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In Response to: Patrick Clauss's *The Uses Of Argument: A Contextual Application*

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In his paper, Clauss proposes that in the college writing classroom, the Toulmin model of argument is useful because it helps students learn three principles about argument: (1) that claims need evidentiary support, (2) that argumentation is contextual, and (3) that good argumentation is multi-sided. And he has illustrated each of his contentions nicely with actual student writing. It is significant, I think, that he sees the Toulmin model as being helpful only at the level of the individual paragraph, a microargument within the student's paper. That is a much more defensible position than the one presented in a large number of current textbooks on written argumentation. The tendency of these books is to present the Toulmin model as somehow enabling a student to write an entire paper in which the thesis is Toulmin's claim and the evidence in the paper must somehow tie to that claim by means of a single warrant. Certainly, Toulmin, Clauss, and I are united in believing that teaching writing students about argument through Toulmin's "substantive logic" is far superior to teaching them the syllogism, or (heaven forbid) propositional logic.

My own position is that one doesn't need to invoke Toulmin's terminology or apparatus in order for students to learn those three principles, and further that other ways of presenting them are likely to be as effective at less cost. What sort of schemata would I suggest instead? Well, two come to mind immediately. The first is modern communication theory based on the "communication triangle" (see Kinneavy 1971). It talks of messages being transmitted from sender to receiver by means of some shared channel, and of the desirability of certain degrees of redundancy in the message, and the undesirability of "static."

But the schema I lean toward is the one Toulmin himself identified as underpinning his work ("Logic and the Criticism of Arguments," 1989). In a talk at the University of Michigan in 1982, Toulmin paid homage to leading thinkers of classical Greek and Roman rhetoric and remarked that in *The Uses of Argument* "even though sleepwalkingly—I had rediscovered the topics of [Aristotle's] *Topics*" (380).

Can we derive the same three principles about argument, which Clauss and I both support, from a classical source? Certainly. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of discovering the means of persuasion available in a given situation, and he spent the bulk of Book II of the *Rhetoric* discussing varieties of audience and how to adapt to them. That will work for the idea that argumentation is always contextual.

As for the idea that claims require support, Aristotle also said that the parts of the oration were basically two: statement and proof.

Third, he recognized that "proof" may include "the other side," and this idea became codified in the more elaborate elements of the Classical Oration as set down by Cicero among others: Exordium, Propositio, Partitio, Confirmatio, Confutatio, and Peroratio (see Corbett 1965). For the classical orator, proof for one's claim wasn't complete until one had recognized and devalued the counterarguments of others.

For my money, it is easier and clearer for most college students to understand these ideas as they are grounded in the Western rhetorical tradition than to attempt to assimilate the newer

language of Toulmin. Now, I acknowledge that as long as we stick to the terms of “claim,” “support” (or “data”), “qualifier,” and “rebuttal,” it matters little which set of terms we use. Since the major weakness in the writing of college students, as identified by experts, is the failure to support their positions adequately, I use a host of terms and phrases to attempt to get the need for support to stick: “elaboration,” “evidence,” “judgments need to be accompanied with facts,” “details,” “development,” “supply specifics,” “give the reader some onces,” and yes “you need some data.”

The Toulmin model really only becomes problematic when we add the concepts of “warrant,” “backing,” and with them “field dependence.”

Let’s look for a moment at Clauss’s first student example. Ben writes a descriptive paragraph about his automobile, a restored 1964 Chevy of which he is proud. And he includes, as Clauss notes, much supporting detail about the “metallic silver paint,” the V8 283 engine, and the new dual exhaust system. Clauss says that there are actually two claims, one at the beginning and one at the end. The beginning sentence/claim reads, “I’m the proud owner of a restored 1964 Chevy Biscayne.” If we do a bit of propositional analysis (which one does not get from Toulmin), we see that the sentence asserts

- 1) I own the car.
- 2) The car has been restored.
- 3) I am a proud of the car.

The first is presumably a statement of fact—if it were challenged, Ben would have to produce the appropriate documents. The second synthesizes the various details of the paragraph, and hence seems to be the “true” claim. The third is a purely expressive statement, perhaps even a performative utterance: the assertion that one is experiencing the feeling of pride presumably proves itself. Now if Ben had said, “I have a right to feel proud,” that would be a claim with some teeth in it.

