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The Uses of Argument: A Contextual Application

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Title: The Uses of Argument: A Contextual Application

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What do you do when you want to write an argument? The sheer variety of persuasive situations precludes simple guidelines: arguments serve too many audiences and purposes to wear one suit of clothes. All writing, moreover, is a process of discovery--thoroughly unpredictable and idiosyncratic. As a result, arguments can't be stamped out like sheet metal panels; they have to be treated like living things—cultivated, encouraged, and refined. Five-step plans for changing minds or scoring points don't work.

—Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*

Introduction

When Stephen Toulmin wrote *The Uses of Argument*, his intended audience was other philosophers, particularly those working in the analytic and ordinary-language traditions. But aside from the few who responded favorably to his work, most philosophers in Toulmin's intended audience found his positions unsatisfactory. For them, Toulmin's conception of the structure and nature of justificatory arguments was too far from the rigorous, positivistic standards of formal, symbolic logic. Toulmin's conception of arguments was, in short, too rhetorical. As a result, soon after the work's original 1958 publication, the amount of discussion and the number of reviews in scholarly journals of philosophy dropped considerably. By the early to mid-1960s, *The Uses of Argument* was all but forgotten by many philosophers.

However, unlike their fellow scholars in philosophy, in the forty years since *The Uses of Argument's* original publication, many rhetoricians (both in departments of English and departments of speech communications) have responded favorably to the work. In speech communication, for example, Toulmin has influenced the teaching of debate, general-level public speaking, and rhetorical criticism. But composition scholars still have not, as Fulkerson notes in his 1999 *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, sufficiently addressed Toulmin's specific role in composition pedagogy and theory (18). Composition scholars, particularly those interested in argumentation in the writing classroom, are still searching for innovative yet pedagogically-sound applications of Toulmin's work.

Several distinct aspects of *The Uses of Argument* have caused us to struggle with Toulmin's role in our discipline. First, Toulmin did not write *The Uses of Argument* as a composition scholar or even a rhetorician. Consequently, nowhere does he consciously address issues specifically relevant to the teaching of writing. While it is true that he also does not consciously address issues relevant to speech communication, the early applications of Toulmin in that discipline are more in keeping with Toulmin's original intentions and focus: When speech communication scholars like Brockriede and Ehninger, for example, used Toulmin's work (almost four decades ago) to teach debate students how to analyze their own and their opponents' arguments, they were, essentially, assessing the same kinds of arguments Toulmin specifically examines: what he calls justificatory micro-arguments. The same holds true with speech communication scholars like Hart and D'Angelo, who used Toulmin's work in rhetorical criticism. Nevertheless, such applications are often far-removed from most composition scholars'

pedagogical goals: In composition, of course, we usually focus on discourse production, not necessarily rhetorical criticism. When we do teach criticism, for instance, our ultimate goal is most often to help students answer the “How can I improve this text?” question, not the “How does this text work?” or “What effects will this text have?” questions. We ask these latter questions with our students, but we don’t usually ask them to work toward the same goals as the rhetorical critic.

Composition scholars have struggled with Toulmin in the writing classroom for a second, more important reason—again, one closely related to Toulmin’s original audience and purpose: The argument paradigm detailed in *The Uses of Argument* lacks a critical component for the assessment of the verity of the argument or arguments under consideration. As Fulkerson points out, “Toulmin’s scheme . . . is not a normative system” (20). Toulmin intended his model for the analysis of the structures of arguments, not for the invention of any arguments and not for the evaluation of any arguments’ “truth” or “falsity.” Thus, “the only way it could be used as an evaluation is by saying that since an argument is supposed to have six parts, an argument lacking any of them is defective” (Fulkerson 20). However, more often than not, when composition scholars do utilize Toulmin in the classroom, we use the model and the work in attempts to teach students how to compose effective written arguments—i.e., “logical” prose. In other words, we often use the schema because it seems to offer a model that is easier to understand than the rules of formal logic, while at the same time it seems to retain the standards of correctness that a system of formal logic offers. Again, these applications are not necessarily in keeping with Toulmin’s original intentions, and, as a result, many of the pedagogical applications of Toulmin in composition are weak. (Although Brockriede and Ehninger present Toulmin’s system as an evaluative tool in their 1960 “Toulmin on Argument: An Interpretation and Application,” they use Toulmin’s system as the foundation for their more complete system of argument analysis and evaluation, a system combining the classical conceptions of “logos,” “pathos,” and “ethos,” for example. So far, no composition scholar has worked out such a detailed system based on Toulmin.)

Toulmin’s ideas are entirely applicable in composition. Nevertheless, as we further incorporate Toulmin into our pedagogy, two broad concerns must guide our integration: First, we must use his work judiciously. For instance, while examining Toulmin’s explicit claims about the nature of natural language arguments, considering their specific relevance to composition, we must understand that the contextual nature of Toulmin’s work has resulted in important limitations to his arguments and system. Although Toulmin stresses these limitations throughout *The Uses of Argument*, all too often they have been ignored by other composition scholars. As a result, their applications of Toulmin have not been as effective as they could be.

