

ESTABLISHING POSITIVE

value and image for the

FOLK ARTS:

p r i n c i p l e s o f

e f f e c t i v e

ARGUMENTATION

by Robert Trapp, Professor Of Rhetoric, Willamette University

p u b l i s h e d b y **WESTAF**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to identify new approaches to funding folk arts programs, personnel, and research projects. The project, titled the *Folk & Traditional Arts Infrastructure Initiative*, has drawn on the expertise of individuals both from within the folk arts field and elsewhere to develop new approaches to addressing what has been a continuing unmet need--stronger and more diversified funding streams. Early in the research, the *Initiative* advisors considered the fact that an analysis of the manner in which folk arts projects are presented and the arguments constructed on their behalf may be necessary background information for their work. As a result, the advisors commissioned argumentation expert Robert Trapp to consider ways that arguments for the folk arts could be made more effectively. This essay represents his initial report to the *Initiative* advisory committee. It is a companion piece to the committee's full report, which includes a chapter by Trapp regarding the various approaches that might be used in constructing arguments in support of folk arts.

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principles of effective argumentation

Robert Trapp

This document is aimed primarily at folk arts professionals who find themselves in need of principles of argumentation to help them establish a positive value for folk art activities and a positive image of their art. Before presenting and discussing these principles, I would like to begin with a few of preliminary comments. First, although these principles are being laid out with the folk arts in mind, they are not unique to that field. As far as I have been able to determine, the strategies available to a folk artist may not be so different from those that might be employed by other people desiring to project positive values and images.

Second, although the principles of arguing about the folk arts may not be that different from those used to argue in other fields (politics, for example), the necessity for using effective arguments is just as important and the likelihood for making successful arguments may be relatively high. Because the majority of our citizenry may not consider folk arts central to their lives, making effective arguments for positive values and images of the folk arts may be more critical than making arguments in other fields. In fields like politics, for instance, most citizens already are reasonably informed and have already assessed its value. With regard to folk arts, many people begin with a relatively neutral view; therefore, arguments may be more successful here than in a situation where the audience begins with a negative view. In other words, folk artists and folk arts professionals are in a situation where using effective arguments may well improve their value and standing in the eyes of the community.

Finally, while argumentation very likely can improve the citizenry's image of the folk arts, no one should read this document expecting to find a magic bullet. A magical answer to the image problems of folk artists—or anyone else for that matter—does not exist. No one should expect to find a fail-safe method for arguing their case.

The principles for developing a good argument follow in two categories: principles that need to be considered before beginning to build an argument and principles that need to be considered as the argument is constructed and presented. Before examining those principles, I want to stress the importance of looking for argument opportunities.

looking for opportunities

Not everyone considers the varied fields comprising “folk arts” as central to their everyday lives as do folk arts professionals. As a result, the opportunity to present an argument for the folk arts does not occur every day. Folk arts professionals need to be prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they do occur. Opportunities lost may not present themselves again for quite a while. Folk artists need to be alert for informal opportunities (such as conversations at schools or social meetings, oral presentations during arts activities and demonstrations at school or community events, input during business meetings, and the like) as well as formal opportunities, such as letters to the editor, press releases, and grant writing.

One instance for presenting a case that folk art is important involves the grant application. Presenting a positive image for the folk arts—including and extending beyond the scope of the particular grant—is important. Of course, the most immediate concern is presenting a positive image of the particular art that comprises the focus of the grant. If the grant is in support of basketweavers, the presentation of a clear and positive case for that particular activity is of the utmost importance. At the same time, the writer of the grant for basketweavers should not overlook the effect her grant might have on future applications written by related folk artists. Thus, the writer of a grant involving basketweaving should present an image for the folk arts in general so that in the future when that funding agency is presented with a grant for a related activity (say, cowboy poetry), the funding agency may already have developed a more positive view of the folk arts in general, a view that might contribute to a positive reading of the cowboy poetry grant.

