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Lessons from ten years of research on argument

Richard Andrews
Institute of Education University of London

Title: Lessons from ten years of research in argument: implications for higher education

Author: Richard Andrews

Response to this paper by: Deborah Berrill

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1. Introduction

This paper is written for lecturers, professors, students in higher education who are interested in the practice of how to learn to argue better, in speech and in writing as well as in listening and reading/interpretation – and in other modes of communication. It is also for researchers who want to understand more fully the difficulties of marrying thought to expression in higher education, and the political constraints that shape our exchanges with each in the business of teaching and learning at advanced levels.

I've composed it in the light of an increasing interest in argumentation at all levels, but particularly with the college and university in mind. My approach isn't formulaic; rather it's based on enquiry, and on shining some critical light on the practices and assumptions of composition at these levels in institutionalized education. Increases in numbers of students in higher education across the world have brought about some mismatches in the expectations of lecturers/professors on the one hand, and students on the other. The paper is partly at attempt to reveal those mismatches and to begin to do something about them.

But I also have practical ends in mind. Included in the paper are new approaches to learning to argue in higher education; ones that are light in their pedagogical scaffolding but which are effective; and ones which avoid excessive taxonomies, jargon or categorization. I have distilled at the end of the paper what I see as the best of a number of approaches; but have also wanted to take the debate further, based on joint research with Sally Mitchell, my own research and that of colleagues in the field.

At the same time, I am talking about a new field: argumentation in education and learning. This field or arena or space for debate allows us and our contributors to draw on a number of different disciplines – among them education, linguistics, discourse studies, philosophy – and to invite them to grapple with problems of composition in spaces that are real as well as virtual: classrooms, seminar rooms, lecture theatres, in electronic communities.

2. Contexts for studies in argument in higher education

It is tempting, in surveying the literature on learning to argue in higher education, to categorize the work to date into North American, English/European and, say, Australian approaches to the problem. Crudely, these approaches might break down, respectively, into a primarily *textual* approach to questions of how students learn to argue in the first years of

college or university; a more discipline-based *contextual* approach, taking into account the social and political bases for discourse; and a *rhetorical* approach, in the contemporary senses of that term. The temptation has been resisted for a number of reasons. First, each of these continental 'approaches', on closer examination, does not appear to be unified. For example, there are different traditions at play within North America as well as within the other continents; in Europe, for example, there is a strong strand of textual studies in argumentation, represented principally through the special interest groups in the EARLI network which take their founding methodological tools from linguistics and pragmatics; equally, in North America, there are strands of enquiry that focus on community rather than on text (eg the work of Linda Flower and others in and around Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh). Second, there is international commerce in the debate on argumentation and on learning to argue, maintained through visiting lectures, common practice and international gatherings of teachers, lecturers and scholars. Third, such geographical categorizing sets up a polemic that isn't productive; far more productive is the exploration of a diverse and complex field via common ground, ie the problem of helping lecturers and students see how the writing of argument in the higher education context can be improved.

Rather, I have identified two main bodies of theory and through a Hegelian process of thesis and antithesis, tried to create a new synthesis that at the same time explores the interface between invention and arrangement in learning to argue on the one hand; and is sensitive to the different disciplines in which argument is operating on the other. These two main bodies of theory – which are international in scope and range – can be characterized as rhetorical and cognitive. The first has its eye on the way languages are shaped to persuade; the second focusses on the thinking that goes into the formation of ideas on paper. To suggest that the two are anything but closely interrelated would be to deny the power of the arena which we are trying to explore (I don't imagine, for example, that thoughts are conceived and *then* committed to paper via a series of technical/linguistic skills); but it is useful to separate the major influences on the process of learning to argue at an advanced level in education.

