

# In Memoriam Charles Arthur Willard 1945-2021

Volume 41, Number 4, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084849ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v41i4.7062>

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## Publisher(s)

Informal Logic

## ISSN

0824-2577 (print)

2293-734X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this document

(2021). In Memoriam: Charles Arthur Willard 1945-2021. *Informal Logic*, 41(4), 691–693. <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v41i4.7062>

## **In Memoriam**

Charles Arthur Willard  
1945-2021

Our beloved colleague, Charles Arthur Willard, has died at the age of 76. He will be remembered within the argumentation community not only as an influential theorist but also as one of the chief architects of an international and interdisciplinary field devoted to the study of argumentation. In the late 1970s, he was part of the founding group for the Alta Argumentation Conferences (held biennially since 1979), and in the mid-1980s, he joined with J. Anthony Blair, Frans H. van Eemeren, and Rob Grootendorst to organize a conference that spawned the International Society for the Study of Argumentation and led to a series of international conferences held once every four years since 1986. In 2013, he was honored with the ISSA Distinguished Research Award. Willard will be missed for the many other ways in which he enriched our community: his drive toward inclusiveness, his exuberant playfulness, and his (sometimes exasperating) intellectual flamboyance.

Willard grew up in Hutchinson, Kansas, and attended Kansas State Teachers College, where he was an elite competitive debater on the national tournament circuit. He later studied rhetoric at the University of Illinois, earning his doctorate under the supervision of Joseph W. Wenzel. His first faculty job was as Director of Forensics at Dartmouth College, and subsequently, he held positions at Slippery Rock State College, at the University of Pittsburgh, and at the University of Louisville, where he served many years as Chair of the Department of Communication and was honored with the title of University Professor.

There was no acknowledged argumentation theory in American communication studies until Willard and a handful of colleagues argued it into being. Pedagogical interest in argumentation had been a central concern of academic programs in communication from their first appearance as speech departments in the early 1900s, and well into the twentieth century, it was difficult to find an American communication scholar who had not been drawn into the field

through debate. Argumentation was thus a common matter of interest among communication scholars, including those studying rhetoric from a humanistic perspective and those studying persuasion from a social psychological perspective, but it was not a primary theoretical focus for anyone.

The first extended effort to provide a cohesive overarching perspective on argumentation from a distinctively communication perspective was Willard's constructivist/interactionist theory of argument, debuted initially as a series of journal articles published while he was still actively coaching debate. These were reworked and elaborated in *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* (University of Alabama, 1983). Two subsequent books, *A Theory of Argumentation* (University of Alabama, 1989) and *Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge* (University of Chicago, 1996) further developed his position.

Willard believed that a theory of argumentation should be built from analysis of the actual practice of argumentation and should be responsive to actual problems of practice. He assumed that the main task for argumentation theory was not to provide universal standards for the evaluation of individual arguments but to understand how argument functions within its many varied communication contexts. He challenged the orthodox view of argument as a certain kind of "thing," stressing that argument should, first and foremost, be regarded as "a kind of interaction in which two or more people maintain what they construe to be incompatible positions" (1983, p. 21). Any credible theory of argumentation, he argued, should be subsumed under a more general theory of communication. Specifically, any special properties of either argumentative interaction or arguments as "things" made during argumentative interaction should be accounted for by seeing them as emergent from general communication processes (such as perspective-taking) operating in situations where people find themselves in disagreement with others. The claim + reason structure is output, he theorized, from attempts to look at one's own position from the perspective of some other. Rejecting theory designed to allow critics to judge the adequacy of people's reasoning, Willard defined an agenda for argumentation

theory around understanding how the interactants themselves judge one another's positions and make sense of the utterances from which these positions are inferred.

Among important insights derived from this perspective, three stand out as particularly durable. Willard argued strongly for valuing dissensus, as a continuous stimulus for deeper thought; he treated arguing as the only really reliable way to detect errors in reasoning, and he saw suppression of disagreement as the deepest threat to rationality. He wrote extensively about our troubled relationship with expertise: our unavoidable dependence on experts of all kinds and our inadequately developed strategies for managing this dependence. And he pointed out, decades ago, something that is only now percolating throughout the field: the fact that people deliberately "tinker" with argument's processes and procedures to open new paths to knowledge that did not previously exist.

Willard loved to engage in deep conversation about reasoning and reasonableness, and there were few boundaries to his curiosity about argumentative discourse. His great unfinished project was an exploration of the Great War, and in later years, he regaled colleagues and friends with countless exemplars of poor reasoning uncovered in his research. He was irreverent at times, relying heavily on wit to draw others into questioning conventional notions, especially notions woven into legacy theorizing about reasoning and argument.

Willard ranks as one of the foremost influences on the rise of contemporary argumentation theory, both intellectually and socially. From Willard we learned to see argumentation as an evolving practice presenting humanity with new choices and new challenges, especially around the absorption into society of increasingly specialized forms of reasoning. While his influence will continue to shape our work, our friend Charlie will be greatly missed for his irrepressible good humor and for his seemingly endless capacity for welcoming new people and new ideas into the community.