Although the presentation of arguments in grant applications is of central concern for this current funding structures project, it is not the only nor perhaps not the most important opportunity for folk artists to present arguments that can aid their image. The success or failure of a particular grant may be important; however, the image one can create about the folk arts in general is at least as important because that image can affect the future of the folk arts in ways that include but are not limited to the discovery and creation of new funding structures. Thus, in addition to presenting the case for the folk arts in grant applications, folk artists should be prepared to present their cases as other opportunities are presented. A couple of these opportunities involve accentuating positive events and responding to crises.

Most of us are probably more practiced at accentuating positive events than we are at responding to crises. Nevertheless, folk artists should make sure their positive events are followed up with messages that accentuate successes. Some of these messages can be initiated by the folk artists themselves, such as arranging an interview on a local television or radio station that emphasizes the success of a conference or writing a press release that discusses the economic impact of a folk festival. Other messages can be prompted by folk artists such as encouraging

observers or exhibit participants to write letters to the editor about how much they enjoyed the activity. Messages like these take advantage of important opportunities to accentuate the successes of folk arts activities.

Ironically, sometimes situations of seeming crisis can present other important opportunities for argument. Even my very limited experience with folk artists and folk arts issues brings to mind two such recent opportunities. One involved a widely circulated editorial by George Will and the other involved an ill-conceived attack on basketweavers by California Representative Wally Herger.

In early April, 1998, *Washington Post* Columnist George Will wrote an essay entitled "Just Ordinary Folks." Reacting to President Clinton's nomination and the Congress's confirmation of Folklorist William Ferris as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Will accused the NEH of "emphasizing low subjects [folk arts] as a matter of high principle." Although his essay was widely seen as a broadside attack on the folk arts, I am not aware of an argument forwarded either by folk artists or by folk arts professionals in response to Will. Situations such as the Will essay should be seen not as crises, but as opportunities to publicize positive images of folk art to the public. As far as I can tell, this opportunity was lost.

Unlike Will's essay, which was an attack on the merit of folk arts in general, the attack on basketweavers by California Representative Wally Herger was an attack on a specific grant to a specific group of folk artists. In a letter circulated to members of the House of Representatives on April 9, 1998, Herger cited a \$60,500 NEA grant to the California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA) "as a prime example of why the NEA should be eliminated." Unlike the situation with Will's essay, the responses to Herger's charges were swift and powerful. On the very next day, April 10, Sara Greensfelder, CIBA Executive Director, wrote a press release calling Herger's letter "arrogant, insensitive, and ill-informed." Subsequent statements by CIBA board members Kathy Wallace, Jennifer Bates, Jacquelyn Ross, and those by Cindi Alvirte (Gabrieleno/Tongva) and Penny Pierce Hurt, Chair of the Salinan National Tribal Council were forthcoming as well. One week following Herger's letter, an editorial in the *Sacramento Bee* ridiculed Herger: "Rep. Wally Herger has seen the enemy and it is a bunch of Indian basketweavers." The next day, April 16, 1998, an editorial in the *Record Searchlight* argued "It's time the Republicans cut some of their own perks instead of picking on a few Indians who are trying to maintain a traditional art form." A couple of weeks later Herger was forced to modify (he would say clarify) his original position by claiming that he was only against the grant, not against the art of basket weaving: "Let me state unequivocally that I fully respect those who weave baskets, and I wish them every success in their *pasttime*" [italics added].

Will's *Washington Post* essay and Herger's letter to the House of Representatives both presented opportunities for argument. Response to the Will essay was not (as far as I know) forthcoming. Response to the Herger incident, while it could have been improved, showed that people were prepared to turn a crisis into an argumentative opportunity.

before constructing your argument

I. Focus energy on creating a positive image.

When an argumentative opportunity arises out of a request to submit a grant application or from having the fortune to accentuate a successful event, focusing energy on creating a positive image for one's activity is not a difficult matter. In either of these two situations, we are directed by positive motivations to present our best facts. The situation is different when the opportunity arises out of a crisis or an attack.