Second, as we design pedagogies utilizing Toulmin’s work, we need to recognize the significance of his implicit claims about the necessary characteristics of effective natural-language arguments. Throughout his work, Toulmin elaborates on several important facets of natural-language arguments. The relevance of probability theory, the force and criteria of modal terms, and the field-invariant and field-dependent natures of arguments are just some examples. Although Toulmin goes into great detail concerning many of these areas, what he does not explain in great detail is, ironically, also important to composition instruction in argumentation.

To illustrate: One of Toulmin’s fundamental contentions is that natural-language arguments do adhere to standards of truth and validity, even though those standards are not the same as the standards for arguments in formal, symbolic logic. This contention is demonstrated throughout

his work with numerous examples of valid natural-language arguments. Certainly, Toulmin would not include fallacious examples when arguing for the equal status of natural-language arguments. Consequently, by examining Toulmin's assumptions and implicit claims—the ones underpinning his own examples—we can better distinguish the characteristics of good arguments from bad, of strong arguments from weak. In turn, then, we can utilize these characteristics in our teaching of written argumentation.

In other words, designing applications that foster recognition of Toulmin's stated and suggested characteristics of good arguments is the best way to utilize *The Uses of Argument* in the teaching of composition.

A Practical Application: Three Specific Uses

As have other members of my discipline, I too have struggled with Toulmin's role in my pedagogy. But after working with *The Uses of Argument* for over five years now in the writing classroom, I have refined my applications of Toulmin's work. Although Toulmin is not the only argumentation scholar to have influenced my pedagogy, I have found that several aspects of good arguments, derived from Toulmin's text, are applicable to my teaching. *The Uses of Argument* has helped me teach students how to design and critique arguments using at least three guiding criteria: (1) good arguments are supported; (2) good arguments are contextual; and (3) good arguments are multi-sided.

Before continuing, several important considerations must be noted. First, these three criteria are not the only aspects of good arguments. Arguments—and arguers—may also do a vast number of other things, such as make evaluations. For example, an argument maintaining that a university's attendance policy should remain unchanged and an argument that a committee's intended course of action will cause harm are primarily evaluative in nature: The first holds, essentially, that the policy is “good”; the second, that the plans are “bad.” Because argumentation is so integral to language use itself, and because arguments are so complex (too much so to be sufficiently summarized or encapsulated within the confines of Toulmin's pages), Toulmin's schema does not reflect every type of argument and every purpose of argumentation. *The Uses of Argument*, contrary to the title's implications, is not an exhaustive study of all facets of natural-language argumentation. *The Uses of Argument* is Toulmin's attempt to tease out the fundamental differences between the methods and standards of assessment of formal, symbolic arguments on the one hand and natural-language justificatory arguments on the other. Again, then, composition scholars wishing to use *The Uses of Argument* in the classroom must exercise a great deal of caution by using Toulmin in specific, limited ways.

Also, not only are argument types and methods far too vast and diverse to be adequately covered within Toulmin's pages, but my division of the “supported,” “contextual,” and “multi-sided” facets of good arguments, derived directly from Toulmin's work, is somewhat artificial. Considering a sample argument by pointing to one of its features as indicative of “good arguments are contextual” and another of its features as indicative of “good arguments are supported” can be misleadingly simple. As Toulmin stresses, for instance, both the number and the types of supports that an arguer offers in relation to a claim directly depend, inter alia, upon the context in which that claim appears. So, while considering that good arguments are supported, contextual, and multi-sided, we must remember that these three features are almost

always inter-related and dependent upon one another. Here, “supported,” “contextual,” and “multi-sided” are presented individually simply for the clarity of discussion.

Good Arguments are Supported

Many scholars often define an argument as Fulkerson does: “An argument is any set of two or more assertions in which one (or more) is claimed to offer support for another” (2). But Fulkerson’s definition seems limited. For instance, at face value the assertion “*Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s finest tragedy” is not an argument, because it is not accompanied by a supporting statement. However, “*Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s finest tragedy” certainly is an argument: It is a claim, a claim put forth to affect the thoughts and/or the actions of one or more people. (Some scholars define argument in even broader terms: Lunsford and Ruskiewicz (1999, 3) define an argument as anything “that expresses a point of view.”) That a rhetor does not offer support for a claim has nothing to do with whether or not that claim is in fact an argument. “*Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s finest tragedy” is an argument, but it is not necessarily a good argument, primarily because the claim is not explicitly supported.

Toulmin devotes much of his attention in The Uses of Argument to the fact that good arguments are supported. Early in the work, he explains that he will focus on what he calls “justificatory arguments brought forth in support of assertions, in the structures they may be expected to have, the merits they can claim and the ways in which we set about grading, assessing, and criticising them” (12). Toulmin’s whole schema, of course, is an attempt to lay out, in visual form, the structure of sample arguments, especially the supporting elements of data, warrants, and backings. This structure displays, albeit in static form, the dynamic relationship among the many elements of an argument.

Certainly, other “logics” and other methods of argument production and analysis display—again, in static form—the structural features of an argument. For example, in deductive logic, a syllogism’s three categories demonstrate that argument’s hierarchical relationship. Seeing the following argument laid out certainly helps one understand the relationship between the premises and the conclusion:

Major Premise: Anyone who commits murder should be punished.

Minor Premise: Claudius committed murder.

