

# Insult rhetoric offers no solution to encampment issue

*Lois Nantais - May 2024*

I used to show a video in my class on the practices and tactics of bullying in the workplace. Given the prevalence of bullying, it is just practical in an ethics class to try to address how to best navigate aggressive people as we try to achieve our own goals. A non-active approach through timidity or lack of care can be unethical, sometimes just as much as aggression can be; if pervasive enough, can lead to sweeping social injustice.

My approach to ethics has moved over the years from descriptive to being much more experiential. It's just practical, rather than to discuss bullying, to have students debate using bullying tactics themselves (albeit in a safe environment), to try to teach them how to respond thoughtfully, experiencing that aggression as an ethical dilemma.

Often, in preparation, I use politics and my own experiences in class as examples for critical thinking exercises. If it's in the public domain, respecting the Fair Dealings Copyright law, I'm permitted to use posts from Facebook, X, or any other social media platform – even if it's an individual's postings – as long as it's public domain. Bill Dennis's response on Facebook to the column I wrote in last month's First Monday magazine was a perfect example of a populist style of politicking using insult rhetoric. The post was an image of the numbers for the 2021 federal election locally, where I came in third. The implication was that I'm a loser, and Mr. Dennis added a little clown face on the post for effect. A loser and a clown. Got it.

The circumstances could not have been better timing-wise with my courses. I just finished introducing the power of populism and the related fallacies and we were learning to debate in both respectful and more aggressive styles. With aggressive styles, the goal is winning through persuasion not truth-telling and not civility.

For their final debate, students completed three debates, each with unique style requirements, with one of those two being purposefully aggressive, using fallacies and tactics similar to what's used in today's political arena.

Without intervention from me, all three sections of my students determined that the aggressive style served as a distraction. With the noise involved with insult politics, the actual issues aren't clearly addressed; instead, the approach is used as a tool for disruption. A quick lesson on this approach is with Marjorie Taylor Greene, U.S. representative from Georgia, who effectively uses noisy fallacies, aggression, and conspiracy theories to drive home her agenda regularly. She gets lots of attention, which brings opportunity and especially at that level of government.

Much closer to home is our Sarnia's city hall, where Bill Dennis has effectively disrupted the governance process in council a few times with words. There is a lot of talk in our community concerning the decisions from city council regarding Rainbow Park and the encampment there for those without shelter. I hear that, after observing the stylized dramatics of Mr. Dennis regarding human waste, many people travelled over to the park to get a look for themselves. Although problems are inherent to the nature of the situation, every person I spoke with did not find Dennis's approach relatable. Many are concerned about how to effectively care for the people involved and are seeking real solutions.

With only 34 beds at the Lodge and with few choices for those in active addictions, our community has noticed the lack – a lack in resources for this ongoing and difficult issue, and, importantly, a lack of care in the disruptor's approach. What we need is a real solution for those facing harsh realities in our community.