

I think Sharon has developed a program that is nothing short of revolutionary. I see that many of the outcomes of critical thinking will be met if students [people] [learn] "Powerful, Non-Defensive Communication." Sharon's model is built on a peace paradigm for communication that stresses respect, clarity and honesty . . . rather than defending, attacking, and persuading. The surprise is that the peace model is much more powerful and effective than the war model.

—Dr. Kostas Bagakis, San Francisco State University

Issue-Analysis: Defensive Dialogue in a Presidential Debate

The following is an example of the kind of in-depth analysis Sharon Ellison can provide in an interview. Smaller portions of it could be part of a brief interview.

Using excerpts from the debate dialogue, Sharon Ellison analyzes the types of defensive maneuvers used by Bush and Gore while discussing tax cuts, Social Security, and abortion. These excerpts are taken from the *New York Times* text of the first presidential debate. For the complete text you can link to:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/04/politics/04RTEXT1.html>

Text and Analysis

In the first set of interactions, Gore states that, according to Bush's plan, tax cuts for the wealthiest one percent of the population will exceed the amount spent on education, healthcare, prescription drugs and national defense combined. Gore presents statistical data to suggest that Bush's plan will benefit the rich in a disproportionate way.

Bush does not respond to the issue of whether those statistics are accurate. Instead, he begins by generally attacking Gore's accuracy and perhaps his honesty. He says,

Well . . . tonight we're going to hear some phony numbers.

Bush then presents his own position, but still does not answer Gore's allegation about the disproportionate ratio of money saved by the wealthy. .

Gore attacks Bush for not responding to the issues.

The governor used the phrase 'phony numbers', but if you look at the plan and add the numbers up, these numbers are correct. He spends more money on tax cuts for the wealthiest one percent than all of his new spending proposals for health care, prescription drugs, education and national defense combined.

While Gore's comments do counterattack Bush and blame him for giving too much money to the rich, most of his words defend his original position and statistics. I think this means he is now already in the one-down position, if we look at this interaction in terms of *defensive maneuvers*, instead of focusing on the quality of content.

They switch to Medicare, and Bush accuses Gore's administration of not achieving the goal of getting prescription drugs for seniors, an attack on accomplishment.

Gore counterattacks by saying that 95% of the seniors would get no help from Bush's program for four to five years, an attack on policy rather than on Bush himself. Also, Gore shifts to a flaw in Bush's proposed program, but never answers the issue of why seniors haven't received help with their prescription drugs during his administration.

Bush responds with an attack on Gore's motives, saying,

I guess my answer to that is the man's running on Medicare, trying to frighten people in the voting booth.

By bringing in the phrase, "trying to frighten people in the voting booth," Bush vaguely but aggressively implies that Gore's concerns have no basis and are simply a manipulation of voters.

Next, Bush again generally describes wanting all seniors to have prescription drugs and Medicare, but does not answer the specific issues Gore raised.

Gore, sticking to discussion of issues, then talks about a middle class couple, making \$25,000 a year and says that

This couple would get not one penny [of Medicare] prescription money for four to five years

Bush continues to avoid addressing the content of the issue and says,

I cannot let this go by—the old-style Washington politics of we're going to scare you in the voting booth.

Then Bush makes a specific comment about content saying,

Under my plan, the man gets immediate help with prescription drugs. It's called immediate helping.

And Gore responds quickly, correcting Bush's statement, saying,

They get \$25,000 a year income. That makes them ineligible [under your plan].

Here, if Bush is speaking honestly, Gore appears to know more about Bush's plan than Bush does. However, instead of responding by demonstrating that Gore is in error about how the program works, Bush again attacks Gore personally.

Look, this is a man, he's got great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator. It's fuzzy math. It's a scaring -- trying to scare people in the voting booth.

Hence, the often-repeated comment about Gore's "fuzzy math" is born. It is used in conjunction with another repeated phrase about "scaring people in the voting booth." Bush repeats these phrases throughout the debate.

This time, after his attack, Bush continues talking about middle class families, and offers some statistics, but he has changed topics without warning. Instead of establishing his position with regard to how long it will take middle class seniors to get prescription drugs on his plan, he talks about how much middle class families with children will save in

taxes. Thus, he *withdraws* from the topic at hand to avoid responding to the issue that was under discussion.

