

A Rhetorical Analysis of “The Right Stuff” Lee Jennings

David Suzuki’s “The Right Stuff” features the gracious, entertaining and informative style we have come to associate with this well-known host of *The Nature of Things*. He begins with the interesting speculation from the book *Is There Life After High School?* that “impressions formed in high school are more vivid and indelible than those formed at any other time in life.” Suzuki stresses the importance of high school education and prepares his readers for a proposal related to making that education as valuable as possible. A rhetorical analysis reveals the varying degrees of success with which Suzuki employs logos, pathos, and ethos: while Suzuki’s ethos is strong because of the reputation he brings to his writing and his use of pathos to appeal to his target audience of parents and educators, his use of logos is weak. Suzuki is skilled in argumentation, but his strong ethos fails to make up for the lack of support for his thesis that high school science courses should begin with sex education.

Suzuki’s ethos is dependent on his achievements in science, and no one would question the wisdom of choosing him to speak to high school students about science. Although he is not an expert on adolescents or education, his own education and experience garner him enough credibility to offer a reasonable opinion on the topic? Because he does not need to establish who he is or what he is talking about, he can assume that his audience will listen, if not wholeheartedly embrace his ideas. He also depends upon making a connection with his audience, and his chosen title “The Right Stuff,” would evoke both the 1979 book by Tom Wolfe and the screen version of 1983, which emphasized the risk-taking fearlessness of the astronauts, of whom only those with “the right stuff” were chosen to go into space. For parents and educators familiar with the book and movie, there would be a carry over into their reading of the article, even though Suzuki does not refer directly to the source of the title, and it remains for the readers to determine if he means that the “right stuff” is being taught or whether educators need to have “the right stuff” (the willingness to change methods to something innovative and potentially risky) to reach high school students with the material that Suzuki believes is essential for them to know.

Because there will be parents in the 1980s (when we can assume this article appeared before it was republished in book form in 1989) just as likely to be concerned as parents of any decade if the high school science teacher appeals to teenage sexual interest to “sell” the subject, Suzuki wisely delays his thesis, first by appealing to his target audience: parents and educators who grew up in relatively the same era as he did, who may even experience some nostalgia for high school when, in the first paragraph, he asks them to invoke their own memories. He appears to have begun his own musings based on the book he has just read. This is a disarming strategy that gets his readers onside before his argument begins, and certainly belongs in both the realms of ethos (his credibility – he had similar experiences to theirs) and pathos (feelings of nostalgia).

His personal anecdote takes up most of the essay, and throughout, he invites his readers to experience what he does, the apprehension, the fears, even the biases, before enjoying the success of his impromptu introduction to his talk. His reader hears the advisor claiming the teenage crowd will “tear [Suzuki] apart.” His reader is invited to fear the “tough” audience just as Suzuki did, although he admits “[t]hey looked pretty normal.”

The danger of mentioning the large number of Aboriginal students in the audience as part of the “tough”

crowd is that it could be seen to reflect a racist attitude, rather than, as he probably intends, to create an atmosphere of “otherness” – of students from people of whom many suffered abuse through the dominant culture’s educational methods of forced assimilation, for example. The population, including the idea of the “tough” Northern town would likely be mentioned to target audiences not familiar with the area. Here, depending on the perspective of his reader, his use of emotional appeal would either be very effective or be upsetting for the reader. However, stories, even those that raise the ire of the reader, always have emotional appeal, and Suzuki’s strategy to reach his audience with pathos and ethos before logos is a good one. The main idea is that the school audience is large, and to Suzuki, all the students would be culturally remote, either because of racial ancestry or the town’s location.

When Suzuki greeted his young audience with the comment, “I’m a geneticist. I know you’re basically walking gonads, so I’m going to talk about sex,” he claims the audience was hooked, and a lengthy, productive discussion of science emerged from this departure point. Suzuki has prepared the readers somewhat for his statement by talking about the importance of hormonal changes in teenagers in connection with their high school experience in his second paragraph. Because his example is personal testimony, it serves as logical evidence, as well as having emotional appeal. The cause-effect strategy of the way he began his talk and its consequences is the strongest use of logos, in fact, his only use besides his personal testimony. The effect of his decision to introduce his talk by appealing to the interest of teenagers in sex must be delayed so that the parent readers are willing to listen to it. If the thesis had been introduced at the beginning of the essay, certainly some readers would immediately react with skepticism, dismissal, or even hostility.

However, Suzuki commits the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* by assuming that his remark caused this reaction. The reaction could have been caused by his charisma and celebrity. Furthermore, certain students might have been privately disturbed by his directness: one observer cannot determine how 400 students are responding on deeper levels. This flaw of oversimplification weakens Suzuki’s essay in general. Beginning a talk with a good-natured joke about sexuality is not the same as giving a class in sex education. Suzuki had no evidence that the students would have welcomed or needed a sex education talk in order to follow to the next points he discussed. Other examples of hasty conclusions can certainly be found. Suzuki, for instance, assumes that the hormonal changes of puberty inevitably disrupt high school students, causing their preoccupation with sex. To his credit, he does try to anticipate and answer resistance to his thesis, based on parents’ pressure on school boards to “keep sex education out of school,” but his response that the teens will learn about sex anyway and that they will not get the real facts is unsupported. He also does not question why this reluctance to allow students to have access to sex education may exist, if it does.

The major question overlooked by Suzuki’s essay—one of logistics-- is how can the schools, understaffed and overstressed, add the difficult subject of sex education to their curriculum. Admittedly, David Suzuki wrote his essay at a time when education budgets were in better shape than they are today, and he certainly makes an excellent point that educators should respect their students and appeal to their interests. Nevertheless, his argument for sex education in the schools clearly needs further thinking. In spite of Suzuki’s strong ethos and persuasive use of pathos, he needs a stronger use of logos to make an argument here. The best he can hope for is to get his audience’s attention – then it is up to them to see if and how his ideas should be implemented in the schools.