Developing “Real-World Intelligence”: Teaching Argumentative Writing through Debate

Students who debate learn skills of critical thinking, argumentation, and presentation. Randi Dickson explains how she combined essay writing and debate to address a range of language arts standards and, more importantly, help students become better-informed participants in a democracy.

In the twenty years that I taught middle school and high school English, one of the most exciting and rewarding times each year was when students wrote argumentative essays and presented them in debates. At one time I believed persuasive writing was the most important kind of writing to teach. I subscribed to the belief that Peter Elbow and Tom Romano argue against: that “expository writing that explains and argues is more important and more mature than narrative or imaginative writing that renders experience” (Elbow 189) and that “‘Real’ writing emphasizes analysis and argumentation” (Romano 3).

Although I no longer place argumentative writing at the top of a curricular hierarchy, I still believe it has a critical place in our classrooms and that the specific teaching of a variety of heuristics can contribute significantly to students’ ability to write effective essays. For the past eight years, working in university settings in English education, I have taught a graduate Teaching of Writing course. I spend a portion of the semester discussing and teaching argument and engaging students in debate. For the course and for this article, I draw on my secondary experiences as well as incorporating recent research and study about formulaic writing and the importance of argument.

Why Teach Argument?

In learning about argument and preparing debates, students learn critical-thinking skills, such as the ability to “identify an issue, consider different views, form and defend a viewpoint, and consider and respond to counterarguments” (Yeh 49). Yeh’s study, an important examination of the “effectiveness of two heuristics based on Toulmin’s (1958) model of argument and classical rhetoric for helping middle-school students . . . write argumentative essays” (49), begins by examining the place of argument in school and the workplace. He says, “The ability to write effective arguments influences grades, academic success, and preparation for college and employment” (49), and he examines the importance of being able to “pose and defend contestable ideas” (MacKinnon, qtd. in Yeh 51) in most academic and workplace settings.

Argumentation and debate are crucial to participation in democracy. Richard Fulkerson, in Teaching the Argument in Writing, says, “As I perceive argumentation, it is the chief cognitive activity by which a democracy, a field of study, a corporation, or a committee functions. . . . And it is vitally important that high school and college students learn both to argue well and to critique the arguments of others” (16). Deanna Kuhn, author of “Thinking as Argument,” would concur. Results from her research study indicate that “[i]t is in argument that we find the most significant way in which higher order thinking and reasoning figure in the lives of most people” and that “social contexts, such as the classroom, are the most promising arena for practicing and developing argumentative thinking skills” (155). Kuhn looks to the skills developed when students learn argument as being vital to all aspects of life. Beyond the next grade and the next job, she believes that thinking as argument reflects “real-world intelligence” and that “no other kind of thinking matters more—or contributes more—to the quality and fulfillment of people’s lives, both individually and collectively” (156). The ability
to form and hold beliefs, make judgments, and consider opposing views is vital to the significant decisions that people make in their lives.

Writing and Debate

I teach argument in conjunction with class debates to address two important goals of effective writing instruction: writing for real purposes and writing for varied and multiple audiences (Zemelman and Daniels 22–23). Students who debate are invested in the writing for several reasons. They feel responsibility to their fellow debaters, the rest of the class, and other invited audiences, and they feel pressure to perform well in front of their peers. They are also writing to be heard and to communicate their ideas, not to complete an assignment for the teacher. Students know that they will present their papers on a controversial and current subject as part of a team of debaters, and they care about what they write.

Integrating writing and debate encompasses multiple strands of language arts: students read and view a variety of texts for information and understanding, write for real purposes, hone their listening skills, and practice speaking in front of an audience. They incorporate research and library skills and often include historical and scientific texts. A unit on argument also moves the traditional literary texts out of the forefront and makes room for teaching through a variety of texts. Such a unit embraces what Robert Yagelski and others (Berlin; Freire) have called for: to “help the students become active, effective users of language in order to understand critically and participate meaningfully in the political and social systems that shape their lives” (Yagelski 55). Students who engage in writing and debating about current social, political, and historical issues learn to participate in making judgments and understand why beliefs are formed and held.

Preparation

Students often write stunningly about personal experiences and thoughts, in part because they know their subject. When asking students to write about complex, less-familiar subjects, we need to engage them in substantial prewriting activities that will afford them the same chance to know their subject. Activities must include much more than mapping or webbing what they already know and must enrich their knowledge base.