When attacked, one of our natural responses is to return the attack. For instance, in response to Herger, Greensfelder called Herger "arrogant, insensitive, and ill-informed"; Wallace described his opinion as "just another form of racism or colonialism"; Bates said, "He better find out what he's talking about before he starts making statements like this"; Ross said that "it is highly embarrassing to see such ignorance come from an elected official"; and Hurt asserted that "Mr. Herger did not do his homework." All of these may be powerful arguments, but they are focused more on creating a negative image of Herger than on creating a positive image of the CIBA.

While the group may claim a certain degree of success because they forced Herger to soften his original position, their focus on attacking him rather than on using this opportunity to present a positive image of basketweaving allowed Herger an easy way out—a way out that does not further the interests of the CIBA. Without the need to dispute any of the charges of the CIBA, Herger made three easy moves in his April 29 Letter to the Editor of the *Sacramento Bee*: (1) He redefined basket weaving as a "pasttime"; (2) given his redefinition, he declared that he "fully respected" the activity and wished the participants "every success"; and (3) he continued to maintain that we should not support the CIBA with NEA funds. Thus, although the attacks on Herger probably were a source of embarrassment to him, they did little or nothing to modify his public position on basket weaving or improve public opinion of the value of the NEA in general. As a result, the CIBA response to Herger only can be described as moderately successful at best.

In my opinion, the responses to Herger contained seeds of much more successful arguments than those on which the attacks focused. Some of the responses discussed the fact that the work of the CIBA was instrumental in keeping important Indian traditions and art forms alive (*Sacramento Bee*, Greensfelder, Bates). One asserted an altogether too brief link between the CIBA and "women's health and community health issues" while another briefly mentioned the economic impact of the folk arts on the community in general (Jim Phelps, NCAC Executive Director). The point is that the responses did contain the seeds of arguments with the potential to present a positive image of the CIBA; however, the focus of the responses was on attacking Representative Herger, not on showing the positive attributes of the CIBA.

The relative value of presenting a positive image for one's self as opposed to attacking the

image of one's opponent is certainly controversial as the modern trend toward negative political advertisements confirms. But especially in an area such as the folk arts, where the public is not particularly well informed, arguers should make sure that a substantial part of their argumentative strategy is directed at enhancing and preserving the positive elements of the activities in which they engage.

2. Consider your audience.

Arguments are much more likely to succeed at enhancing the positive elements of the folk arts if the arguers give specific consideration to the values of the audience to whom the arguments are directed. An arguer who takes audience values as starting points is much more likely to be successful. However, taking the audience perspective with respect to values is ordinarily not our first reaction. Our first reaction usually comes from the values which we hold.

To illustrate whether arguments take audience values as starting points, consider some examples from the exchange between the CIBA and Representative Herger:

- “As a taxpayer, the idea of having my tax dollars returned home [as a result of folk arts activities] is extremely appealing” (Phelps).
- “The preservation of the art of basketweaving is important to the preservation of Indian culture” (Ben Delaney).
- “NEA funds are appropriated to artists in need of support for cutting-edge and unappreciated work” (Christopher Sindt).
- “Support for the folk arts helps keep part of our history alive” (*Record Searchlight*).
- “We’re trying to hang onto our native culture” (Wallace).
- “The NEA recognizes the importance of keeping tradition alive” (Bates).
- The CIBA is a part of “important, proactive work in women’s health and community health issues.” (Ross).

As you consider these as examples of arguments in support of the folk arts, you may find that some seem to be more persuasive to an audience who probably already supports the activities being evaluated. People interested in “the preservation of Indian culture” or “support for cutting-edge and unappreciated work” or “keeping tradition alive” may be the kind of people who would already support folk arts. Thus, a person making an argument to an audience holding those values likely is preaching to the choir.

