Already Experts: Showing Students How Much They Know about Writing and Reading Arguments

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Already experts: Showing students how much they know about writing and reading arguments

An argument workshop can demystify the concept for students by revealing to them how much they already know about persuading an audience.

(pp. 674–682)

One of the most important challenges that students face is mastering argument, that rather loose collection of terms, strategies, and techniques that, according to Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* (1991), enables individuals to discover in any "particular" situation the means of persuading an audience (p. 74). Indeed, when instructors introduce the concepts of argument or persuasion, many students find this genre intimidating, and why shouldn't they? Terms like *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* and concepts such as the *enthymeme* and *logical fallacies* can seem unfamiliar and downright strange to students who quickly wonder what these terms have to do with them. How can a Greek term or the Latin phrase *post hoc ergo propter hoc* possibly help them to convince someone to accept their argument? How can these concepts help them to understand someone else's argument?

Of course, the thriving textbook industry offers students countless choices for learning about persuasion and argument, from original texts like Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* to contemporary interpretations of classical texts (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999; D'Angelo, 2000) to textbooks that embed argumentative concepts within more accessible language (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 1999; Rottenberg, 2000). In addition, numerous rhetorics and readers offer students sample persuasive texts to read and analyze. A few textbooks (Jacobus, 1998) focus exclusively on classic arguments like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration

of Independence." Many textbooks, however, accept Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz's dictum that "everything is an argument" (p. 3). Thus, in these texts, alongside readings like Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Woman," Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Seneca Falls" appear less canonical readings by contemporary essayists (Axelrod & Cooper, 1999; Barnet & Bedau, 1999; Faigley & Selzer, 2001; Hatch, 1999; McMeniman, 1999) and students (Axelrod & Cooper, 1999; McMeniman, 1999), as well as popular texts like cartoons and advertisements (Faigley & Selzer, 2001; Rottenberg, 2000).

The authors of these textbooks understand that although students may read avidly outside of classrooms, many often resist or avoid readings assigned in school (Vacca & Williams, 1995, p. 105). For this reason, these authors link argument to readings on current, controversial topics that students encounter in their lives outside of school. Unfortunately, because these textbooks present argument in a codified form, students still cannot see how these all-too-often prepackaged readings relate to their lives. In other words, to borrow Burke's (1969) words, these students do not yet see argument as part of everyday life, as an integral aspect of "the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard" (p. 23). More important, because many students view argument as something removed from their experience, they often do not realize that they know a great deal about persuading an audience. Specifically, they do not understand that participating in the "scramble of the human barnyard" has, throughout their lives, equipped them with argumentative skills now so embedded as to be almost innate.

To show students how much they already know about argument, the following workshop requires them to work in groups to create arguments and present them to their peers. Progressing from informal oral arguments to equally informal analyses of these arguments and only then to formal writing and reading assignments, this workshop demystifies the sometimes obscure terms and techniques of persuasion. Making argument more immediate, the workshop brings persuasion to life within the classroom and renders this area of language less intimidating to students who discover that they are already experts in constructing and analyzing arguments.

Constructing oral arguments: The workshop begins

Commenting on student resistance to the academy's "established texts," Daughdrill (2000) noted that many students "come from that world where the texts of the academy do not speak" to them (pp. 302–303). Daughdrill called for more "enticing" texts within the classroom, ones that move beyond the academic texts that instructors prefer to texts more interesting to students. Responding to Daughdrill's call, the following workshop introduces students to argument in the context of a game, a form of text that, as Fredericksen (1999) observed, teaches "cognitive skills" such as argument in ways much more "natural" and appealing to students than traditional "teacher-directed" activities (pp. 116–117). Specifically, because it is a game, this workshop introduces students to the basic ideas of persuasion much more effectively than textbook readings, lecture, and discussion ever could.

Before describing this game in detail, however, we would like to add that this argument workshop originated with Edna (second author), who invented the game to demonstrate to her students their already sophisticated sense of argument. Edna first presented this workshop to her class well into the unit on persuasion. However, since the workshop was first presented, we have moved it to the beginning of the section on persuasion and have found that presenting it before students have formally studied argument offers the best introduction to persuasion's frequently obscure terms and strategies.

