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Reason in the balance: Teaching critical thinking as dialectical

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we describe the approach to critical thinking pedagogy used in our new text, *Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking*. In this text we concentrate on developing students' ability to analyze and assess competing arguments in a dialectical context. This approach shifts the emphasis from the more common and traditional approach of evaluating individual arguments and fallacy identification. Our focus is on teaching students to analyze and assess competing arguments surrounding an issue with the goal of achieving a reasoned and justifiable judgment (an enterprise we refer to as inquiry).

KEYWORDS: argumentation, comparative evaluation, critical thinking, dialectical context, inquiry, reasoned judgment.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable recent focus on the dialectical dimension of critical thinking. Johnson's argument for the notion of a dialectical tier (2000, 2003, 2007) and the discussions it has spawned (Govier 1997/98, 1999; Leff 1999/2000; Hitchcock 2000/2002; Tindale 2002/2002; Groarke 2000/2002) have been significant in pointing out the importance of the dialectical context in which argumentation takes place. The notion of dialectical context highlights the interaction between arguers and between arguments involving criticisms, objections, responses, alternative views, and frequently revisions to initial positions. An implication of this view is that a complete assessment of arguments can seldom be done in isolation but generally needs to be done in the context of a historical and ongoing process of debate and critique, of the give-and-take among competing views. Thus individual argumentative exchanges should be viewed in the context of this dialectic.

In addition, there has been recent renewed interest in the nature and place of conductive reasoning. This body of work has marked a recognition of the centrality, in all areas of endeavour (Govier 1999: 160), of reasoning which involves the evaluation of pro and con considerations (Battersby & Bailin 2010; Blair 2010; Finocchiaro 2010; Fischer 2010; Freeman 2010; Hansen 2010; Jin 2010; Johnson 2010; Kauffeld 2010; Kock 2010; Pinto 2010; Walton 2010; Wohlrapp 2010; Zenker 2010) and has raised the issue of how such considerations can be weighted.

In our view, taking seriously this dialectical dimension as well as the conductive nature of much argumentation implies having as a central focus for both theory and pedagogy the kind of comparative evaluation which we make in actual contexts of disagreement and debate. Thus we have argued that the best approach to critical thinking is to view it as a dialectical enterprise involving a comparative weighing of the competing views and arguments with the goal of arriving at a reasoned judgment (Bailin & Battersby 2009).

Although making reasoned judgments in complex situations is at the heart of critical thinking, it is our experience that students tend to have very little preparation in how to do accomplish this. In our book, *Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking*, we have attempted to provide such preparation through an approach to critical thinking instruction which focuses on the process of arriving at a reasoned judgment (a process we refer to as critical inquiry, or simply inquiry). This approach shifts the emphasis from the more common and traditional approach of evaluating individual arguments. Although this aspect is important and is given due consideration, it is only part of what is involved in coming to a reasoned judgment. Our book goes beyond this dimension to focus on the various aspects of the practice of inquiry, including identifying issues, identifying the relevant contexts, understanding the competing cases, and making a comparative judgment among them.

This approach gives rise to several distinctive features of the text:

- (1) An emphasis on the dialectical dimension of critical thinking. Our approach focuses on arguments viewed in the context of the debate surrounding an issue, including the history of the debate as well as the current dialectic. It also emphasizes the role of the context surrounding an issue in coming to a reasoned judgment.
- (2) Attention to the dialogical aspect of inquiry. Dialogues are used extensively throughout the text in order to situate inquiries in realistic contexts and to point out the ‘dialogical’ dimensions of inquiry. We also offer guidelines for productive inquiry dialogues.
- (3) The inclusion of inquiry in specific contexts. The inclusion of chapters on inquiry in specific contexts demonstrates how the approach is applicable in a variety of areas, including science, social science, the arts, philosophy, and inquiring into extraordinary claims. These chapters also illustrate the various criteria relevant to evaluation in different areas.
- (4) An emphasis on the spirit of inquiry. In addition to identifying the various aspects of the spirit of inquiry, such as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, etc., the book describes some of the obstacles to achieving the spirit of inquiry and proposes some strategies for countering these obstacles.