Conclusion: Thus, Claudius should be punished.

The elements of this particular argument—or one in the same vein—could also be laid out according to the components of a stasis categorization: The question “Did something happen?” would yield an answer along the lines of “Claudius poured poison in King Hamlet’s ear while he was sleeping.” “What is its nature?” would yield “The pouring of poison was an act of murder.” And “What is its quality?” would yield “murder most foul.” Finally, “What actions should be taken?” would yield “Claudius must be punished” or “Claudius must die.” Of course, comparing a (deductive) syllogism and stasis theory, in this particular instance, may seem artificial, because both are often used for different purposes. But, they are also often used in the composition classroom as invention heuristics and analysis tools, especially in relation to a given argument’s structural qualities and supports.

Compared to the (deductive) syllogism and stasis questions, Toulmin's argument schema is more productive for the displaying of an argument's structural characteristics—especially, in this instance, both the quantity and the quality of that argument's supports. The deductive syllogism, as it is usually presented in composition textbooks and utilized in the writing classroom, does not offer any categories displaying the variable force of the particular argument's claim. Syllogisms are, more often than not, "all or nothing" propositions: e.g. "All men are mortal." Stasis theory does allow rhetors to examine the particular argument's "level of certainty," vis-à-vis the "what is its nature?" and "what is its quality?" questions. However, answering "what is its nature?" and "what is its quality?" does not necessarily help a student writer see the need for the appropriate type and quantity of supports in a sample argument. Quite simply, because Toulmin's schema includes categories covering an argument's warrants, backings, rebuttals, and qualifiers, rhetors can more easily see the dynamic complexity of a sample micro-argument's supports. With Toulmin's schema, rhetors can see that "good arguments are supported."

As an example, I use Toulmin's schema in my basic writing course in several ways. For instance, for the first assignment, students write several "Descriptive Paragraphs" on topics of their choosing. The assignment is designed to foster, among other things, their skills with organization, development, and transitions. At this early point in the course, I do not explicitly discuss Toulmin's schema in great detail. However, rather than approach a sample paragraph by referring to its main features as the "topic sentence" and the "body," I conceptualize the paragraph in "Toulminian" terms: students and I see the descriptive paragraph as a micro-argument, wherein the "topic sentence" (whether implied or stated) is the main claim, and the supporting details are the data (or, as I often refer to them in class, the "evidence").

In *Attacking Faulty Reasoning: A Practical Guide to Fallacy-Free Arguments*, Damer addresses what he calls "A Code of Conduct for Effective Rational Discussion" (172). This code of conduct summarizes "basic rules of intellectual behavior that a rationally mature person would be expected to follow when participating in a discussion of disputed issues" (172). One of the most important of these basic rules is "the Burden of Proof Principle." This principle states, most simply, that "the burden of proof for any position rests on the participant who sets forth the position" (176). In other words, the person stating the claim must provide—especially if challenged—appropriate supporting evidence. In my basic writing class, then, the "Descriptive Paragraphs" assignment is really an exercise in Toulminian justificatory arguments: defending an explicit or an implicit claim (because one must, according to the Burden of Proof Principle), with appropriate supporting data (and even warrants and backing, if necessary).

Parts from one sample student's work are relevant here. In his descriptive paragraph entitled "Betsy Biscayne," Ben describes the features of his classic automobile, one he restored with his father. He begins his paragraph by telling readers, "I'm the proud owner of a restored 1964 Chevy Biscayne." This statement is, when the paragraph is viewed as a Toulminian justificatory argument, his main claim. To support this claim, especially stressing the idea of "restored," the student provides ample evidence or data. Readers are told, for example, that the Biscayne "has a nice new coat of metallic silver paint and a rebuilt engine, which is a basic 1964 V8 283." Ben also explains that he has "tinted the windows as much as is legally possible" and "put a new exhaust system on it, complete with dual pipes going straight out from under the back." Further, "Betsy Biscayne is also riding on a new set of Firestone tires with Super Sport hub caps." The writer's supporting evidence, his data, continue for another half of a page before he ends the paragraph with another claim, one closely-related to the first: "When I first got my Biscayne, I

was afraid people would think I was a grandmother when they saw me in my car. Well, some people might still think that I look like a grandmother, but this grandmother is riding in style.” Ben’s data also support this claim, further focusing and unifying the paragraph or micro-argument.

Read vis-à-vis the three components of Toulmin’s schema relating to the support or demonstration of a claim (data, warrant, and backing), the student’s paragraph may seem unfinished. In the roughly 300-word argument, Ben has no explicit warrant and, consequently, no explicit backing. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the paragraph is incomplete; nor does it mean Toulmin’s schema has little or nothing to do with the paragraph’s structure and contents. The argument is what Toulmin refers to as a “warrant-using,” not a “warrant-establishing” argument. Similar to an enthymeme, a warrant-using argument is one in which the arguer appeals “to some warrant whose acceptability is being taken for granted” (120). Demonstrating that he understands that “good arguments are supported,” the writer provides ample data to support his two main claims; he also understands that there is no need to include a warrant such as “Someone who repaints his car and adds a new radio, hub caps, and tires has done a lot to restore it.” Thus, the text is a good example of an effective descriptive paragraph and an effective Toulminian justificatory argument.