The workshop's format is very simple. First, we introduce the activity as a game both to relax students and to create "desire and urgency" within the class (Fredericksen, 1999, p. 117). We explain that this game will help the entire class to understand how argument works; that is, to see how individuals create and present arguments and, just as important, to notice the ways that actual, live audiences respond to these arguments. Next, we ask students to form teams of four to five members.

Generally, to encourage students to view this event as a game and not as a formal class activity, we ask students to select their own groups. Nevertheless, other instructors could just as easily divide students into teams using some other method (counting off, dividing by rows, drawing lots).

Next, we explain that many games involve rewards, and this one will be no exception because, at the end of class, the winning team will take home a prize. This reward can be anything—homemade certificates, a small trophy, extra credit, cookies, candy, even play money. Whatever the prize, we then ask each team to work together for 15 to 20 minutes to come up with the best reason —the best argument—for why the class should award the prize to their group. This reason can be real or invented, serious or playful, focused on one member of the group or the entire team. Finally, before stepping back and letting the groups work, we encourage each team to appoint a scribe who will write down the group's arguments and also mention that each group, either together or through a team spokesperson, will present its arguments to the class.

At this point, the instructor can best help students to learn about persuasion by not interfering as the teams fashion their arguments. After all, this workshop aims to show students how much they already know about persuasion, and only by working on their own can the teams discover this ability to construct arguments. Moreover, only by working on their own can the students discover how closely their own ideas about argument match those of their peers. From experience, we know that the persuasive strategies that each team employs will be strikingly similar to the techniques that the other groups choose. For this reason, this workshop succeeds because it demonstrates to students where their expertise in argument truly lies—within their ability to draw from a repertoire of persuasive strategies and assumptions about good argument that they share with one another.

Discovering shared knowledge: Students analyze their arguments

After the groups have created their arguments, each team presents to the class its reasons for receiving the prize. Typically, this part of the workshop is the most amusing as the majority of the groups enter into the playful spirit of the game. For example, during one workshop, a group of students in one of our classes decided to tease their instructor, Angela (first author), who that day offered cookies as the prize. Holding the classroom's "no food or drinks allowed" sign above his head, the team's spokesperson began,

> Now you all know that we're not supposed to have food in these classrooms, but our teacher has brought these cookies. And, even though our *teacher* brought the cookies, we could *all* get into trouble if we're caught. For this reason, *our* team is volunteering to protect everyone, even our teacher, and eat all the cookies ourselves. You know, hide the evidence. We're gonna take it for the team!

This selfless sacrifice was matched that day by another group, which offered a somewhat different method for disposing of the contraband cookies:

> You've already heard how most of the groups plan to keep the cookies for themselves. But not *our* group. No way. Unlike our classmates, we're not selfish. If you vote to give us the cookies, we'll share them with all of you. That way, we can *all* enjoy them.

Unfortunately, the class discovered that not all of the groups were so altruistic, as another team's arguments prove:

> You know, guys, it's against the rules to have any kind of food in here. And our group, some of us are related to the campus police, and it's really our obligation to tell them about this violation. And, hey, getting caught could affect our grades and even lead to our teacher's dismissal. But we're nice. We won't tell if you *just give us the cookies.*

As amusing as they are, these comments are not frivolous; they uncover a hidden reserve of persuasive strategies that most students do not know they possess. During this part of the workshop, the instructor should first allow the teams to offer their arguments without any interruption or analysis. Students need to present without interference so that they can experience how an actual audience reacts to their arguments.

Following the presentations, though, the analysis begins, and to guide this analysis, we give students an informal handout listing classical and contemporary argumentative terms (see Sidebar). We have found that distributing the terms after students present their arguments introduces students to persuasion in ways that materials given out before the presentations cannot. The handout becomes a resource; instead of learning abstract terms and then trying to apply them, students simply gives names to the argumentative techniques that they have just used or heard others use. In this way, students learn that argument does not exist outside of them in textbooks or on handouts. Rather, argument is natural; it is something that people do—an integral part of being human.