I use a two-step process to teach argumentation and debate. The first argument paper culminates in a debate involving a portion of the class. I set up a “fishbowl” with an inner circle of students who talk and an outer circle of students who listen. This serves as a model for the second round, where all students become involved in the debates.

For the first round, I choose the subject and take responsibility for providing the experiences and research to give them ample information. Two subjects I have used often with secondary students are capital punishment and the right to die. These remain current and controversial and have substantive arguments on both sides so the debate is fair. They are, I believe, important issues in our society and ones that students may someday be asked to make decisions about. For the capital-punishment debate, I begin by asking students to write a journal entry stating how they feel about capital punishment in this country and why they feel that way. The “why” is important as it starts them thinking about the bases for their opinions. I might ask several students to share their views on both sides of the argument.

We then spend at least a week acquainting ourselves with the topic. I begin with a taped television program that explores the history of capital punishment in this country and the methods used. The tape includes interviews with inmates on death row. Students take notes and get some sense of the arguments that have raged in this country over the death penalty. They see how public opinion fluctuates and what forces drive those changes.

I then supply students with articles from news magazines and newspapers and ask them to read about both sides of the issue. We read these in class, discussing the arguments, and they continue to take notes. Depending on my goals for the unit, we might also go to the library to find one article or essay on the subject and use this opportunity for the librarian to teach or reinforce research skills.

Making Peace with “Form”

When I feel students are sufficiently versed in the subject to have an informed opinion, I begin to teach
the form of argument in class. For many years, I taught argument according to a specific structure described in Sheridan Baker’s *The Practical Stylist*, holding students to the “keyhole” approach to writing their essays (54). When using issues regarding the death penalty, for example, I expected students to work from some opening—a narrative or imaginary scenario, information on the history of the subject, the context of the argument—that led to a thesis statement, where *thesis* means a statement that expresses the writer’s opinion on the subject. In the body paragraphs, writers made at least one concession to the opposition that they refuted, and we discussed the language, or words that signified that rhetorical move: “Of course, opponents of the death penalty will argue that . . .” followed by the signal of the refutation—“However . . .” or “Although . . .” or “Yet . . .” Writers then developed the reasons for the position they were taking, using evidence from the film we had viewed in class and their reading and discussion. Finally, they wrote a concluding paragraph in which they restated their thesis or summarized their argument and tried to broaden their position by considering the implications of their stance. An effective prompt was to ask them, “So what?” about their position in an attempt to come up with a “clincher” sentence.

Although I would not now insist on this structure, I would continue to teach it as one possible way to build an effective argument. I was comfortable with this approach because it helps build a strong argument and exists in the “real” world. That is, I often brought in copies of the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, where we found pieces written in this format. Students identified each part in the margin, labeling the thesis statement that often occurred as the last sentence in the first paragraph, the concession statement, the signal that it was being refuted, the arguments and the ways they were developed, and the clincher sentence that elaborated on the thesis. Although I am now uncomfortable with any kind of formulaic writing that insists on one right way, I can at least demonstrate that writers use this format effectively in real settings. However, as Yeh comments, “even if patterns exist in argumentation, variations in contexts and audiences give rise to the need for flexibility and adaptiveness” (53).

In a new century of writing instruction, the effects of high-stakes testing have reinforced the myth that formulaic writing is the best way to teach students to write—at least for the tests. Despite criticisms of it (Pirie; Wesley; Wiley), the five-paragraph essay or some form of it continues to be reinforced, particularly for students who “need the basics.” As someone who works actively in teacher education classes to debunk that myth and offer alternative views for teaching expository writing, such as those Pirie proposes in “Mind-Forged Manacles: The Academic Essay,” I am careful about how I might introduce any structures or forms. Now I would emphasize multiple models, as again evidenced on the op-ed pages and in other publications that include essays, such as most news magazines and newspapers.

Yeh’s study has informed my current position, and I advocate what his research supports: immersion and process approaches combined with explicit teaching of models (heuristics) to develop content and support for students’ opinions. Yeh’s study involved teachers with experimental and control groups, where the experimental group learned two heuristics, a “bridge” and a “pyramid.” (See figs. 1 and 2 for samples of how students in the experimental group used these heuristics. Yeh defines heuristics as “devices to teach students a pattern of thought—a process for achieving a well-formed essay that avoids focus on superficial aspects of the written product” (53)). Most critical is the way the models are introduced; that is, students see the struc-
FIGURE 1. Example of an Experimental Student’s Pyramid (with corrected spelling)

OPINION: People should not drink alcohol

REASON #1
People shouldn’t drink too much alcohol because it could hurt them and other people around them.