2. DIALOGUES

In terms of structure, the book uses as a focus a series of dialogues involving a group of students and their relatives and acquaintances discussing a variety of issues including vegetarianism, capital punishment, the theory of evolution, video violence, human nature, polygamy, interpreting and evaluating artworks, and conspiracy theories. These dialogues serve as the basis for the examination of the various aspects of inquiry. The following is an excerpt from one of the opening dialogues which introduces the notion of inquiry.

“Mystery Meatloaf – Take II

Phil: Ah—mystery meatloaf—my favourite. I’ll have a big piece with lots of gravy – and a double order of fries.

Nancy: I’ll have the vegetarian lasagna please, with a side of yam fries.

Ahmed: What, no meatloaf today?

Ravi: Haven’t you heard? Our Nancy’s become a vegetarian.

Ahmed: No way! Why did you do something like that?

Nancy: It just finally got to me that I was eating an animal, another living creature, and that didn’t seem right.

Ravi: But animals eat other animals. It’s just natural.

Ahmed: And besides, it tastes so good.

Phil: Anyway, it’s just a dumb cow, isn’t it? It doesn’t have thoughts or feelings like a person, does it?

Ravi: I’m pretty sure that animals feel pain. My dog sure howls when he gets his tail caught in the door.

Phil: Well, what about fish? They’re not too with it.

Nancy: Some of my vegetarian friends do eat fish. I’ve been struggling with that one.

Sophia: I’ve heard that animals used for meat are kept in horrible conditions.

Ravi: I wonder if that’s true or whether it’s mostly propaganda from the animal rights folks?

Sophia: I haven’t really checked it out ...

Ahmed: And there are some animals that live quite well. There are those free range chickens who get to roam around and have lots of grain to eat and lead a normal chicken life (in fact, probably better than most). Until it’s time to hop into the pot, that is. So is it OK to eat those free range chicks?

Nancy: But it’s still killing other living creatures for our selfish purposes. Why should we think that human beings have a right to do that?

Phil: It does bother me, though, when folks get so worked up about how we treat animals, especially cute ones with big eyes, and ignore all the people getting mistreated and even killed all over the world. Isn’t that more important?

Sophia: Like the way all those movie stars and famous people protest about the seal hunt in Newfoundland but don’t take any action about all the genocides happening around the world.

Ahmed: Wow – we’ve sure come up with a lot of questions. Though not many answers.

Sophia: I wonder ... maybe there’s some way to go about trying to answer some of the questions. We couldn’t be the first people to think about these issues. So we could have a look to see what ideas and information are out there.

Nancy: I’m sure there’s information about the conditions in which animals are kept.

Ravi: And there must be research about whether different animals can feel pain, or even have other feelings.

Phil: And I’ll bet other folks have thought about the moral issues about the treatment and rights of animals. I’d be interested in seeing what’s been written about that.

Ravi: Though I don’t expect that they’ll all agree.

Phil: No, but that would at least give us some ideas to consider.

Ravi: And evaluate.

Sophia: I think it's worth a try. I don't know if we'll end up agreeing. Maybe. But even if we don't, at least we'll be able to think about the issues in a more informed way. And we'll be able to understand where the others are coming from.

Nancy: Now that would be progress! (Bailin & Battersby 2010: 2-3)

3. OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

We shall briefly describe the various sections of the text, highlighting those aspects where our approach is distinctive.

3.1 The Nature of Inquiry

The first section is comprised of two chapters. The first is comprised of an introductory discussion of the nature and value of inquiry. The second chapter introduces the five questions which are used to guide and structure an inquiry throughout the text.

- What is the issue?
- What kinds of claims or judgments are at issue?
- What are the relevant reasons and arguments on various sides of the issue?
- What is the context of the issue?
- How do we comparatively evaluate the various reasons and arguments to reach a reasoned judgment?