3. Rhetorical perspectives

From a rhetorical perspective, I take as a point of reference two of the books that emerged from the 1979 Canadian Council of Teachers of English conference at Carleton University (Freedman and Pringle 1980, Freedman, Pringle and Yalden 1983). The conference which gave rise to these books established its identity as one which marked a move on from the 1966 Dartmouth conference , with its affirmation of personal identity at the heart of the writing process; and a reinvention of the classical tradition of rhetoric which had surfaced again in the States in the 1960s (see, for example, Corbett 1965) in relation to the need for compositional assistance for the large number of undergraduates entering the higher education system. It is important to note that the Carleton conference was not affirming the taxonomically-driven,

textbook-producing rhetorical tradition; on the contrary, its major contribution was to restore *invention* to a central place in considerations of learning to write; hence the term 'reinventing'. The main thrust of the Freedman/Pringle enterprise was not to foreground argument, however; it was to broaden the scope of rhetoric to embrace the 'poetic' as well as the 'transactional' (essays by Britton appeared in both volumes). But the effect on the teaching of argument was clear: argumentation was as much drawing on the voices and expressiveness of the individual as were the more obviously expressive modes such as poetry and narrative. Such a conception of argument lent itself more to advocacy and positioning than the arid formulae of an older rhetoric, described by I.A.Richards as "the dreariest, and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate trawl through in freshman English" (quoted in Corbett 1965, pp626-7).

Freedman and Pringle's contribution, in summary, was to reinvent the classical rhetorical tradition by restoring invention (*inventio*) to pride of place in the business of learning to write, and to foreground process rather than product. Bu there was (and to a certain extent is) still a gap to be filled in the reinvention of rhetoric. While style, memory and delivery had been the keystones of the post-Ramus rhetoric – and consequently brought about the downfall of rhetoric because they lacked the other two elements of invention and arrangement – there was still little in Freedman and Pringle on arrangement (*dispositio*). Indeed, this key element in any discussion of argumentation seemed also to be neglected in other writing on rhetoric. Kinneavy's (1990) survey of contemporary rhetorical approaches spends little time on it, though his chapter does contain an important section on argumentation in North America and Europe and concludes that "it may be that the twentieth century is the most persuasive of all centuries" (p202). Nevertheless, he goes on, "the study of the organization of the parts of a discourse insofar as they relate to the teaching of composition has not been nearly as interesting a field as either general composition theory or invention and process" (pp218-9); the slippage is from invention and content to grammatical and lexical issues. Some of the most interesting issues about learning to argue in higher education are precisely where Kinneavy finds little to write about: at the interface of invention and arrangement. If, as Kinneavy suggests, "possibly the most telling empirical finding of [the twentieth] century in composition research relating to grammar has been the accumulated evidence that the isolated teaching of formal grammatical skills (traditional, structural or transformational) cannot be shown to bring any significant improvement in writing, reading or speaking skills" (p220), such a conclusion is further testimony to the gap that has unhelpfully opened between grammar and composition, unbridged by any consideration of arrangement. Freedman and Pringle themselves (1985, quoted in Andrews 1992) noted very little revision in school writing in Ontario 'above the level of the sentence' in their study of writing at grades 5, 8 and 12.

It is at the interface of invention and arrangement that rhetorical convention can get in the way of learning. What teachers teach, though 'assured of certain certainties' of academic convention like the academic essay and its

appropriateness for arriving at grades (through its making explicit the knowledge that students have gained), may not be what best helps students to learn. There are thus discoursal differences between learning and teaching. Again, put crudely, teaching tends to favour explicit end products that can be assessed (and modularisation exacerbates the move toward the assessable). Learners will favour a wider net of genres that allow informal and formal expression of the process and heuristics of learning as well as the demonstration of what has been learnt, ie everything from notes through personal log and diaries, question-and-answer to fully-fledged narratives and arguments. Insensitivity to the range of genres required for learning can lead tutors/lecturers into blocking off the routes into learning.