WHY?
People who can’t stop drinking are called alcoholics. Alcoholics drink too much and lose control of themselves, cause accidents, and suffer from health problems.

REASON #2
When people drink alcohol they do dangerous things.

WHY?
Some people cause car crashes by driving on the wrong side of the road, not stopping at stop signs, or traffic lights.

COUNTERARGUMENT
Many people say a small amount will not hurt, it can even be healthy.

ANSWER
While small amounts are safe, you can get addicted to it and you will increase the amount you drink. Especially if they are unhappy about their jobs or feel that nobody cares about them, then they will become alcoholics.

Yeh (59). Copyright 1998 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

FIGURE 2. Example of an Experimental Student’s Bridge (with corrected spelling)

OPINION
I believe we should not have uniforms.

REASON
It costs too much for parents to purchase uniforms and after school clothing.

FACTS
Some families can’t afford to buy uniforms for their kids.

IF THENS
If kids can’t afford uniforms then they’ll get into trouble for not wearing them at school.

VALUES
Kids have their own personalities and they need to express them in their clothes.

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tures as tools that they can use and modify to their needs and contexts, not forms they must slavishly adhere to. In Yeh’s study, independent raters from ETS rated the experimental group as having greater gains in development and voice. Yeh comments, “The gain in voice suggests that heuristics do not cause stilted writing, contrary to concerns expressed by some educators” (77). Students who are introduced to multiple models and possibilities “learned principles rather than rote procedures for argumentation and were able to adapt the heuristics and transfer their knowledge to a range of topics” (49).

Revision
We begin drafting the papers in class, looking at various models for opening paragraphs. During the writing, I ask for volunteers to read their opening
paragraphs aloud to the class, and we comment on what we noticed, what worked to get our attention and inform us, and why. The students continue to draft their papers in class, often finishing a first draft for homework. The next day, we might hear some concluding paragraphs. Students then work in groups of three or four to respond to each other's papers, utilizing a checklist or response sheet to help them with feedback (see Zemelman and Daniels, chap. 14, for examples), unless it was a class well-versed in responding to one another's work. I also read and respond to these first drafts, working with another area of the curriculum for a few days to give me time to read the papers outside of class. Using peer and teacher feedback, students revise their papers, again often in class. (A writing center where students can draft and revise on computers is helpful.) Before turning in the final paper, they work with a peer editor who checks for basic components and proofreads for correctness.

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On the day of the debate, I explain the format. We borrow a podium from the auditorium and I act as the moderator. The debaters position their desks on either side of the podium in teams of four. The rest of the class is the audience and will engage in the debate as well. The students are instructed to have pen and paper ready to make note of points they wish to support or question. This is a key element of the debate and an important skill: listening carefully to the other arguments presented and "thinking on one's feet" to respond. With a flip of a coin, we choose who will begin. Each person comes to the podium and reads his or her paper. We alternate the pro and con positions until we have heard all of the arguments. The students get to hear a variety of styles and approaches to building an effective argument and we see how facts, examples, scenarios, emotion, and reason can provide support.

Each team is then given ten minutes to prepare a rebuttal, which will be delivered by one person on the team. The teams huddle quickly, sharing their notes on points the other team made and deciding who has the best grasp of the issues to deliver the rebuttal. When I call time, one member of each team comes to the podium and delivers the rebuttal. Teams and audience again take notes. Then I moderate, with members of either team recognized to address questions or comments to the other team. By now, the audience members, who have read and written on this topic themselves, are jumping out of their seats to get involved. They refer to their notes and have to be active listeners to paraphrase a point made and ask a question or challenge that point. The class can get quite chaotic and enthusiastic, which is why I moderate and recognize hands. When we have exhausted questions, or as time permits, we end the debate. This may take two class periods. At the end, I comment on the way the debate was conducted, pointing out strengths of both the debaters and the audience. I ask them to write another journal entry in which they state whether their opinion has changed on the subject and what made them change their minds or what solidified their view. We then share several of these entries, looking to see how opinions are formed, what avenues we have for increasing our knowledge, and how information is a key component in making informed decisions.