The use of these guidelines is illustrated by means of two detailed examples, one focusing on a discussion of the Academy Awards, and the second involving a city council debate over dangerous dog legislation

3.2 Arguments

The second section, comprised of four chapters, focuses on arguments and includes the material traditionally covered in critical thinking texts, e.g., the structure of arguments, deductive and inductive arguments, fallacies, causal and analogical arguments, and appeals to authority and expertise. The following are a number of ways in which our text differs from traditional approaches to treating this material:

- We view individual arguments as the building blocks of cases. In our view, individual arguments can generally not be evaluated in any full sense in isolation from the context of the dialectic in which they are embedded. Cases are the units ultimately to be comparatively evaluated. We do show, however, how one can conduct a *prima facie* evaluation of individual arguments in which fallacies are identified and certain arguments are eliminated from consideration.
- We offer a somewhat different approach to fallacies than the traditional ones, characterizing fallacies as arguments whose persuasive power greatly exceeds their evidential worth. Thus we analyze each fallacy in terms of both its logical error and its rhetorical force.

- The book places considerable emphasis on evaluating sources, including web as well as print sources, as finding and evaluating sources is so central to the enterprise of inquiry.

3.3 Conducting an Inquiry

The third section deals with the various aspects of actually conducting an inquiry, examining in detail what is involved in applying each of the guidelines:

- The chapter on identifying the issue focuses on the need to be clear about the issue under consideration. It also distinguishes among different types of judgments (factual, evaluative, interpretive) and emphasizes the differing criteria according to which each is evaluated.
- In the chapter on understanding the case, the focus is on laying out the dialectic, including the arguments on different sides of the issue, the various objections, responses etc. The text makes use of tables listing pro and con arguments, objections, and responses to represent this dialectic. This step is a necessary prelude to comparative evaluation.
- We also focus here on laying out relevant aspects of context. Our approach (unlike many others), emphasizes the role of the context surrounding an issue in coming to a reasoned judgment. There are three aspects of context that we focus on: 1) the state of practice, which refers to how things currently stand with respect to the issue; 2) the history of the debate, referring to the history of deliberation which has led to current practice or thinking about the issue; and 3) the intellectual, social, political, and historical contexts. In our view, context has a role to play in understanding the issue and why it is controversial, understanding the various positions which are vying for acceptance, and determining which view bears the burden of proof.
- There is a chapter on the evaluation of individual arguments which looks at the criteria used for evaluating different types of arguments and the criteria for establishing the credibility of various sorts of claims, e.g., ethical as well as factual.
- Of particular interest is the chapter on making a judgment and making a case (Chapter 10), as it is central to the approach taken in this text. Here we examine what is involved in the kind comparative evaluation which is necessary in order to come to a reasoned judgment on an issue. Such an evaluation involves the weighing and balancing of the various considerations which have come to light. Although we do not believe that there are algorithms for this type of comparative evaluation, what we do offer are guidelines for reaching a reasoned judgment. These guidelines require a comprehensive examination of the dialectical space, including consideration of relevant arguments and objections; taking into account the appropriate range of perspectives and considerations; determining where the burden of proof lies; considering differences in how issues are framed; incorporating the strong points of different positions where possible; appropriately weighing and balancing different considerations, values and arguments; and making a judgment at the appropriate level of confidence.

- We also use these guidelines to furnish the basis for identifying certain kinds of problems in particular cases, what we refer to as fallacies of judgment. These fallacies consist in a failure to observe any of the guidelines.
- Of note in the chapter on dialogue and the spirit of inquiry is that it goes beyond a simple exhortation to be open-minded, fair-minded etc. to identify some of the obstacles to achieving the spirit of inquiry and to offer some strategies for overcoming these obstacles. This chapter also discusses how to ensure that inquiry dialogues are successful, in particular how to respond to fallacies to keep the dialogue on track.

3.4 Inquiry in Specific Areas

One of the widely recognized instructional challenges is the difficulty that students have in thinking critically within particular areas and disciplines, both in terms of transferring general strategies and understanding to specific cases, and of understanding and applying the criteria which are relevant to the area. To help students in this process, we have a number of chapters that illustrate the application of the approach in a variety of disciplines.