For example, once students receive the list of terms, they can see that when a group threatens to tell law enforcement about the cookie "violation," this team is manipulating *pathos*, playing on the audience's fear of getting caught. Once the students identify *pathos* in this argument, they quickly notice that other groups appeal just as powerfully to emotions such as respect, sympathy, and even selfishness when team members offer to share the prize or sacrifice themselves for the good of all ("We're gonna take it for the team!"). In using the list of terms, students can see how appeals to emotion frequently play on the "commonplaces" or hidden assumptions that circulate among members of an audience. For instance, no group that presented in Angela's class that day created elaborate arguments about why sharing, self-sacrifice, and avoiding the police are important. The teams assumed—often correctly—that their listeners already believed that sharing and sacrifice are noble and that running afoul of the police should be avoided at any cost. Finally, each team that day exhibited a strong sense of timing or *kairos*, so well developed it seemed innate. Without prompting, most groups matched their arguments to the rhetorical situation. Thus, teams purposely referred to the classroom's rules against food and drink and specifically mentioned the cookies in their pleas for the prize. No doubt, if the prize had been play money, as it was during one of Edna's early workshops, the arguments would have reflected these changed circumstances.

Analyzing their arguments, therefore, students uncover a reserve of persuasive strategies that they have used for years but whose names, up to

List of argument terms and strategies

When analyzing someone else's argument or constructing your own, always ask yourself these questions: Who is the speaker or author's intended audience? How do I know who the audience is? How has the audience influenced the speaker or author's choice of argumentative strategies?

Arrangement

Refers to the way that a speaker or author organizes or arranges an argument. How does the speaker or author arrange the argument? Why did the speaker or author choose this arrangement?

Authorities or "big names"

Refers to a speaker or author's use of "big names" or well-known authorities on the topic being discussed. Closely related to *ethos* because speakers and authors often try to build their own credibility or *ethos* by referring to big names or authorities on their topic.

Claim

The speaker or author's main point, theme, central argument, or thesis. What is the speaker or author's claim? How are other rhetorical strategies being used to back up or support this claim?

Commonplaces

Also known as hidden assumptions, hidden beliefs, and ideologies. Refers to the assumptions, many of them unconscious, that groups of people hold in common. What hidden assumptions or beliefs does the speaker or author have about the topic? How is the speaker or author appealing to the hidden assumptions of the audience?

Definition

How is the speaker or author defining certain terms? Why has the speaker or author chosen to define these terms for the audience?

Difference

Examples of difference might include gender, race, class, ethnicity, or any other factor that people use to separate themselves into groups. How is the speaker or author portraying men, women, certain ethnic groups, certain social and economic classes of people, and so on? Why is the speaker or author portraying these people or groups in these ways?

(continued)

List of argument terms and strategies (continued)

Ethos

Refers to the credibility, character, or personality of the speaker or author or someone else connected to the argument. *Ethos* brings up questions of ethics and trust between the speaker or author and the audience. How is the speaker or author building credibility for the argument? How and why is the speaker or author trying to get the audience to trust her or him?

Examples

What examples is the speaker or author using to build the argument? Why?

History, context, background

What historical background is the speaker or author providing on the topic being discussed? Why? How and why is the speaker or author building a context for analyzing the topic?

Identification

This is Kenneth Burke's term for the act of "identifying" with another person who shares your values and beliefs. Many speakers or authors try to identify with an audience or convince an audience to identify with them and their argument. Related to Burke's term *scapegoat* (defined later).

Kairos

Timing, circumstances, opportunity, urgency. In any argumentative situation, an author or speaker must adapt to the circumstances of the argument. An author or speaker must also appeal to the audience's sense of urgency about a topic or create a sense of urgency within the audience. How is the author or speaker adapting to the circumstances? How is the author or speaker appealing to or creating a sense of urgency within the audience?