Gore does not point out that Bush has changed topics, but ignores the change of subject and goes back to the original topic, once again defending his position by saying.

It's just clear, you can go to the Web site and look, if you make more than \$25,000 a year, you don't get a penny of help under the Bush prescription drug proposal for at least four to five years.

At this point, Gore begins to sound like an ineffective person who is trying to make a point and can't get anyone to listen. This is not because his point is inaccurate, but because he just keeps trying to defend his position by repeating it over and over. Ironically, some people, conversely saw Gore's behavior as "too aggressive" because he did continue to come back to his point instead of accepting the evasion.

At this point Lehrer interjects, but rather than ask Bush if what Gore is saying is true, he makes an attempt to move on. Since he had responsibility for keeping the debate moving, this part makes sense. However, his way of shifting to another topic was by equalizing both men's positions, saying,

As a practical matter, both of you want to bring prescription drugs to seniors, correct?

Bush and Gore do another couple of rounds with Bush saying Gore is speaking falsely and then generally suggesting he wants to help all seniors, and Gore keeps repeating and defending his original position.

They move on to the abortion issue and Lehrer asks Governor Bush,

If elected president, would you try to overturn the use of the abortion pill RU-486?

Here, instead of answering what he will do, (first person) Bush shifts the conversation to third person and says,

I don't think a president can do that.

Then he comments that he is concerned that the drug won't be safe for women and Gore responds by saying the F.D.A. took 12 years to determine it was medically safe before authorizing it. Gore goes on to say that the main issue is whether Roe v. Wade will be overturned.

Lehrer says they'll move to the Supreme Court in a minute, but he is still trying to find out what Bush would do about the RU-486 abortion pill, and so he repeats his original question a second time.

If you're elected president, will you not throw appointments to the F.D.A., you won't support legislation to overturn this?

Again, Bush shifts to third person to avoid saying what he will do.

I don't think a president can unilaterally overturn it. I think the F.D.A.'s made its decision.

Lehrer repeats his question a third time,

You wouldn't throw appointments to the F.D.A. and ask them to reappraise this?

On the third round, Bush says "No," but qualifies his statement by saying "unless it's proven to be unsafe to women."

Gore jumps in and says ". . . he said he would order his F.D.A. appointee to review the decision . . ."

Now Bush says that he just wants to make sure women would be safe. He ignores the substantial data that indicates that it has already been proven safe. This can be seen as surrender-sabotage, where one appears to be doing something for a person or group, when in reality, he may be using it as an excuse to do something against the person or group. For example, under the guise of "safety for women," he might attempt to review and reverse the decision to use the abortion pill, in keeping with his anti-abortion stance, but not confirm or admit his true motives.

Next, Lehrer asks Bush, with regard to the Supreme Court question, if he is pro-life and Bush states that he is. Lehrer goes on to ask if a voter could assume that all judicial appointments he made would be pro-life

and Bush indicates that he would have no litmus test— the voters should know that he will put competent judges on the bench who look at the Constitution as sacred. He said he believes in strict constructionists and those are the kind of judges he would appoint. He makes a general reference to Texas Supreme Court judges he appointed as good solid men and women, but does not say what their position is on abortion.

Gore makes an effort to point out that what Bush has said does indicate that he would appoint justices who were pro-life. He continues to focus on the content of the issues rather than attacking Bush as a person.

When the phrase a strict constructionist is used and when the names of Scalia and Thomas are used as benchmarks for who would be appointed, those — those are code words and nobody should mistake this for saying that the Governor would appoint people who would overturn Roe v. Wade.

Here, he uses the phrase “code words,” a somewhat indirect way of saying that Bush is not being straightforward. Gore then states his own position openly,

And I would appoint people who have a philosophy that I think would make it quite likely that they would uphold Roe v. Wade.

Next, Lehrer asks directly,

Is the vice president right? Is that a code word for overturning Roe v. Wade?

Bush avoids answering the question directly. Instead he attacks Gore.

Sounds like the vice president is not very right many times tonight.