In addition to relying on Toulmin’s implication that “good arguments are supported” with the Descriptive Paragraphs assignment, I also rely on it while covering the first full-length essay assignment in my freshmen-level writing courses. In class, I refer to this assignment as the “Character Definition Argument.” Because there are not clear-cut distinctions between the expressive, descriptive, and analytical “modes” of discourse, the essay is best described as a melange of these types of writing: Essentially, the individual writer is the subject of the essay, and her purpose is to detail several specific characteristics about herself, by providing appropriate claims, supports, and justifications or warrants. While approaches to this essay vary depending upon the individual, most students rely on the analytical mode for the overall organizational pattern to the essay: Each body paragraph, for instance, focuses on one specific aspect of the writer’s personality.

In class, as students and I are working on this particular essay, we consider the utility of Toulmin’s complete schema and its implications. The Toulmin-inspired “good arguments are supported” premise is especially helpful in the planning, drafting, and revision stages of the individual body paragraphs: Body paragraphs are often “micro-arguments.” Micro-argument body paragraphs often have a stated claim, and they always have some type of supporting evidence or explanation—in Toulmin terms, the “data.” Of course, the ubiquitous nature of argumentative situations dictates that the kinds of evidence a rhetor will provide in support of a claim will vary greatly. Some arguments, some contexts, demand statistical data or facts; other arguments, other contexts, demand the testimonies of experts working in the relevant field(s), for instance.

For the “Character Definition Argument,” several kinds of evidence work well as supports, but personal examples (often in the form of “mini-narratives”) usually work best. An illustrative body paragraph from one student’s paper deserves to be quoted at length. Karla writes

In addition to being caring, my parents raised me to be responsible. I am glad that I learned about responsibility at a young age. When I was nine years old, I broke my younger brother’s favorite action figure, He-man. I was purposefully threatening Billy by telling him I would break it, and it accidentally broke. Of course, Billy received a new toy and I was in

trouble. For my punishment, I gave Billy a dollar of my allowance each week for a month. Well, the “you break it, you buy it” theory worked. I don’t think I have respected someone else’s toys more than I respect Billy’s, and the incident taught me to be responsible for my own actions.

For my purposes, one of the most important features of this paragraph is Karla’s use of a supported claim. The clauses “my parents raised me to be responsible” and “They have taught me to be responsible for my own actions, regardless of the matter” are both claims; they both put forth an assertion for agreement from readers. To simplify, however, the two claims could perhaps be best understood as “Karla learned to be a responsible person” or “Karla is a responsible person because of her parents.” By reading Karla’s work vis-à-vis Toulmin’s schema, critics (students and teachers) can examine how well Karla supports these claims.

Karla supports her claims using the short narrative as her evidence or data; the story recounting her breaking of Billy’s “He-man” action figure is her sole proof in this micro-argument. Depending on how the reader chooses to interpret Karla’s paragraph (that is, depending upon which of the two claims strikes the reader as most important or as most worthy of support), the data could be conceptualized in a number of ways. Karla’s data, her evidence, encompasses several propositions, propositions relying on a causative relationship for their overall meaning. They could be broken down to include the following statements, paraphrased directly from the text: “Karla broke Billy’s He-man,” then, “Karla’s parents punished her by making her pay Billy a dollar a week,” and finally, “Billy got a new He-man, which Karla paid for.” Taken as a whole, these ordered statements—these data—uphold “Karla learned to be responsible” or “Karla learned to be responsible because of her parents.” Karla has supported her claim with quite acceptable data.

Just as with the first student’s example, what must be noted with this one in relation to Toulmin’s schema is her lack of a stated warrant and backing. In this instance, Karla did not feel compelled to offer a warrant and a backing hooking up the data and the claim. But, working under Toulmin’s conception of “warrant-using arguments,” the lack of a stated warrant and backing is not a problem, either for Karla or her readers. Karla’s purpose in this particular paragraph, this micro-argument, is not to argue for the verity of the warrant (or new claim) “Making a child pay for someone else’s broken property teaches her to be responsible.” Most readers can easily infer and accept an implicit warrant such as that on their own. Should readers not infer that or a similar warrant—should a classmate challenge Karla’s pairing (during a peer-review session, for instance) of “I broke Billy’s He-man, and my parents made me pay for it” with “My parents taught me to be responsible”—then Karla may be obligated to either supply the missing warrant(s) or to offer different data to support her stated claim. As the paragraph stands, however, we accept the implied warrant because the data and the claim go together well.

In both Ben’s and Karla’s examples, the data for their arguments are based on their personal experiences. And, each argument is, essentially, ethos-directed: Ben’s claims focus on his being a proud owner of a stylish, restored automobile; Karla’s claims focus on her being a responsible young lady. Toulmin’s structure is also applicable, of course, in logos arguments, ones where the data are not drawn from personal experiences and are not upholding ethos claims. One example of this type of argument is from a research paper in an advanced composition course.