Learning to argue has been a central focus of work in school and higher education in projects that Sally Mitchell and I have been engaged in between 1990 and 1999 (eg Mitchell 1992, 1996; Costello and Mitchell 1995; Andrews 1992a, 1995). Our conception of rhetoric is close to social semiotics and critical literacy in that it takes into account the social and disciplinary context in which argument takes place, is interested in the interplay of visual and verbal codes and has been concerned with the distribution and effects of power in argumentation. Rhetoric, however, has been a key foundation to the research in that argument is foregrounded, as it was in Aristotelian conceptions of the art. In such a conception of argument, it is rebirth rather than reinvention that characterizes the nature of contemporary rhetoric, *viz* a rhetoric characterized by dialogue, imagination, making and an integrated relationship between invention, arrangement, memory, style and presentation. The dialogic dimension, backed by the work of Bakhtin, informs the whole process – which might be called, in short, the 'arts of discourse'. I (Andrews 1992) attempt to set out the foundation for further work on argumentation, and to address the importance of such a foundation in the theory and practice of learning to argue. In doing so, I attempt to steer a course between the re-application of Aristotelian rhetoric to the needs of the contemporary writing classroom at university level (eg Corbett 1965, Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992, Fulkerson 1998) on the one hand, and literary-driven models of argument as a process in the *spirit* of rhetoric (eg Leith and Myerson 1989) on the other, in which argument's association with dialogue, address (audience) and play figure prominently.[1]

4. Cognitive perspectives

From a cognitive perspective, argumentation has a central place in higher education. It must be said at the outset, however, that thinking will be grounded not only in its social and political situations, but also in the specific disciplinary contexts in which it is asked to operate. Cognitive approaches to argumentation, then, will be context-specific[2]. The connection between cognition and argumentation will be a strong one, however, not least because cognition ('thinking') is seen to proceed from assumptions about rationality that underpin the processes of higher education. Graduates from university are expected to be able to 'think' creatively and imaginatively about their discipline

but also more generally to be able to apply that creativity to different contexts. Learning to argue, then, could be seen to be a central purpose and activity of attendance at university.

It is worth distinguishing my position from that of Toulmin (1958) and especially from that expressed in Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984). The latter is generally regarded as a key text in the composing of argument at undergraduate level, at least in the USA. *An Introduction to Reasoning* is concerned with the study of "practical reasoning and argumentation" (pv), that is to say, an introduction "to ideas about rationality and criticism without requiring a mastery of any particular logical formalism" (ibid). As Riddle (1997) says of Toulmin's seminal text, *The Uses of Argument* (1958), it[3] marked "a move away from argument conceived of as fixed patterns of 'technical logic' to argument regarded as a linguistic activity constrained by use in context" (p1). The follow-up practical book, *An Introduction to Reasoning*, associates practical reasoning with 'informal logic' and rhetoric (though we would want to argue with such a conception of rhetoric).

In the broad field of practical reasoning and argumentation, then, Toulmin, Rieke and Janik posit a basic pattern of analysis "suitable for application to arguments of all types and in all fields" (pv). The pattern of analysis is designed to test the soundness and strength of arguments: how are claims supported by reasons? How are those reasons to be evaluated? And what makes some arguments, such as trains of reasoning, better and others worse?

Briefly[4], claims are assertions, hypotheses or discoveries; grounds are the evidence to support the claim, whether it is empirical or not; warrants and rules express the relationship between claims and grounds; and backing is the foundation for the warrants in disciplinary or other social bodies of knowledge, practice and information. Qualifiers perform the function they denote: the qualification of a warrant, as indicated by phrases like 'presumably' and 'so far as the evidence goes'. Rebuttals consist of the circumstances which make exceptions to the claim.

The underlying metaphor for the model is archaeological: the approach aims to dig below the surface of the verbal manifestations of the argument to reveal its soundness and strength. While there is explication of how arguments can be linked to each other, or arise from each other in 'chains', the spirit of the model is analytical in a paradigmatic way. That is to say, it digs and scrapes away at the surface representations of argument until it reveals the underlying hierarchical *structure* of the argument.