As on other occasions, Bush then moves on to a general description, which peters off into a statement about how it is a governor’s job to appoint judges. However, he begins this general statement with, “I just told you” He takes on a tone of parental authority, which performs two functions. One, it gives the illusion that he has already thoroughly

answered the question. Two, the tone of authority might be seen as a “strong” approach if the listener doesn’t actually analyze what he said.

I just told you the criteria on which I'll appoint judges. I've had a record of appointing judges in the state of Texas, that's what a governor gets to do. A governor gets to name supreme court judges and –

He follows this general statement with another attack on Gore, flashing back to the Medicare plan,

He also reads all kinds of things into my tax plan and to my Medicare plan.

Gore responds by saying,

That's a yes, it is a code.

Here, Gore tries to get a point in, but it is, too little, too late. He fails to make Bush’s pattern of evasion and attack clear, and to demonstrate that Bush uses this approach to avoid giving straightforward answers.

Lehrer then asks Gore,

What code phrases should we read by what you said about what kind of people you will appoint to the U.S. Supreme Court?

Unfortunately, Lehrer’s question again functions to “equalize” both men’s defensive tactics, suggesting that Gore also uses “codes.” Gore responds,

It'd be very likely that they'd uphold Roe v. Wade, but I do believe it's wrong to use a litmus test.

Gore does not address the issue of whether he uses a code, or make it clear that he doesn’t need one because he is giving his position in a straightforward way. Instead he simply restates his position, which leaves standing, the implication that he, too, uses codes, and therefore is not being straightforward. While Bush also restates some positions, the milder manner Gore uses enhances the image that his is defending his position instead of asserting himself.

Bush follows with another attack,

I'll tell you what kind of judges he'll put on there. He'll put liberal, activist judges who will use their bench to subvert the legislature. That's what he'll do.

Here, Bush equates being liberal with subverting the legislature. While he is making a comment about the issue of judges, he words it with a focus on "what Gore will do."

When Gore responds with "That's not right," he leaves himself in the position of using a general self-defense. It is unclear whether he is denying that he would appoint a liberal, or denying that his liberal appointees would subvert the legislature.

Later, each candidate made one additional comment regarding the "fuzzy math" on the topic of the tax cut. Gore said,

You haven't heard the governor deny these numbers. He's called them phony, he's called them fuzzy, but the fact remains almost 30 percent of his proposed tax cut goes only to Americans that make more than \$1 million per year.

This is one of Gore's stronger statements in terms of naming Bush's evasions in conjunction with his own data.

One more time, Bush avoided talking about the issue, saying,

This man has been disparaging my plan with all this Washington fuzzy math.

Conclusion:

Gore also attacked issues more and Bush attacked Gore as a person more. While the public claims to want issues discussed rather than people attacked, many people still evaluate "strength" in terms of a politician's willingness to attack.

Media analyses varied, of course, but there was substantial agreement among many of those reporting that Bush won. Major metropolitan front page newspaper articles reported that Bush won points with his "fuzzy

math" comment. In this case, Bush got "points" for an aggressive personal attack that avoided an issue.

The news article did not mention that, in making the "fuzzy math" comment, Bush avoided responding to the issues of prescription drug affordability or disproportionate tax cuts for rich Americans. In fact, the article didn't even report what Gore said about the impact of Bush's programs on middle and working class people.

On the other hand, Gore was never held accountable for why he had not done more to make sure seniors received affordable prescriptions during the eight years he was in office. In most cases, the candidates were rated based on various degrees of aggressiveness, sometimes getting credit and sometimes criticism. As a viewer, most of us would leave this debate with more questions than answers about the candidates positions.

What happened in this debate is typical of what happens in political debates, where one party makes an allegation, the other avoids answering it and goes on to her or his own point, and/or changes topics midstream. This method of debate makes it hard for people to figure out what is "true" and creates a great of deal mistrust for politicians. Reporters also often simply refer to the "spin" that each politician puts on a particular issue without reporting the facts.

If each party were held more accountable for responding directly to the issue at hand, public knowledge of the issues and public trust would increase. Using a non-defensive process for asking questions, making statements that analyze the issues, and setting clear boundaries on what the parties respond to, could dramatically alter the informative quality of debates and interviews.

For an example of alternate questions that could have been asked during one portion of this debate, see [Interview Coaching: Question Asking](#).