- There is a chapter on inquiry in science which uses examples from plate tectonics, the theory of evolution, and epidemiology to illustrate the nature of scientific reasoning and the evaluation of scientific arguments. It also tries to address the widespread student alienation from the natural sciences by demonstrating their imaginative aspects and historical situatedness. The chapter on inquiry in the social sciences uses the example of the claimed effects of video violence to illustrate the evaluation of empirical claims and arguments in the social sciences. It also focuses on the question of the selfishness of human nature to illustrate an inquiry in social science to which a number of different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and sociology have something to offer.
- In the inquiry in the arts chapter, an inquiry focused on the *Guernica* is used to illustrate the role of argument in both the interpretation and evaluation of works of art. The transcript of an actual public art debate is used to illustrate an inquiry concerning the interface of artistic and other values.
- Inquiry in philosophy is illustrated through an ethical inquiry focusing on polygamy and issues of ethical relativism.
- The final chapter deals with ‘extraordinary’ claims and theories through examples of inquiries on the popular book, *The Secret* and on 9/11 conspiracy theories. These concluding inquiries involve an application of the various principles and criteria taught throughout the text.

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Commentary on “REASON IN THE BALANCE:
TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING AS DIALECTICAL”
by Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby

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In my capacity as Director of First Year Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Notre Dame, one of my regular responsibilities is to observe and evaluate writing instructors, most of whom are doctoral candidates in English literature, philosophy, and other disciplines in the liberal arts. They are smart, eager, and inexperienced, requiring a fair amount of guidance and support over the course of an academic year. One day I may be observing a class where students share drafts of proposal arguments with one another in small groups; the next day I may be observing a teacher-led discussion of ethos, pathos, and logos appeals. Our teachers’ approaches and curricula vary, but there are, of course, similarities across sections. Our program emphasizes written arguments and critical thinking (thus my attendance at OSSA), so I regularly observe our students grapple with, among other things, constructing sound claims, providing relevant and sufficient evidence, and considering alternative points of view.

This leads me to my comments regarding Professors Bailin and Battersby’s text, *Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking*. As our first year students immerse themselves in the important, exciting domains of academic, civic, and social arguments, they reveal powerful attitudes and assumptions about their own understandings of critical thinking and inquiry. A common and mildly troubling one is best exemplified by an episode I observed last year in a new teacher’s class. She had asked students to report, informally from their seats, on progress they were making on their final research papers, essays running approximately 12-15 pages in length and asserting claims about an issue of local or global importance. A few students talked about difficulties narrowing down their topics, but most seemed reluctant to reveal they were experiencing any problems at all. One brave young man, however, offered this to his instructor and classmates: “I’m stuck,” he explained. “I can’t find any sources for my topic.” The instructor asked what his topic was, subsequently expressing surprise that the student couldn’t find any sources when he explained he was writing about global warming. “Well, it’s not that there aren’t *any* sources,” he clarified, “it’s that the only sources that agree with me, that global warming is a myth, are crackpots.”

This student’s dilemma illustrates, I believe, the need for a textbook like *Reason in the Balance*. Bailin and Battersby argue in their paper that “the best approach to critical thinking is to view it as a dialectical enterprise involving a comparative weighing of the competing views and arguments with the goal of arriving at a reasoned judgment.” Early in the textbook itself, they lay out the following questions, questions functioning as “Guidelines for Inquiry” (p. 20):

- What is the issue?
- What kinds of claims or judgments are at issue?
- What are the relevant reasons and arguments on various sides of the issue?
- What is the context of the issue?
- How do we comparatively evaluate the various reasons and arguments to reach a reasoned judgment?

The young man in the story immediately above, it seems, was not interested in the important and necessary approach Bailin and Battersby privilege. His goal was not to weigh competing views and arguments in order to then arrive at a reasoned judgment; rather, having already arrived at his judgment—we do not know when, but it was, presumably, before he began his research/writing process for the project in question—he was interested in simply marshalling claims and evidence that supported his predetermined, fixed position. Perhaps the student ended up, over the course of the semester, engaging in the type of weighing of competing views and arguments that Bailin and Battersby address. Maybe, too, he eventually arrived at a reasoned judgment. (I'm not optimistic.) In all honesty, I do not know what ended up happening, since I did not have a chance to follow up with his instructor at the end of the term. The episode still troubles me.