There are other ways in which I would wish to distinguish my approach from that of Toulmin, Rieke and Janik. They use the term 'reasoning' for "the central activity of presenting reasons in support of a claim" (p14) and as subsidiary to 'argumentation' which they see as "the whole activity of making claims" and supporting and challenging them (ibid.). What they see as 'rationality' strikes us as being more like an attitude than an intellectual inclination; and 'argument'

is seen as a 'train of reasoning'; whereas I would see argumentation as the process of arguing, and argument as the overall noun describing the products of that process and manifesting itself in particular arguments (eg written arguments, oral exchanges, dance exchanges etc). Argument and argumentation, from the point of view of this paper, are subsidiary to rationality (the general web of discourses in which reason operates) and reasoning (the process of operation in those discourse worlds which might include, for example, mathematical reasoning as well as verbal reasoning). In short, argumentation – the main focus of the present paper as indicated in the title's use of the verb 'to argue' – is subsidiary to reasoning. Verbal argumentation, as well as visual and physical argumentation, are merely ways of exploring and creating a reasoned world.[5]

These are two ways, then, in which I would wish to refine the Toulmin, Rieke and Janik model. There is much that I would go along with, however: the distinction between argument as inquiry and argument as advocacy (distinctions made by Dixon, to which he would add argument as display); the useful distinction between generic, universal, field-invariant rules of procedure "that apply to rational criticism in all fields and forums" on the one hand, and field-dependent[6] elements of argument on the other.

Furthermore, as Mitchell sets out in her interim report on the project 'Improving the Quality of Argument in Higher Education', work by Higgins (1994), which attempts to explore the communicative contexts in which argument operates, adds to the picture; as does Toulmin et al's distinction between regular (rule-applying) and critical (rule-justifying) arguments (see Mitchell 1996 pp12-17).

However, one misconception that has bedevilled composition practice and theory, especially in argumentation, might be said to be derived from an aspect of the Toulmin at el model, namely the reification of a process as a product. The model's key elements are not the boxes or categories of analysis, important though they are to a scientific analysis of the process. Rather, the key elements as far as written and other forms of composition are concerned are the lines that join those boxes.

In other words, the act of arguing is more contingent upon the contexts and factors in which it is taking place than the Toulmin model enables us to see. The power relationship between protagonist and antagonist will be a major factor. The internal pressures behind composition, realizing themselves in blocks to writing or prejudices or predilections for particular modes of expression and forms of composition, will be another. Yet another will be the context in which the subject or discipline is framed (see Bazerman xxxx 'Where is the classroom?'), whether it be institutional or not. Argument is particularly susceptible to context because it is essentially dialogic. It invites response in a way that narrative or lyric poetry often doesn't; its function is sometimes to heal rifts, sometimes to explore them, sometimes to engender them; but at all times one person's or one group's argued position depends on another's.

5. The dialogic principle

The *dialogic* nature of argument is well described in Riddle (1997):

> The singularity of argument lies in its mode of interaction. In non-argumentative modes, the form of the interaction is complete if receivers co-operate in the co-construction of meaning. In argumentative interactions the form is not achieved without active challenge to the construction of meaning represented by participants' positions. (p4)[7]

This is not the place to repeat the case for seeing the dialogic principle at the core of argument (see for example Bakhtin 1982, 1986; Kaufer and Geisler 1991, p110ff; Andrews 1995; Riddle op cit), except to summarize the case by saying that dialogism manifests itself in argument in a number of ways. These include argument's openness to different points of view (sometimes opposed, sometimes tangential to each other, sometimes consensual where two points of view move to reconciliation after starting from different points, or which move to and from between consensus and conflict); its dynamic, interactive nature; its close association with conversation and drama; its predication on speech. However, it *is* necessary to apply that principle to the subject of this paper: learning to argue *in higher education*.

Let's take is as given that in higher education, students are inducted into a discipline (or a number of disciplines or professions) in which, by the time they attain degree level, are expected to be able to argue in that discipline[8]. That is to say, although at the very beginning of the course or program, there may be a good deal of one-way communication, with the lecturer or professor 'passing on' to the student the foundations of the subject, by the end of the course the student is able to discuss and debate the subject with the lecturer or professor. In some disciplines, such dialogue takes place earlier, either because of the nature of the subject (eg philosophy, where argument is a *modus operandi*) or is included earlier for pedagogic and interpretational advancement.