On the other hand, values reflected in “women’s health and community health issues” or “having my tax dollars returned home” may be more general or universal than those previously cited. These arguments may appeal to audiences whose values do not presently include reflections about folk art. The arguments help an audience connect their present values to values of folk art. As a result, if audience persuasion is the goal, the arguer would be well advised to speculate about the audience’s values before deciding what kinds of values on which to base the arguments.

Having said this, I want to add that the other arguments should not be dismissed simply because they are not based in values the audience already considers important. Just because an audience may not consider Native American culture and traditions important or may not be concerned

about racism or about cutting-edge and unappreciated art does not relieve the arguer of the responsibility to educate the audience with respect to these values as well. Arguers should stress the arguments that ethically and morally are at the center of the issue, but they should not do so without considering the audience's values as well. More effective arguments result when these two kinds of values can be linked or related.

So prior to beginning to construct an argument, advocates of folk arts should be on the look out for opportunities to argue, whether these opportunities come in the form of a grant proposal, the chance to publicize a successful event, or in the form of a controversy raised by an adversary. Once the opportunity arises, arguers should think of arguments that enhance the activities they are supporting. The arguer then needs to decide whether these positive arguments should be used alone or in conjunction with negative responses to their adversaries. Finally, the arguer should consider the audience when selecting arguments. Although many situations may present ethical and moral demands that certain arguments be presented even though the audience may not consider them of utmost importance at the particular time, the arguer should also think about the audience's values when choosing the arguments to be made. After these preliminary considerations, one is ready to consider the topic of constructing arguments.

constructing your argument

Quite clearly, professionals in the field of the folk arts need to be in the business of arguing about values. After many years of reading, writing, and teaching in the field of argumentation, I have developed what I consider to be a sound yet simple way to teach people to argue about values. This method is certainly not the only method used to argue about values, but it is effective and can be used by remembering three simple words: describe, relate, evaluate. Initially, some people may discard or under emphasize describing and relating because they believe evaluation is the stuff of value argument. While they are right in that belief, my position is that much of the work of evaluation comes from careful description of concepts and by explicit explanations of how concepts relate to one another. Using the following three suggestions, I will demonstrate how descriptions, relations, and evaluations can be used singly or in combination with one another to construct effective arguments about values.

I. Describe your activities in positive ways.

Describing involves explaining the nature of a concept or activity to an audience as well as choosing the language in which the descriptions are to be couched. Both the choice of language and a careful description of the nature of the concept or activity are important to the construction of an argument.

Language is powerful. How an audience evaluates a concept frequently corresponds directly to the way specific language is used to describe that concept. Sometimes arguers have no control over the way concepts are described, but at other times they have substantial control.

An example outside of the area of the arts, but one that is very well known, is the use of the term “partial-birth abortion” by anti-abortion activists. The procedure this group tries to condemn existed long before the name “partial-birth abortion” was associated with it. Physicians called the procedure “intact dilation and extraction.” For anti-abortion advocates, “intact dilation and extraction” was much too neutral a term so they chose “partial-birth abortion” to more closely link the procedure to the birth of a live infant. Although the procedure remained the same, their choice of language changed the audience response to the procedure. From all accounts, their use of “partial-birth abortion” has been quite successful in convincing many people, including legislatures, to reject the procedure.

Attacks on the folk arts may begin by describing it in terms that do not contain positive connotations. For instance, in Will’s critique he selects the term “desert” to portray the NEA. He was happy to point to “goo goo clusters” as an example of folk art, and he labeled these kinds of activities as “mundane.” In describing folk arts activities in these manners, he escapes the need to construct a logical argument by describing activities in unfavorable language. Will capitalized on what may be a fairly widespread belief: that folk art is not really good art.

In order to establish or reestablish a positive image for the folk arts, supporters of the folk arts need to describe these activities in more positive language. Both in responses to images like those Will conjured and in establishing formal and informal arguments of their own, folk artists can select language carefully and with purpose. In response to Will, for example, folk arts professionals might select excellent and varied examples of folk arts and show how they are more like a lush forests than a desert, more extraordinary than mundane.¹

In addition to choosing positive terms, an arguer needs to clearly explain the nature of an activity to an audience before the audience is likely to arrive at a positive evaluation of the activity. The descriptions need to begin from the perspective of the audience and move toward the perspective of the arguer. In other words, the arguer needs to try to understand how the audience already conceptualizes the activity and needs to move that understanding to one which is more in tune with the understanding of the arguer.