In her essay about child sexual abuse, Cheryl argues that school teachers and administrators need to take a more active role in protecting children from such abuse. After briefly defining sexual abuse, she explains

Some of you may think that it is not the job of the school system to address this problem. With increasing pressures on teachers to cover the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, many people think that such concerns are better dealt with by family members or friends. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Did you know for example, that 50% of abuse cases take place in the child's own home? In a majority of cases, the abusers are close male relatives—fathers, brothers, or uncles, for example. In-home baby-sitters are another large group of abusers, while child-care providers also frequently abuse children.

Cheryl's paragraph contains two closely-related arguments; both rely on different interpretations of the "Unfortunately, this is not the case" clause.

In the first argument, "Unfortunately, this is not the case" means "the problem of child sexual abuse is not best dealt with by family members, friends, or baby-sitters." Cheryl argues for the verity of this claim, claim₁, by providing the statistics concerning the percentage of abuse cases in the children's own homes. She also provides the information concerning who is responsible for the abuse. These facts are her data. While there is no explicit warrant in this argument, Cheryl's readers can infer the following:

Data: If 50% of abuse cases take place in the child's own home, if close male relatives are the abusers in a majority of cases, and if in-home baby-sitters are another large group of abusers,

Claim₁: then the problem of child sexual abuse is not best dealt with by family members, friends, or baby-sitters

Warrant: because individuals who abuse others are not going to stop on their own; nor will they protect those individuals who are being abused

Once readers accept claim₁, they can apply it to Cheryl's larger argument, claim₂.

Now, "Unfortunately, this is not the case" is understood to refer to the first two sentences of the paragraph, the section concerning the pressures on school systems to concentrate on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Here, "Unfortunately, this is not the case" means "it is the job of the school system to address the problem of child sexual abuse." Although the information for claim₂ comes first in the paragraph, readers have to understand and accept claim₁ in order to accept claim₂. So, claim₁ is, interestingly enough, the data in claim₂'s argument structure. Given that abused children are not best helped at home (which, most likely, readers now accept as true), readers infer that "abused children must be helped at school." Or, in other words, claim₂: "The problem of childhood sexual abuse should be dealt with at school."

Again, as with the first argument, in this case there is no explicit warrant. However, readers move from the data to claim₂ because school systems must protect children.

In other words,

Data: Abused children are not best helped at home, so

Claim₂: school systems have the responsibility of addressing the problem of child sexual abuse,

Warrant: because school systems must protect children.

Supplying this missing warrant—that is, making the inferential leap from the data to claim₂—is rather easy for readers. Obviously, we value the protection of children. So while Cheryl needs to provide data to convince readers that the problem of childhood sexual abuse is all too-common,

and while she also needs to demonstrate that children are not being sufficiently protected in their own homes, she does not need to explicitly argue for the protection of children in general.

Certainly, Cheryl could be criticized for not being explicit about her two claims. After all, she relies on the somewhat ambiguous “Unfortunately, this is not the case” clause to operate as a claim within two separate micro-arguments. Whether or not this was a conscious decision on Cheryl's part, I do not know. Using Toulmin's structure in the revision stages, however, Cheryl and I could have discussed the option of providing two separate claims: “The problem of abuse is not best dealt with at home” and “It is the job of the school system to address the problem of abuse.” Because of the nature of her supporting evidence, however, I think most readers can make the appropriate inferential leaps for both arguments, understanding that the clause operates as two claims. As a result, I think her paragraph is a well-written argument.

Of course, use of Toulmin's schema is not the only way students can be encouraged to construct body paragraphs utilizing relevant personal narratives (as Karla does); specific descriptive details (as Ben does); or factual, statistical information (as Cheryl does) as the primary kinds of data or supports. In Karla's case, for example, while use of a deductive syllogism's structure would hardly help her construct or revise her paragraph (her micro-argument), the stasis questions “Did something happen?” and “What actions should be taken?” may have helped Karla support her claim by leading her to include the same or a similar example. But, Toulmin's schema is the most applicable tool in relation to the students' construction of their paragraphs and in relation to the assessments of these paragraphs. In all three cases, my use of Toulmin's schema helped the writers see the dynamic structural relationship between the types of appropriate data, the implied or stated claim, and the implied warrants. Because each student understood that “good arguments are supported,” each student generated a specific, focused, and well-supported micro-argument.

Good Arguments are Contextual

In addition to stressing that good arguments are supported, Toulmin also emphasizes the contextual nature of argument production and assessment. For example, while addressing the force of and the criteria necessary for the invocation of the modal “possible,” Toulmin affirms that for a claim to be considered as “a ‘possibility’ in any context . . . it must ‘have what it takes’ in order to be entitled to genuine consideration in that context” (37). “The criteria of possibility,” he continues, “are field-dependent” (37). Not only does Toulmin stress the contextuality of natural-language arguments in his discussion of the field-dependency of modals, he also stresses contextuality in his discussion of the layout of arguments—in particular, data and warrants. He writes, “The data we cite if a claim is challenged depend on the warrants we are prepared to operate with in that field” (emphasis added 100). Different argumentative situations, in other words, have different standards, and the adept arguer can recognize and respond to those standards by utilizing the appropriate data, warrants, and backings.