I do not think that the anecdote I share is an isolated case. I am wary, however, of emphasizing it too much, especially in a discussion of *Reason in the Balance*, where Bailin and Battersby warn readers against what they term (p. 63) “the fallacy of anecdotal evidence. ... using a story (one case) to justify a generalization.” Certainly, many undergraduate students approach the research/reasoning/argument processes as true opportunities for inquiry, defined in the Bailin and Battersby text as (p. 4) opportunities to be “open to finding out about the views of the other[s]” and to “offer reasons for ... positions, explore the ideas of ... others, and engage in genuine dialogue.” Twenty years of teaching experience at the college level, however, tells me that the process I described the young man engaging in—his dilemma regarding finding only “crackpots” who agree with him, and his at least temporary refusal or inability to modify his own position—is alarmingly more common than we would hope. In my own discipline, many students understand the writing/research processes roughly along the same lines as the student I described. For these students, one engages in research—note, not *inquiry*—not to learn new information about a topic, modifying one’s position accordingly; no, one engages in research largely or only in a search for sources that support one’s *a priori* position. Conflicting views or voices are ignored or dismissed, of course, for argument is adversarial in nature, not exploratory. Additionally, beliefs, like possessions, are to be held on to at all costs, no matter compelling claims or evidence to the contrary. The goal, after all, is to win. Persuasion, not argument, perhaps.

This is why, as college faculty, no matter our particular disciplines, we must both model and require the sorts of reasonable, ethical, and open-minded critical inquiry approaches laid out in *Reason in the Balance*.

I appreciate these approaches a great deal. In my own writing courses, I currently require students to purchase three textbooks. Students would revolt, I fear, if I added another textbook to the list of required readings. However, while *Reason in the Balance* is not written expressly for a writing class, for a number of reasons the book would fit quite well in my own curriculum (and those of many of my colleagues, I might add). In

the interests of time, to ensure adequate space for conversations among all of us, I will offer two more brief and, I hope, focused points.

My first: There are clear-cut, useful definitions and explanations throughout the text. For instance, when Bailin and Battersby turn their attention to fallacies, about one quarter of the way into the book, they explain that (p. 62) “a fallacy is a common weak (or even terrible) type of argument that nonetheless has considerable persuasive power.” Immediately after, they explain to students the difference between what they call an argument’s (p. 63) “rhetorical effect” (that is, its “persuasive power”) and an argument’s “probative value” (that is, its “legal weight or evidential worth”). I find this simple, straight-forward ratio incredibly useful. I’ve been thinking about it a great deal since I first encountered it in the Bailin and Battersby text.

Several weeks ago, for instance, my students and I were discussing the problem of “quote-mining”—the practice of quoting selected or certain lines out of context, making it seem as if an arguer or text supports a position the arguer or text does not in fact support. I had made the case that intentionally quote mining was an unethical argumentation move, akin, it seemed to me, to lying. Soon after, the students and I also considered whether quote mining could be considered a fallacy; Wikipedia, a student observed during class, explains that quote mining is a “fallacy of quoting out of context.” This led my students and me to a discussion of the differences between an unethical argumentation move and a fallacy: Are all fallacies unethical? Are all unethical arguments fallacious? The discussion quickly became more complicated than I was prepared to deal with in that particular class, and I offered students no firm answers—temporarily, at least. Soon after, however, I received my examination copy of *Reason in the Balance*, coming across Bailin and Battersby’s distinction between an argument’s rhetorical effect and its probative value. Their uncomplicated discussion helped me, then, when I returned to class and discussed the unethical, fallacious nature of quote mining: A “mined” quote may at first glance have considerable rhetorical effect, but a closer inspection reveals that it fails any test of its probative value. While I do not believe I sufficiently answered the ethics question for my students, Bailin and Battersby’s distinction helped all parties—my students and me—understand the issues at play in a very effective framework. This summer, as I prepare for fall teaching, I plan to rethink many aspects of my curriculum, and I shall give serious thought to points Bailin and Battersby raise in *Reason in the Balance*.

I would like to offer another example of my esteem for this distinction between an argument’s rhetorical effect and its probative value, again commenting on its applicability to my own teaching: Newt Gingrich, as you may know, has recently announced his intentions to seek the Republican nomination for the 2012 US Presidential race. (He’s not faring well so far.) In March of this year, while speaking at an evangelical Christian church in San Antonio, Texas, Gingrich told the crowd the following: “I have two grandchildren: Maggie is 11; Robert is 9. I am convinced that if we do not decisively win the struggle over the nature of America, by the time they’re my age they will be in a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists and with no understanding of what it once meant to be an American.” Yikes.