Take, for instance, the activity of basketweaving. An audience uninformed about the activity of basketweaving may begin with an implicit, stereotyped description of the activity. In these cases, as the *Record Searchlight* indicated, basketweaving is seen as an activity carried out in mental institutions and sheltered workshops or it is evaluated as a euphemism for worthless college courses (Underwater Basketweaving 101). An arguer needs to understand that these may be the conceptions of basketweaving (and perhaps of other folk arts activities) that an audience already possesses. These conceptions need to be corrected by clear and positive descriptions of the activities, descriptions more in line with those possessed by the arguer. Correcting these images can be tricky because the arguer must avoid “talking down” to the audience or berating the audience for holding these conceptions. The key to a good argument

¹ I have engaged in at least one conversation where the participants have discussed whether or not the term “folk arts” is not at least an inherently negative term and at best a term which causes these activities to be seen as lesser in quality than other artistic endeavors. The same sentiment was felt for the term “folklore.” If arguers believe these terms to be negative, they can choose either (1) to use other terms for the duration of the argument or (2) to include in their work arguments aimed at changing the ways these terms are interpreted and evaluated.

that helps the audience replace old conceptions and values with new ones is careful use of language and clear descriptions of the nature of the activity without overtones of censure or attack.

The nature of the activity needs to be explained (and when possible demonstrated) to audiences so they can understand the activity they will later be asked to evaluate as positive. Arguers need to explain how basketweavers must take great care of plants used in the activity, how this care is important to delicate environments where the plants used in basket weaving grow, how the plants are harvested and dried prior to weaving, how the actual process of weaving takes place, who does the weaving, and how traditions are passed from generation to generation.

A clear understanding of the activities of basketweaving were not included in the arguments I read from the CIBA. Their arguments accused Herger of being “misinformed and ill-advised” and urged him to do more research before condemning another group, but did not take the opportunity to inform the audience about basketweaving and to correct any misconceptions they might have. Without a clear and positive description of the activity of basketweaving, audiences are left with their stereotypical thoughts of basketweaving as a waste of time. An audience must be able to understand the nature of an activity before they can be expected to relate that activity to positive values. Description is therefore an important element of evaluation.

2. Relate your activities to things valued by your audience.

Assuming that you have described your activity clearly and in positive language, the next argumentative principle involves relating the activity to things valued by your audience. Two of the most effective ways of relating a concept or activity to something valued by your audience are by creating relationships of similarity and of contingency. Creating a relationship of similarity involves convincing an audience that your activity is similar in important regards to other activities or ideas they already value. Creating a relationship of contingency involves convincing an audience that your activity is contingent on certain values—for instance, that folk arts lead to some valued effect. For our purposes, the second strategy seems to be the most important one.

Two points should be kept in mind when constructing arguments of contingency. First, the effects you claim to be contingent on certain activities should be effects your audience already values. Second, you should be able to demonstrate in a clear and convincing way that the effects really are contingent on your activity. I’ll provide examples for each of these points.

The first point—that effects you claim to be contingent on activities should be effects your audience already values—is sometimes missed in arguments forwarded by folk artists. Frequently, folk artist professionals claim that their activities enhance important, traditional cultures which are otherwise threatened. By itself, the relationship between folk arts and traditional cultures may not take audience values into account. Many people, for good or for ill, do not seem to place traditional cultures at the top of their value hierarchy. This is not to say that the relationship between folk arts and traditional cultures should be ignored, just that the argument has not

been taken far enough. For instance, one might argue that the dissolution of some traditional cultural activities has been replaced by other negatively valued activities such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and gang-related activities. Furthermore, it has been argued, that providing children with information about and practice in the arts of their culture furnishes an alternative to these more negative activities. So, in order to argue for the preservation and enhancement of traditional cultures, the arguer needs to show the audience how allowing the cultures to decay has led to effects the audience already believes are negative and how, by comparison, efforts to enhance those cultures can potentially assist in dealing with those negative effects.