Inspired by Toulmin's acknowledgement of the crucial role context plays in both the production and the assessment of natural-language arguments, I have attempted to incorporate an extended recognition and study of context into my composition curriculum. One specific way I do so is through the inclusion of what I refer to as a “context statement” or “context paragraph” in several of my essay assignments. For example, in my advanced composition course, when students write what I refer to as “Argument Essay One,” they include a short paragraph, single-

spaced at the top of their paper, which details their intended audience, their intended role(s), and their intended purpose(s). As with the paper itself, the students have complete control over the construction of this context: They are whoever they want to be, they write to whomever they want to write to, and they work toward any goals they chose. Put most simply, the context paragraph encourages the students to conceptualize a more specific and practical writing situation than what they may have encountered in previous writing classes. Because they are responsible for conceptualizing and then responding to a particular, explicit context for the essay, students develop a better understanding of the contextual nature of language, of arguments, in many phases of the writing process.

One recent student, Troy, wrote his “Argument Essay One” to his father, Dan. Dan is, as Troy explains to me in his context paragraph, “from a generation that did not have the Internet, so he does not understand it and does not trust anything about it.” Because Troy has “grown up with computers,” he is “informed about e-commerce” and has “done much online shopping.” The goal of Troy’s argument is to encourage his father to shop over the Internet. Of course, my asking students to detail their role, audience, and overall goal is nothing new; many composition teachers use similar approaches in their curriculum and assignments. What is important, in relation to Toulmin’s influence on my teaching of argument, is how the context paragraph is then used by both the students and me. For instance, as Troy works on his “Argument Essay One,” as he invents claims and supports and constructs his body paragraphs, he must carefully consider the relevance of each micro-argument in relation to his specific intended audience.

A section from one of Troy’s paragraphs is illustrative. Almost halfway into the letter, as he supports his argument, Troy writes

Think of this example of your typical shopping experience: Say you want a new fender for the Harley, so you get dressed, jump into the car, and drive over to Crazy George’s—only to find out that he doesn’t carry the exact fender you need. Next, you go to Tommy’s shop, but he sold the last fender to some guy a week ago. Finally, you drive across town to Jim Bailey’s, but his shop is closed for the day. Thus, you have just driven all over Ft. Wayne, wasted most of your morning, but still have no fender. However, now imagine this scenario: You wake up and don’t even get dressed. You turn on you computer and connect to the Internet. You type in “Harley parts” in a search engine and receive a list of 20 different online dealerships. You click on a link to Cycle World and type in the fender you are looking for. Cycle World has ten in stock, so you order one and it is scheduled to arrive in two business days. Now you must figure out what to do with the rest of your Saturday, since it is only 9:30 in the morning!

In this paragraph, as he does throughout the essay, Troy employs data, claims, and warrants that are best-suited to his intended audience, his father. Of course, Troy’s father is not unique in his desire to save time and money while shopping; however, because Troy understands that “good arguments are contextual,” he further personalizes (*i.e.*, contextualizes) his argument by using his father’s search for a Harley-Davidson fender to illustrate his points. Troy’s father would appreciate finding a particular Harley-Davidson fender quickly and easily. He does so, as Troy argues, by shopping online. Troy has produced a good, contextual argument—one in which the rhetor recognizes, among other things, his audience’s particular needs, values, and goals as he presents his case.

The Toulmin-inspired “Good arguments are contextual” is relevant not only in the production of arguments, in the invention stages of the writing process, but also in the revision

and assessment stages. Both writers and readers can use the premise as a guideline for considering the utility and effectiveness of each supporting argument or claim. Nevertheless, as Fulkerson points out in *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, the field-dependent nature of argument evaluation may in fact pose a problem for composition students and scholars. Because “arguments are not judged good or bad on the basis of universal and timeless criteria, but are determined to be solid or defective on the basis of accepted standards of the field in which they are used” (21), the reader or critic “must first be able to assign an argument to a specific field and then know that field well” (21). Obviously, most writing teachers are not as well-versed in sociology, biology, or psychology as we are in rhetorical theory or composition pedagogy, for instance. Consequently, we are not as well-equipped to judge the merits of arguments in such contexts. In my experiences with using Toulmin in the composition classroom, however, this has not been a problem. My training as a composition scholar and teacher has not hindered my ability to evaluate students’ arguments—especially while recognizing the Toulmin-inspired premise that “good arguments are contextual”—precisely because, as Fulkerson concludes later in the same work, “Most argumentation taught in English or speech courses involves topics of general interest or at least student interest rather than field-specific issues” (23).

Of course, students will write about topics with which I have no experience or training whatsoever. Many times, I am perhaps not in the best position to judge the utility or effectiveness of a student’s arguments. However, as a disinterested but critical reader (which is what a good peer-reviewer and a good grader should be), I can evaluate students’ essays with one eye on their intended context, asking myself, “Okay, if I were the audience they are writing to, how would I react to this particular argument? Do I accept it? Can I think of exceptions that rebut the claims? Do I find the positions reasonable, and, more importantly, do I find them to be well-supported?”