Logos

Loosely defined, *logos* refers to the use of logic, reason, facts, statistics, data, and numbers. Very often, *logos* seems tangible and touchable, so much more real and "true" than other rhetorical strategies that it does not seem like a persuasive strategy at all. How and why is the author or speaker using *logos*?

(continued)

this point, may have been unknown to them. However, more important than discovering this repertoire is recognizing that speakers and writers often share the same assumptions about persuasion with their peers. During this part of the workshop, we outline each group's arguments for receiving the prize on the chalkboard. Seeing the reasons side by side, students notice striking similarities among their arguments. For example, they might discover, as several classes competing for cookies have, that many groups manipulate *kairos* through a medical argument, a reason based on members' urgent and physical need for the cookies. Thus, more than one group participating in this workshop has stated, "Look, everybody! Our group really needs the cookies because, see, we need sugar, and if we don't get that sugar rush from the cookies, we'll all get sick." Other groups voice similar arguments but, as the following example shows, phrase the appeal in much more vivid terms:

> If our group doesn't get the cookies, bad things will happen. One of us, Melanie, has a history of doing really crazy and violent things when her blood sugar gets too low and, hey, the rest of us in Melanie's group just can't answer for the consequences if she doesn't get the cookies. So, remember, when you choose the winning team, you've been warned!

Medical excuses, appeals to fear and concern, assumptions based on beliefs about sharing and the fear of getting hurt or caught: Within and across classes, again and again, we and our students have heard the same arguments as teams compete for the prize.

Moreover, even when we do not hear identical reasons for receiving the prize, we and our students often notice teams using the same argumentative strategies to win the class's approval. We note, for example, the widespread appeal of the strategy *pathos*. No matter what other techniques the teams employ, most groups play to the audience's emotions in some way, an irony considering the bias against *pathos* in classrooms and textbooks that privilege *logos* or reason over emotion and feelings. For many speakers and writers, *pathos* is the default strategy, the persuasive technique used more often than any other. However, only when students outline and analyze their

arguments can they see that they share this preference for *pathos* with others. In other words, as Gee (1992) suggested, they discover that what they thought was "mental" or personal knowledge is in fact "social" or shared knowledge (p. 141) and that they can create arguments that reflect these shared preferences. What students may not realize, however, is how closely this discovery echoes contemporary theories of language and thought—theories that highlight knowledge's social nature and offer strategies, particularly collaborative learning, for bringing this shared knowledge out into the open.

Specifically, an argument workshop introduces students to the theory that persuasion is a social act, an activity performed not in isolation but with a strong sense of rhetorical context and audience. Noticing the similarities among their arguments, students can see that, from their earliest days, they have absorbed many of the same rules about how to persuade from their surroundings. As Vygotsky (1986) stated in *Thought and Language*, communication is "social contact," an external or "vocal" speech that has become "inner speech," an internalized set of norms for communicating with an audience (pp. 34–35; see Bakhtin, 1986; Bizzell, 1997; Foucault, 1984; and LeFevre, 1987 for additional discussions of language's social nature). The persuasive techniques that students uncover during an argument workshop are no more than the "internalized conversations" (Bruffee, 1997, p. 398) that they have heard their entire lives and that the workshop makes external once again. An argument workshop merely transforms these shared but now internalized persuasive norms back into "vocal" speech.

Of course, not every argument that students invent during the workshop will succeed. Kent (1989), for instance, described communication as a series of "interpretive guesses," a speaker's attempts to "match" his or her discourse to the "code" that the speaker shares with an audience (pp. 26–27). If Kent was correct, then some of these guesses, like all guesses, are bound to fail. However, as Kent also suggested, speakers do not create arguments from scratch; rather, they draw from the same code as their audience. An argument workshop can help students to refine their guesses by revealing to them how much of this code they already know and share with an audience

List of argument terms and strategies (continued)

Metaphors, analogies, similes

Comparisons, usually between an idea or thing that is unknown and an idea or thing that is already familiar to the audience (e.g., "A strand of DNA is like a ladder."). How and why is the speaker or author using these comparisons?