I was particularly intrigued by a statement by CIBA Board Member Jacquelyn Ross indicating that basketweaving was related to issues of community health and particularly women's health. Although Ross's argument did not contain enough information to clearly explain this relationship, it is the kind of relationship that might be developed into a very strong argument. Because general audiences are more likely to be concerned with health issues than with the preservation of Native American culture, linking basketweaving to health issues is particularly fruitful ground for argument.

Another effect that is worth pursuing is the economic impact of the folk arts. If it can be shown—and several folk arts professionals claim that it can—that folk arts activities bring money into the community, audiences are likely to take a second look at the value of folk arts activities.

Deciding which effects should be related to folk arts activities is one important part of constructing the argument, but the second point—actually demonstrating the relationship—is important as well. Asserting the relationship between cause and effect is one thing, making a convincing argument for that relationship is another. Cause and effect arguments are difficult to make and no single method is perfect. However, simply associating the absence of your activities with the absence of the effects and the presence of your activities with the presence of the effects is a good starting place.

For example, some information I have pieced together from the CIBA indicates that prior to the CIBA programs, the art of basketweaving was threatened. However, since these programs have been started, Native American basketweavers are starting to make “headway where our numbers are finally increasing rather than decreasing.” This argument shows a cause and effect relationship between the existence of CIBA programs and the health of the activity of basketweaving. To complete the relationship for an audience, a similar argument would need to be constructed to show relationships between the improvement in the health of basketweaving and, for instance, women's and community health programs. If such a connection could be made, the arguer will have moved successfully from an audience value to the value important to the arguer.

Thus, the folk arts advocate needs to select the effects that are to be associated with the activities, then proceed to build a series of cause-and-effect arguments that shows how the actual or proposed activities lead to those effects. An outline of the argument might include the following premises:

- I. Without the CIBA, the art of basketweaving was in decline and in danger of disappearance.
- II. After the CIBA programs, the art of basketweaving has been reinvigorated.
- III. The reinvigoration of basketweaving has brought Native Americans together in situations which are more healthy than the activities in which they were previously participating.
- IV. The effect (reduction of drug and alcohol use, reduction of teen age pregnancy, etc.) are notable.²

3. Evaluate your activities positively.

To this point, you have described your activity carefully with the audience in mind and have made explicit for your audience causal relationships between your activity and effects. The final step is to evaluate your activities positively.

Review your description. Have you discovered the most positive match between the value of your activity and the values held by your audience? Have you focused on the most positive moral or ethical issue you believe to be shared by both the audience and the activity? Have you considered other positive moral or ethical value issues that need to be made evident?

Review your causal relationships. Have you presented the most positively compelling connections between and among the effects and your activity? Have you highlighted the most positive effects contingent on your activity? Have you made clear each connection between values as you move from the audience value to your own?

Evaluate the argument you have created in terms of its power to project a positive image and a positive value for the folk arts. A positive evaluation can be accomplished through a close assessment of the foci and emphases used in the description and relationship stages. When these two stages create positive images and values, the evaluation will be positive also.

conclusion

The ultimate goal of the entire process of constructing arguments for folk arts activities is to cause an audience to evaluate your activities positively. This goal is accomplished if you are able to couch the activities in positive language and able to describe your activities so they are clear from your audience's point of view. Your goal is accomplished if you are able to create sound causal arguments to link your activities to values accepted by the audience. Describe, relate, evaluate. These three simple steps can enhance the likelihood that your audience will evaluate folk art activities and images in positive and productive ways.

² Of course, folk arts professionals need to gather evidence to support these arguments (if they are in fact supportable). I present this and other examples simply as illustrations of how arguments might be constructed.