In this sense, my reading of students’ arguments is a more focused reading, a more “Toulminian” contextual reading, than the usual readings encouraged in the composition classroom. Again, the field-dependent nature of arguments does limit the layperson’s abilities to evaluate a particular, highly contextual argument; however, recognizing and utilizing the field-dependent nature of arguments (recognizing that “good arguments are contextual”) allows writers and teachers the chance to consider the implicitly agreed-upon standards (the warrants and backings) operating within a variety of fields and contexts. Interestingly enough, the process I describe here corresponds to Peter Elbow’s discussion of first-order and second-order thinking (1986, 55-63): Often, when we construct an argument, we “are intuitive and creative and . . . [we don’t] strive for conscious direction or control.” Then, when we consider the relevance of each of our arguments in relation to our particular audience (i.e., the argument’s field-dependent nature), we move into the realm of second-order thinking: We are “conscious, directed, controlled. . . committed to accuracy” as we “examine our premises and assess the validity of each inference.” So, by doing this with students we model and develop their ability to do it later with profession-specific audiences. The process also corresponds to James Kinneavy’s appeal for what he calls “the reintroduction of the rhetorical analysis of political, legal, religious, educational, and commercial discourse aimed primarily at persuasion (1982, 19-28). Kinneavy suggests, in fact, that understanding how to analyze an argument (what he terms “persuasion”) may in fact be more important than understanding how to produce an argument, for “the mass media powerfully influence us, and we must learn to reflect analytically on the forces transforming our lives.” While analyze arguments as described, students and teachers can then begin to consider the next aspect of a good “Toulmin-inspired” argument: “Good arguments are multi-sided.”

Good Arguments are Multi-Sided

Just as good arguments are supported and contextual, they are also multi-sided: When they put forth assertions or claims, good arguers recognize that issues are not always clear-cut or one-sided; they recognize that there is at least one other point of view and that they may in fact be wrong. This aspect of good arguments is so fundamental within Toulmin's conceptualization that it is often difficult to separate when an argument's features are indicative of contextuality or when an argument's features are indicative of multi-sidedness. In fact, an explicit recognition of the multiplicity of viewpoints in an argument is often a good way for the rhetor to indicate to her audience that she is able to understand the issue from the audience's perspective; this contextual recognition can become, then, a way to establish further rapport with that audience as the rhetor subsequently supports her claim and moves her audience closer to conviction.

Use of Toulmin's schema allows—rather, encourages—this contextual recognition of “other sides” because of the schema's qualifier and rebuttal categories. At first glance, however, the qualifier category does not seem to have much to do with the “multi-sided” aspect of good arguments. Because the particular qualifier a rhetor uses depends on the strength of the relationship between the claim and its supports (both stated and unstated), it may seem more accurate to consider qualifiers as belonging to the “good arguments are supported” category. Or, because the particular qualifier used also depends on the particular context in which the argument appears, it may seem more accurate to consider qualifiers as belonging to the “good arguments are contextual” category. Both of these are fair contentions. But qualifiers can be considered best in light of “good arguments are multi-sided” precisely because of what qualifiers do in actual practice: When a rhetor uses a qualifier such as “probably,” “most certainly,” or “it may be,” she is demonstrating to her audience that she recognizes that other possibilities exist; she is also demonstrating that even though she cannot be completely certain of her claim, she feels confident enough, after considering at least some of these other possibilities, to stand by her assertion.

In my advanced composition course, the importance of Toulmin's qualifier category often comes up when we work on the “Rhetorical Criticism Essay.” At this point in the course, students and I explicitly consider the utility of Toulmin's schema, paying special attention to the qualifier and rebuttal categories as we discuss the “good arguments are multi-sided” premise. For this assignment, students analyze and evaluate another writer's argument; most students pick letters to the editor in the campus newspaper, for example. One recent student, Jessica, found an article in a church newsletter, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, to be particularly noteworthy because of the kinds of sweeping claims the author, Kenneth Harper, makes about her generation. In one section of “‘Generation X’—Unknown in the Church,” Harper argues that those people born between 1961 and 1981 are “the chronic underachievers, the generation of Bart Simpson, Beavis and Butthead” (12). Jessica finds Harper's argument unsatisfactory, precisely because he does not qualify his assertion. In her “Rhetorical Criticism” paper, Jessica asks, “How could he possibly know that all members of Generation X are, as he says, ‘chronic underachievers’?” “Did he survey the entire generation to come up with this assertion?” she demands. Jessica asserts, in turn, that “even though some members of Generation X are ‘under-achievers’ . . . not everyone can be pigeon-holed like this.” As she continues to refute Harper's argument, she uses herself and her friends as examples of exceptions that mitigate Harper's unqualified claim.

Perhaps Jessica is being too hard on Harper. Harper could answer her charges, of course, with an argument along the lines of, “Well, of course I didn't mean all members of Generation X

are underachievers; I simply made the generalization for effect.” However, Jessica’s contention is fair, especially in relation to the Toulmin-inspired premise that “good arguments are multi-sided”—in this example, multi-sided in respect to properly qualified assertions. Jessica understands that adept arguers recognize that their claims are rarely “all or nothing propositions.” Many members of Generation X, the very group Harper is condemning, are not “underachievers”; these members deserve to be recognized. At the very least, Harper should have done so with a properly qualified claim, perhaps one along the lines of “Most Generation Xers are underachievers,” or “Many Generation Xers are underachievers.” Such statements are still arguable claims, of course, but they demonstrate to participants that the rhetor is able to recognize the complexities of the issue at hand.