But much in the systems of higher education works against either attainment of argumentation at the end of a program or use and exploration of argumentation during a program. One student Sally and I have both worked with complained that the size of an undergraduate group in which she found herself for a course on education research methods was too large to foster argument. Although the lecturer worked hard to break down a group of thirty students into smaller groups during the weekly sessions, the chances to run with an idea in a sustained way over a period of time were minimal. At the other end of the scale, small groups don't necessarily lend themselves to lively argument. Often they are dominated by one or two people who, as it were, demonstrate arguments of varying quality to the rest of the group. Contributory reasons might be a lack of impetus or confidence on the part of the other students, or a lack of ability in the lecturer to engineer the learning so that everyone in a small group has a chance to make his or her voice heard. Furthermore, lecturers may not have made clear to students what the ground rules of the teaching sessions are: whether and how argumentation is expected.

Such tacit ground rules manifest themselves also in writing. The default genre in higher education – at least in the humanities - is the essay (Womack 1993). The essential problem is that the essay is a single-voiced genre that requires the student to weave together a number of other voices (authorities, references). I have experimented with different forms of writing for students to demonstrate to the lecturer that they have gained command of the subject or topic they are exploring. These include 'dialogic writing' like symposia or script-writing, question-and-answer, Socratic dialogue, dissertations that interweave conventional essay sections with narrative, lyric sections etc. Reports – a common genre in project work – often confuse students in that they don't know whether simply to report or whether to argue; often a mixed-mode work ensues, the criteria for judgement for which are sometimes not clear.

As points of reference for the development of my own position on learning to argue in higher education, I have taken two recent publications in the field of school and college composition: David Kaufer and Cheryl Geisler's 'A scheme for representing written argument' (Kaufer & Geisler 1991) and Richard Fulkerson's *Teaching the Argument in Writing* (Fulkerson 1996).

Kaufer and Geisler suggest that rather than students using "sources to *support* their own position" (p109), sources tend to be used in written argument as points of reference against which to define one's position:

> …once authors have discovered their position, they will often use a kind of 'metric of faultiness' to determine the order in which they will introduce and discuss prior sources in their own text: the more unlike their own position, the earlier they discuss a source; the more like their own position, the later they discuss it. (ibid)

They chart several ways in which the dialogic principle manifests itself in writing at undergraduate level, identifying dialogism not only in classical rhetoric, but also in contemporary versions and implicit in the Toulmin model (through rebuttal and qualifiers). What is more dynamic than Toulmin or the taxonomic imperative of fossilized rhetorics is the proposal of a main path/faulty path model of written argument, providing an explanation as to how writers use other sources to clarify and identify the direction of their own argument.

Fulkerson's book is a good point of reference because it is recently published and widely available in North America. It's a ground-clearing book and attempts to provide a basis for practice in teaching (not learning!) argumentation as part of composition in schools and colleges.

I share Fulkerson's position, *viz* that argumentation is "mutual dialectical interchange through which our opposing yet simultaneously cooperating voices, wise decisions can be reached, decisions always subject to revision as better arguments and better evidence becomes available" (p*ix*). The journeys on the route to that position are those reflected in this introduction: from rhetoric on the one hand, and informal logic (in various forms) on the

other. The tendency is for Fulkerson to come down on the side of informal logic, whereas the tendency is for this paper to favour the rhetorical.9

Fulkerson places himself squarely in the classical and Toulmin traditions, distinguishing his own position from the Aristotelian (ie logical or syllogistic, not rhetorical in this sense) and the 'pragma-dialectical' approach of the Amsterdam school which bases itself in "finding exact conditions for describing with precision fallacious moves in simple and artifical argumentative dialogues" (p15). Instead, Fulkerson proposes "an adaptation of classical argumentation as the most fruitful approach to teaching students to write good arguments and to read argumentative texts effectively", ie Corbett (1965) reframed for the 1990s. Such a position is taken despite the (albeit limited) evidence provided by McCleary (1979) that neither the Aristotelian nor Toulmin approaches helped students with the argumentative composition; indeed, in McCleary's study, a control group which had neither input wrote better arguments than those groups which did.