Pathos

Appeals to the audience's emotions. How is the speaker or author appealing to the audience's emotions? Why? Always try to name the emotions being appealed to (love, sympathy, anger, fear, hate, compassion) and figure out how the emotion is being created in the audience.

Research

What type of research has the speaker or author chosen to use in the argument: books, scholarly articles, popular articles, Web pages, statistics, scientific experiments, theoretical research? Why has the speaker or author chosen to use this research? How is this research being reported? For example, with graphs and charts, as text only, in scientific language, as narrative, through parenthetical references?

Scapegoat

Kenneth Burke's term for a group or person blamed for a particular problem. Related to Burke's term *identification*. Often, an author or speaker asks an audience to identify against this scapegoat. Is anyone in this argument being blamed for a particular problem? Why?

Style

A broad term, usually referring to the many ways that the speaker or author manipulates words (diction) and sentences (syntax). How is the speaker or author manipulating style? Why?

Visual rhetoric

Refers to the speaker or author's use of pictures, symbols, colors, format, or any other visual. Could also refer not to actual pictures or symbols but to the use of intensely vivid language in a written or spoken argument.

This is only a partial list of the many strategies that speakers and authors use when they create arguments. Feel free to add other strategies that you discover on your own.

that may respond to arguments in much the same way as they do.

The workshop succeeds, therefore, when it creates a space where students can begin externalizing this code, talking about which strategies work, which ones do not, and why certain strategies might work better than others in certain situations. Giving individuals unfamiliar with argument the opportunity to externalize persuasion is critical because many students do not know that when they argue they draw from a repertoire that they share with their audience. According to Bruffee (1997), most students and teachers instead "assume that thought" is "essentially" personal (p. 398). In other words, as Crowley and Hawhee (1999) explained, individuals do not attribute thought, including assumptions about argument, to the "networks of interpretation" that link them to one another (p. 6).

For this reason, Crowley and Hawhee (1999), like Bruffee (1997), advocated an understanding of language grounded in the social, and Bruffee in particular promoted collaborative learning as the ideal way to "re-immerse" students' hidden knowledge into "its external, social medium" (p. 400). For example, when they share the experience of argument, students learn that many of their assumptions about persuasion are in fact shared. Collaborative exercises like the argument workshop provide supportive spaces where students, working together, tap into these resources for argument. This discovery, in turn, prepares students for the final, most challenging phase of the workshop: turning their informal spoken arguments into formal written texts and analyzing the written arguments of others.

From proximity to distance: Moving from oral to written arguments

The last phase of the argument workshop brings students full circle. As students in writing and reading classrooms, the workshop's participants know that they are playing this argument game to prepare for fashioning and analyzing written arguments. Initially, the workshop pulled students away from text and into spoken argument and collaborative play. This final phase now asks students to turn away from speech and, either alone or with their group, transform their team's reasons for winning the prize into a written document. More often than not, students do not finish these essays before the class period ends and must take the essays home or complete them during a later class. However, enough time usually remains for students to begin writing in class and incorporating the persuasive strategies uncovered earlier in the workshop into their written arguments.

Of course, the demands of writing an argument differ from the demands of persuading an audience face to face. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong (1982) observed that writing "heightens consciousness" in ways that speech simply does not (p. 82). Writing "fosters abstractions," setting up the "conditions" required for objectivity, "personal disengagement," and distance between writer and reader (pp. 43, 46). Words can hold "layers of meaning" when committed to print (p. 46), and this capacity for complexity demands that students participating in an argument workshop change everything from their spoken argument's diction, syntax, and length to its tone, organization of ideas, and level of elaboration.

Nevertheless, these changes cannot undermine the lessons that students learned while fashioning their team's oral arguments. After all, writing's main benefits—its ability to distance, to abstract, to complicate—become obstacles when students who have never created text arguments sit down to write. In contrast to print, speech is intimate, "communal," grounded in the "human lifeworld" where "struggle" and proximity are more important than distance and abstraction (Ong, 1982, pp. 44–45). An argument workshop draws from this immediacy to demystify persuasion for students. Beginning writers who progress from spoken to written arguments find persuasion less intimidating than students who dive straight into writing argumentative essays.