In addition to the qualifier category, Toulmin’s schema also encourages students to write multi-sided arguments because of the rebuttal category. Toulmin defines the function of a rebuttal as “indicating circumstances in which the general authority of the warrant would have to be set aside” (101). As with the inclusion of a qualifier, the inclusion of a rebuttal within an argument is a way for the rhetor to demonstrate that she recognizes the contingent nature of her claim. However, although she does recognize this, through the inclusion of and then subsequent response to the rebuttal, the rhetor demonstrates the superiority of her overall argument.

As with the contextual and the supported nature of good arguments, an example from a student’s paper is illustrative. Amanda’s “Argument Essay One,” from my advanced composition course, is directed at single parents who neglect their responsibilities to their children in favor of what Amanda calls “an extensive social life.” In one section, Amanda describes how, as a young girl, she looked all over her house one evening, unable to locate her recently divorced mother. After several minutes of frantic searching, she finally found her mother in the laundry room, kissing a man she had just begun dating. Amanda was “shocked and hurt at the same time,” so she “walked away in disbelief.” She continues:

That was the first of many times where my heart would be injured from my mother’s attempts at happiness. That last sentence can definitely bring up a valid argument: Should a single parent raising children not be able to live that responsible life but also find new love and be happy? After all, we are all entitled to our own happiness. Of course, my answer would be yes. That is a very strong argument. However, in rebuttal, I would have to say that a parent first has a responsibility to make sure that her children are raised properly with not only the necessities in life, but also enough love and attention, and she should intertwine her attempt at a social life around the lives of her children.

Amanda’s explicit recognition of “the other side” is significant in this section. In an earlier draft, Amanda ended the paragraph with “That was the first of many times where my heart would be injured from my mother’s attempts at happiness.” After we considered Toulmin’s schema in class, especially concentrating on the functions of qualifiers and rebuttals, Amanda was compelled to return to this section of her draft and elaborate on her points. By also including the clause “After all, we are all entitled to our own happiness,” Amanda demonstrates that she recognizes the complexity of the issue under consideration. A reader could assert something along the lines of, “But Amanda, your mother is an adult, with responsibilities not only to you but also to herself.” While revising her work with Toulmin’s rebuttal category in mind, Amanda deftly anticipates this argument; she even recognizes the legitimacy of this point with the qualifiers “of course” and “very strong.” Best of all, she answers this “other side” with what she labels, interestingly enough, her “rebuttal.” In this rebuttal, she ranks the parent’s responsibility:

First comes the responsibility to the child; next comes the responsibility to the self. Amanda's Toulmin-inspired revision of this paragraph is a compelling argument, one that demonstrates her willingness to grapple with several sides of a complex issue as she moves readers toward accepting the validity of her claims.

Conclusion

Inspired by recent research in informal logic and argumentation theory, I have tried to incorporate more argumentation skills into my composition classes. As a result of being in my writing courses, I want students to understand, for instance, that "arguments are goal-directed": that humans engage in natural-language argumentation because they wish to change others' thinking and/or actions or because they wish to work toward common goals in their attempts to solve real-world problems. I also want students to understand that "arguments are evaluative": that seemingly simple arguments contain a tremendous variety of explicit and implicit evaluations or assumptions about reality.

A variety of philosophy, speech communication, and composition scholars have influenced my curriculum design decisions, but *The Uses of Argument* has proven most applicable for my specific pedagogical goals. Again, Toulmin's work is not an exhaustive study of all types and purposes of arguments; nor does Toulmin consciously address issues specific to the composition classroom. However, I have found that by understanding the contextual nature of his work and by exploring the implications of his discussion of the features of natural-language justificatory arguments, I am able to successfully use three specific Toulmin-inspired premises in my composition classroom: "Good arguments are supported," "good arguments are contextual," and "good arguments are multi-sided." These three guidelines have helped my students and me construct, analyze, and evaluate arguments at both the paragraph-level and the essay-length level. These three guidelines have also helped me design curricula and implement assignments that recognize the crucial importance of argumentation skills in contemporary society.

Although not originally intended for the composition classroom, Toulmin's ideas are relevant to the teaching of writing. But composition scholars must not presume that simply teaching Toulmin's schema, for example, will make students argue more logically or write more effectively. Composition scholars using Toulmin must first recognize that his arguments are directed at a rather specific audience, analytic and natural-language philosophers; this audience was, for all intents and purposes, not only unaware of topical issues in composition instruction and theory but also, most likely, completely unconcerned about such issues.

Appreciating the contextuality of Toulmin's arguments encourages the composition scholar to use Toulmin in particular, limited ways. One way to do so is for language users to ask themselves, as they construct and reconsider their arguments, Toulmin-inspired questions such as the following: One, "Is my argument in this particular section supported well enough?" ("Do I have enough data?"); two, "How well do the particular types of supports I've chosen apply to my particular audience?" ("Are my data and their corresponding warrants and backings relevant?"); and three, "Do I need to recognize 'the other side' here?" ("What rebuttals might a respondent offer, and how can I answer those rebuttals?") In my experiences with using Toulmin in the writing classroom, these are productive uses of Toulmin's ideas.

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