Fulkerson also helps us to define the particular approach of the present paper. Like him, my own approach has not operated within the modes of composition that divide neatly into exposition, description, narrative and argument (the EDNA model, re-formulated but not called by that acronym by Moffett (1968)). Rather, my approach is to look not at teaching argumentative composition but at *learning to argue*; in other words, the paper is about argument *in verb*: the dynamics of argument in higher education. Consequently, I am not proposing the teaching of argument by formula, nor am I assuming that argument is pervasive is higher education discourse (the notion that *all* discourse is persuasive therefore it is all argumentative). Rather, I am interested in the conditions in which argument might thrive in higher education, and how best to help students learn to identify the often tacit assumptions about argument that underpin and inform practice; furthermore, how best to help students and lecturers speak the same language and how best to argue in speech, writing and other modes of communication. What I am after is a disposition to argue and to argue well; an encouragement of critical approaches to ideologies and ideas (and therefore a move away from affirmation to critique, in the most positive of lights); the development of capability in students to imagine alternative positions and to listen carefully to the arguments put by others, complementing and challenging those positions as seems appropriate to the situation; and finally, providing students with a range of forms in which they might express their own distillations of arguments and their own new arguments. Essentially, then, I see learning to argue as fundamental to personal, social, institutional and political transformation – whether that argument be for clarification, defence, assertion or the breaking of new ground. That last function is for me the most important and what links learning to argue with the potential for the creation of new knowledge.

6. Conclusion

I end this paper with a disclaimer and the prospect of a way forward. Studies in

argumentation and rhetoric (and indeed other fields in social semiotics or linguistics) tend toward taxonomies. Such scientific categorizing is an important factor in clarifying the field. But it doesn't translate easily into ways of helping students speak, write, read, listen or make in some other medium that verbal language. On the contrary, such taxonomies often lead, if followed slavishly, to wooden, formulaic composition. Rather than devise a new set of such tools, I'm proposing a light scaffold that can be erected quickly to put up a building, then taken down again. The scaffold is a teaching and learning aid, applicable to writing as well as reading, speech as well a listening, making as well as deconstructing. It is the distillation of work on argument in educational settings, neither committing itself to the Toulmin nor Aristotelian/classical rhetoric nor informal logic nor pragma-dialectical camps, but rather distilling the insights from each of these into a model for pedagogic and practical use. I present it as a series of questions, to be asked by makers or audiences in any order, and at any stage in the process of composition or intepretation:

- who is composing/arguing for whom? What are the power relations and their implications?
- what are the tacit ground-rules? Can they be made evident in order to make explicit what is going on?
- what genres and text-types10 are assumed, are default in the field? Can they be subverted, appropriated, played with to create a new angle on the exchange or to provide a better way of expressing a position or positions?
- what is the nature of evidence in this particular composition? How many degrees of warrant or backing are required in order to make the evidence secure? Is the design of the underpinning foundation a) suitable to the task in hand and b) successful?
- what underpinning structure is there to the argument? How does the 'argument structure' translate into the composition? Or if the structure emerges through the composition ("shaping at the point of utterance") what are the tensions and complementarities of the act? Yet another possibility: is it possible to say that the work will have a single identifiable structure?
- to what degree is logical coherence at play?
- within the genre or text-type used for the exchange, what arrangements are possible? (cf classical *dispositio*) Is the order of presentation of the argument reflective of the order of thinking that underpins it? If not (and it possible for it not to be), why? Does it need to be? Is the surface arrangement linear or non-linear?
- what style and voice does the argument adopt?
- what is the syntactical or articulated shape at a smaller unit of analysis, ie how do the constituent parts of the composition link with each other?
- what other surface feature help or hinder the argumentative composition and its reception?

and finally

- what alternatives are there to the way the argument has been composed? Would there have been a better way to do it?

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Endnotes

1There is much more to say about the role of rhetoric in underpinning argument. For a full account of the rhetorical perspective, see Vickers (1988).

2That is why this paper does not focus on concepts of 'argument structure' of the kind explored by Pinker (1989) whose work is based on an assumption that the sentence or utterance is the unit of assessment, and that logical analyses of syntax reveal such structures.

3Along with Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's La Nouvelle Rhetorique (1958).

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