For example, one challenge that novice writers face is imagining the audience that they must persuade. During an argument workshop, however, students see their audience face to face. Often, this classroom audience's background, experiences, and beliefs about persuasion are similar to the speaker's; both speaker and audience have internalized the same argumentative norms. These familiar listeners respond instantly to the arguments that they hear, giving the presenter an immediate sense of the argument's strengths and

weaknesses. The speaker can take this vivid memory of audience to the written text as this speaker, now writer, moves from the intimacy of speech to print's distance and abstraction. Just as important, this memory of presenting before a real audience may help students when they must imagine audiences who are less homogenous and familiar, who may not share the same norms, and who are so distanced from the writer that she or he has never met these individuals, let alone tried to persuade them. By moving from spoken to written arguments, students are better prepared to leap from circumstances that are known to ones more removed from their daily lives.

Moreover, progressing from spoken to written arguments will help students to become better readers of persuasive texts. During the argument workshop's early phases, students have the opportunity to analyze the spoken arguments that they and their classmates create. Once they commit their arguments to writing, students can apply this informal introduction to analyzing argument to the written word. Specifically, this final phase of the workshop asks students to bring their written arguments back to class, share their texts, and analyze the persuasive strategies presented in these texts. This reading activity benefits students new to argument by demonstrating how other authors manage argument, including the move from the proximity of the classroom and speech to the distance of the printed word.

For example, students who compete for a prize like cookies typically notice that groups that used signs warning against food to create *kairos* can no longer depend on these physical symbols in their written texts. Students also observe that authors' use of *pathos* changes when the distance of the page alters the ability to spark emotion in an audience. Creating urgency and emotion in a group of readers is quite different from inspiring these same feelings in a crowd of listeners, and asking students to bring their printed texts to class and analyze these texts together highlights these differences. As writers and readers, students can now ask questions and form theories about the ways that authors handle this shift from speech to print. Indeed, reading becomes an active process to students because they are also writers. In other words, they too have faced the challenges that the authors of the texts before them faced, often negotiating the same persuasive strategies and assumptions about argument as these other writers.

Finally, this heightened awareness of persuasion is not confined to the reading of other students' texts. After the argument workshop concludes, students are better prepared to read more canonical arguments like "Letter from Birmingham Jail" or "Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Having experienced argument as both writers and readers, they can now imagine these readings not as texts composed by faraway authors but as texts whose authors faced the same issues of audience and strategy that they and their classmates have negotiated. Johns and VanLeirsburg (1994) observed correctly that a "love of reading is a highly desired outcome of reading instruction" (p. 91). An argument workshop helps students see the authors included in their textbooks as individuals who, like themselves, drew from a repertoire of argumentative techniques to persuade an audience. In short, these students move toward greater love of reading because they can now see themselves in these other authors and their texts.

Argument in action

Fredericksen (1999) observed that classroom games are "not designed merely to amuse"; rather, they serve a "complex, cognitive function" (p. 117). The argument game described in this article is no exception, revealing to students how much expertise they bring to argument. The workshop's game-like quality relaxes students as it introduces persuasion's unfamiliar terms through nonintimidating play. Indeed, when we present this workshop to our students, even the prize that the teams compete for is ultimately shared by everyone in the class. However, more important than the game or the prize is the knowledge that students gain about persuading an audience. As students move from creating spoken arguments to analyzing their speech and, finally, to writing and reading persuasive texts, they see argument in action. Persuasion is no longer a series of obscure terms in a textbook but an act that demands—and receives—an immediate response from an engaged, active audience. After this workshop, students are ready for the terms and readings of argument textbooks. Specifically, after this

workshop, students take to these reading and writing assignments the knowledge that the ability to argue is something that they already possess. They now know that persuading an audience requires them to refine the argumentative strategies that they share with this audience, not that they invent their arguments in isolation and from scratch.

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