**Moving to the Debates**

For the first round, I choose four “pro” and four “con” papers. I emphasize that the choice is based on the variety of arguments and their combined ability to explore the topic in depth. While the rest of the class works on another assignment, the debaters revise the papers they will present so as not to repeat one another. Sometimes a person has to eliminate some aspects of his or her paper and allow another student to build on that argument. Students pool their resources and plan their strategy, deciding who will read first and who should be last. Students take to this work with great excitement. They know that they are going to be presenting arguments to an informed audience of their peers. By now, they are also quite invested in their topic and eager to share their research and their views.

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The Next Round: Involving Everyone in the Debates

The modeling of the debate makes everyone eager to participate. Students seem to enjoy debating, especially as part of a team effort, and they feel empowered by becoming knowledgeable on a subject that the outside world has been debating as well. The experience of speaking from a knowledge base and knowing why one feels as one does is powerful. Students feel grown-up, discussing issues their parents and legislators might discuss and knowing that they are conversant on the subject.

For the next round, I ask each student to come in with one or two current and controversial subjects. We put these on the board, and I take a few minutes to discuss each one and its “debatability”; that is, we quickly brainstorm the pros and cons to make sure it is a viable topic for argument. We then vote on the most popular and intriguing topics. Depending on the size of the class, we usually end up with three or four teams of six to eight members who have chosen a topic. Each group then meets and negotiates the positions. Sometimes students have to be on a side they do not personally agree with, but they learn that the skills involved are still the same and investigating the other position is a way to explore one’s personal view.

This time we spend several days in the library with each team working to find and share relevant articles. As students build a repertoire of support for their thesis, they begin to divide the arguments between them; this time they agree beforehand which evidence they will emphasize in their papers and which opposing evidence they will cite and respond to. We again spend class time drafting the papers, and students utilize both peer responses and teacher comments to revise the drafts. We schedule two or three debates per week for two weeks. The students follow the same model that we used previously, but each member of the class debates and each listens to the other debates. Students are engaged as they see their peers deliver informed arguments, and they have the opportunity to respond as well as present.

As motivation for writing, I believe this format is a powerful incentive. I have often found other audiences as well, including taking an eighth-grade team to debate in front of a local college sociology class with their parents and friends invited and whole-grade assemblies where debate teams argued issues of local or national interest before a larger audience. Sometimes I have simply invited another class of English or social studies students to our debate. Students learn not only the skills involved in writing well-developed claims with evidence but also of being able to deliver these claims orally and respond from a knowledge base when challenged on the spot.

Broader Goals

Sometimes the students want to know who won. I tell them, “We all did. We all learned a great deal about a topic of interest and importance and we all participated to enliven and broaden that discussion.” My aim is to move students beyond the goal of trying to defeat their opponents by adamantly defending their own view. Fulkerson says, “I want students to see argument in a larger, less militant, and more comprehensive context—one in which the goal is not victory but a good decision, one in which all argumenters are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own” (16–17). For that reason, I never declare a winner of the debates, placing the emphasis on understanding an issue more fully. I often ask students to write how their opinions have been expanded or altered. I might also ask them, as Pirie suggests, to imagine themselves as another person, perhaps someone in quite different circumstances, and write what they think their opinion might be (30). Students can explore how opinions are constructed within individual and group contexts and can begin to think about how and why others might hold a different view than theirs. In today’s world, where adults in prominent positions often model distortion of facts and “truths” to get their point across (Soros), teaching students that we are not after “winning” but about making considered decisions about complex subjects seems particularly urgent.

Works Cited


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**Call for Papers**

The *SLATE Newsletter* invites submissions of Personal Opinion Papers (POPs) on any sociopolitical issue that affects the teaching and learning of English language arts. Recent topics have included student testing and grading. The *SLATE Newsletter* is also looking for other articles on issues related to the teaching of the English language arts. Send submissions to Fred Barton, Editor, *SLATE Newsletter*, bartonf@msu.edu.

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**EJ 75 Years Ago**

**Fighting Tradition**

I knew only one way to get pupils, pens, and punctuation on friendly terms, have them meet often. I knew the value of drill sheets, but I hated them like castor oil. I used them, and still do, but the benefit gained from sticking things into sentences, doctored to need them, is very brief. Learning to render first aid to your own literary offspring is much more interesting than working in a foundling hospital.

So I took my courage and my much maligned red pencil, and ignoring the cold looks of the other members of the overworked English department, set out to require a one-page theme a week. It was a noble effort, but useless. Students have had busy work for the waste-paper basket ever since the first Dad gave his infant a pencil to keep him quiet.