When I saw the Gingrich excerpt on a political news site I read each day, I knew I wanted to address it in class with my students. We had been examining *pathos* appeals, concurrently examining various ways rhetors tailor their discourses to their immediate, intended audiences. Gingrich’s claims about a future secular atheist *and* radical Islamist

country, claims delivered at an evangelical Christian church in Texas, were a striking example for class discussion. I fear that for many in Gingrich's audience, the argument was, we can reasonably assume, effective. I hoped, however, that removed from the event itself (the speech), my students would quickly grasp the error in Gingrich's claim: a country cannot be both secular atheist and dominated by radical Islamists at the same time. (They did.) I wanted, though, to frame the discussion in such a way as to be respectful of anyone supporting Gingrich, not just the particular lines in question but also Gingrich and his run for the White House in general. (I teach at a Catholic university, with a large contingent of very conservative students: When Obama spoke at our commencement in 2009, many members of the campus went apoplectic.) Bailin and Battersby's distinction between an argument's rhetorical effect and its probative value was an effective way for me to address Gingrich's claim. Considering the argument's rhetorical effect allowed us to discuss its *pathotic* elements and their likely values for Gingrich's audience; considering its probative value allowed us to talk, dispassionately and impartially, about the troubling contradiction embedded in Gingrich's claim.

My final point about Bailin and Battersby's *Reason in the Balance*: Because the text privileges critical inquiry, including examination of (p. 20) "the relevant reasons and arguments on various sides of the issue," the dialogues throughout the text are illuminating. They allow Bailin and Battersby to model for students the varieties of real-world moves arguers make as they grapple with issues and move toward (or away from) consensus. Dialogues have a long history in philosophy and critical thinking, of course, going back at least as far as Plato's dialogues, so Bailin and Battersby tap into a rich tradition. I suggest, though, that in a future edition of the text, the authors consider an alternative method of displaying the dialogues and the commentaries or explanations that currently follow. As the text stands, format-wise, the dialogues are inserted in key places throughout the chapters, demonstrating the principles discussed therein. However, the dialogues play out as self-contained dramas—a sort of play-within-a play—with Bailin and Battersby's explanations coming *after* the action has unfolded, so to speak: In the subsequent explanations, Bailin and Battersby unpack for students the moves the arguers/actors made. For instance, in one explanation, appearing after Phil and Sophia discuss capital punishment, Bailin and Battersby write (p. 161), "Phil and Sophia have begun their evaluation of the various pro and con arguments by checking out the evidence in support of the deterrence argument, an argument which focuses on the consequences of capital punishment" I suggest reformatting the dialogue and explanations so that the explanations run parallel to the dialogues themselves, in column-like fashion. Seeing the dialogues and explanations next to one another would be even more illuminating and memorable. This layout would allow readers to see the moves the arguers make and the authors' explanations literally side-by-side. I suspect that would aid in students' comprehension. In my own experiences reading the dialogues, for instance, by the time I got to the authors' explanations, I had forgotten critical parts of the dialogues. I then had to go back and read the dialogues again. Rereading is not necessarily a bad thing, but I wondered if I would have appreciated and comprehended the dialogues even more if the commentaries were more immediately available.

Overall, as I hope is clear from my comments today, I find *Reason in the Balance* to be an important text. I've mentioned that I am here today as a member of a university writing program, teaching writing and rhetoric classes. The text would not work

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as the sole or primary text in my own courses—my students need focused help planning, drafting, and revising written arguments—but there is much here that is directly applicable to any critical thinking class, whether that class is offered through a speech communications program, a philosophy program, or a writing program. I agree with Bailin and Battersby when they assert that (p. 20) “the best approach to critical thinking is to view it as a dialectical enterprise involving a comparative weighing of the competing views and arguments with the goal of arriving at a reasoned judgment.” Helping students reach reasoned judgments is an important goal for all college faculty, no matter our respective disciplines or home departments.

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