

In Memoriam Joseph W. Wenzel 1933-2021

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Volume 42, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088466ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v42i1.7227>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Informal Logic

ISSN

0824-2577 (imprimé)

2293-734X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Hample, D. (2022). In Memoriam: Joseph W. Wenzel 1933-2021. *Informal Logic*, 42(1), 359–361. <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v42i1.7227>

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In Memoriam

Joseph W. Wenzel
1933-2021

On December 30, 2021, Joseph W. Wenzel passed away, in the company of his wife and two children. Joe was a generous and friendly man, and will be deeply missed by many of us.

His professional life took place almost entirely at the University of Illinois. He was an undergraduate debater, a college debate coach, and a mock trial coach (this, even after retirement). These experiences blended easily with his education in rhetoric to produce a lifelong interest in argumentation. He served his profession in many capacities, but particularly as the editor of *Argumentation and Advocacy* (the leading U.S. journal for the study of argumentation), as the Alta argumentation conference director, and as editor of *Argument and Critical Practices*, which grew from that conference. He was pivotal in the internationalization of the U.S. argumentation community, by encouraging the work of Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst in *Argumentation and Advocacy* and at the Alta meetings, and by being one of the first U.S. scholars to take a role in the meetings of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation. His career was honored by the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, and he was a keynote speaker at several conferences in North America and Europe.

Perhaps his most remarkable scholarly contribution was his recognition that arguments can usefully be seen from three different perspectives: as rhetorical, as logical, and as dialectical. His idea that scholars should try to see argument, the one thing, in three different ways offered a comfortable way to reconcile what seemed to be radically different interests in the argumentation community. Those interested in politics and pragmatic effects were naturally drawn to the rhetorical perspective and its concerns with effectiveness and audience. Scholars wanting to evaluate the soundness of arguments could begin by considering the truth/validity focus of formal logic, or the Toulmin model, or informal logic's emerging acceptability/relevance/sufficiency standards. Finally, concerns of

power, social justice, and equality found a natural home in dialectically-oriented attention to the procedures arguers follow, procedures that allow either open discussion or abuse of one's "opponents." This tripled perspective grew from Wenzel's classically-oriented education dealing with rhetoric, logic, and dialectic; his respect for Wayne Brockriede's work; and his early interest in Habermas' theories about rationality and communication. I had the privilege of being in Wenzel's graduate classes during the time he was formulating this theory, and I watched it grow out of his personal readings and his discussions with his students: Charlie Willard, Dan O'Keefe, Sally Jackson, Scott Jacobs, Susan Kline, Brant Burleson, and myself. We often talked about product/process/procedure, the similarities and differences between rhetoric and argument, social considerations that made argument profitable or unproductive, the weaknesses of formal logic as a model for interpersonal disagreement, and the interplay of public argument and private thought. Many of us discovered the kernels of our own contributions to argumentation in those seminars and conversations. These three perspectives also had the happy possibility of creating international bridges between the U.S. rhetoricians, the Canadian informal logicians, and the Dutch pragma-dialecticians. The expansiveness of Wenzel's conceptions offered comfortable intellectual homes to scholars across the world, and allowed substantial cross-talk among people of very different academic heritages.

Those seminars were remarkable in their intellectual freedom, an openness to varieties of thought, that remains rare in higher education. Wenzel was a traditional rhetorician who enjoyed discussing Aristotle, Karl Wallace, and Brockriede. But he was also early to appreciate Toulmin and Perelman and one of the very first to begin teaching Habermas in U.S. communication programs, along with other philosophers such as Rawls, Gottlieb, Natanson, Johnstone, and Hamblin. He encouraged his students to explore on their own as well. In the courses given by this traditional rhetorician, his students began to integrate argumentation with the then-new work on interpersonal communication (O'Keefe and Willard), with conversational structure (Jackson and Jacobs), with pragmatics (Kline, as

well as Jackson and Jacobs), with Habermasian philosophy (Burlison and Kline), and with cognitive psychology (me). We did all this together, under Wenzel's generous invitation and sharp questioning, and we ourselves found natural bridges between these disparate foundations. Professors are often evaluated by listable things: articles, books, honors, citations, and so forth. It is hard to assess teaching, and the listable things about it seem to miss the point. But those of us who shared in those seminars know that Joe Wenzel was a most extraordinary teacher, a thing hard to document but unmistakable in person. Few professors could even organize a course with the breadth of Wenzel's, and even fewer could have genuinely stimulated so many lines of thought at once.

For good reason, we have grown wary of casually describing great scholars as "fathers," but I have always felt that way about Joe. He embodied the things I admired in my own father – generosity, pointed intelligence, practical wisdom, and a genuine fondness for me and many other people. He gave me my start, and I think many of my generation of Illini would say the same thing. After I passed my dissertation orals, he invited a group of us out to his home and gave me my first taste of single malt scotch. So I owe him that, too. The argumentation community and everyone else he touched is diminished by his passing.

Dale Hample