discusses the importance of the character or status of the author in relation to the persuasiveness of an argument	5. Engage with various points of view in a meaningful manner	P10 Develops arguments supporting points of view that they may not hold themselves P11 Practises discernment when listening to the ideas of others in the class or various texts
3. Different philosophical normative ethical ideologies (deontology and utilitarian), virtue ethics, and human rights	P6 Understand the different philosophies and can use judgment to apply these philosophies in diverse situations P7 Explains how, and why, different philosophical approaches may be subjectively justified P8 Understand the history of the UDHR and explore their influence on philosophical ideologies	6. Identify the features of different normative ethical ideologies  7. Explore a real-life issue within the context of Aristotelian rhetoric and normative ethics	P12 Argues the strengths and weaknesses of different normative ethical philosophies P13 Applies, and justifies, different normative ethical philosophies to hypothetical and real-life situations P14 Through an inquiry process, composes a comprehensive response to a real-life situation from a specific normative ethical or human rights perspective using Aristotelian rhetoric

The authors recognised that by combining the three modes of rhetoric with the four ethical frameworks, a matrix could be produced to scaffold student thinking about any issue (see Figure 1), which lead to a guided inquiry project for the students to complete in the second half of the year.

The guided inquiry project featured four phases including *explore*, *identify*, *create* and *respond* and the topic area was ethical questions around COVID-19. Students could pick a single square in the matrix as their focus area for their response, or any combination of squares. At least one teacher required their students to populate every square to have the students develop a well-rounded perspective on their chosen issue. During the *create* phase students submitted a 5-10-minute video which was then viewed and evaluated by a selection of their peers during the *respond* phase.

YEAR 9 2020

# PHILOSOPHY & RHETORIC MATRIX



LOGOS



PATHOS



ETHOS

## UTILITARIANISM

The rightness of an actions is determined by their consequences

## DEONTOLOGY

The rightness of an actions is determined by legality

## VIRTUE ETHICS

The rightness of actions is determined by whether the actions are virtuous

## HUMAN RIGHTS

Rights inherent to all people regardless of age, gender, nationality or beliefs

Figure 1: Matrix demonstrating the integration of the two elements of the Philosophy & Rhetoric course including Aristotelian rhetoric and four prominent ethical perspectives.

## Conclusion

The short course in Philosophy & Rhetoric has undergone an exciting evolution. By combining the Aristotelian rhetorical framework with an exploration of alternative structures for ethical thinking, students have been equipped to approach a real-life complexity with nuance and sophistication. Time will tell the broader impact on student thinking, however exposure to such ideas can only be beneficial for developing teenage minds.

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# Notes

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