For each of these claims (as well as for the final one that Ben is “riding in style,”) a different sort of evidence and a different warrant is appropriate. Or perhaps the details prove the claim that he rides in a classy automobile, and that claim then becomes the data for “I am proud.”

No warrant is stated, but as Clauss notes, there doesn’t need to be. Given a claim and support, we can always treat the combination as an enthymeme and derive a warrant of some sort.

Would there be anything gained from going through that sort of Toulminian analysis with Ben?? I think Clauss and I would agree that the analysis is overkill. All Ben needs to be concentrating on is making an assertion and giving enough vivid, relevant details to back it up. So I suggest that the example paragraph doesn’t tell in either direction whether using a Toulmin-based approach helps our students.

After several other examples, Clauss makes an assertion that is at the crux of his position: “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.” I respectfully suggest that Clauss here engages in a *post hoc* fallacy, one common to us as teachers. He presented some Toulminian concepts, and his students then wrote certain pieces that can be analyzed—as any argument can—using parts of Toulmin’s model. But what proof is

there that these students could not have written these same paragraphs in high school, before ever hearing of Toulmin? Or more to the point, what proof is there that they would have been less likely to write them had some other set of theory talk, such as that of classical rhetoric, been used? In a way, Clauss's next sentence lets the cat out of the bag: "Because each student understood that 'good arguments are supported,' each student generated a specific, focused, and well-supported micro-argument. No need for Toulmin there.

It interests me that when Clauss moves to discuss "contextuality" and relate it to Toulmin's idea of "argument fields," the example student paragraphs cited earlier would hardly fit. What is the "context" or "field" within which writing about pride in a retooled car fits? Or in what "context" or "field" is a personal essay about one's own personality traits and where they came from?

Once they reach complete essays, Clauss has his students include on a cover sheet what he calls a "context statement," in which they detail audience, role, and purpose. One can surely relate that to Toulmin's notion of a "field" with a bit of stretching. But it's just as easy to conceive of such a memo to the instructor as growing from the commonly used figure of the communication triangle, with writer, reader, and world at the angles, and "message" in the center pulling them together. Or from audience theory itself (see Porter 1992). I have my students fill out a cover sheet in which they must overtly state the claim they want to make, the question at issue, and the audience they are addressing, as well as the publication channel by which they could reach the audience.

Clauss himself says that "asking students to detail their role, audience and overall goal is nothing new"; but he then turns around and suggests that for the student to consider how each micro-argument within a paper functions in relationship to the intended audience is somehow Toulminian. I suggest it isn't. Rather, it is profoundly rhetorical; rhetors can succeed only by adapting the means of persuasion to the given audience.

Clauss's third virtue of Toulmin is that the combination of qualifier and rebuttal conditions reminds students that all good arguments are multi-sided. Well, yes, but then again no; it isn't that simple. If "good" means effective on audiences, then the research on whether presenting a multi-sided argument will work better is quite mixed. For some audiences, giving a single clear "side" is more effective. Sometimes bringing up contrary views only to show their weaknesses rather than to treat them as genuine rebuttal conditions is likely to be effective.

As Clauss details how he reads student papers through Toulmin and thus does a better job than the "usual readings encouraged in the composition classroom," I am reminded of a relevant experience I had in "reading" a student's paper. It was explicitly addressed to the student body on my campus, and it argued vehemently that we needed more parking lots. It told stories of driving around looking for spaces, and finally of having to park four blocks away and then be late to class. Its qualifier was "certainly." I gave it a poor grade and suggested that anyone discussing such an issue needed to consider "the other side" by asking such questions as "Just how many parking spaces versus parking permits do we have right now," and "How much would additional parking lots cost?" I duplicated the paper for class discussion, hoping my students would point out these same problems. Instead, they all said it was a fine paper and the administration should act on it.

I was stuck between two theoretical positions about evaluating writing. I claimed that I wanted my students to write in a way that would suit their audiences. And here my student's

audience was most enthusiastic. But in actuality, I wanted my writers to be more analytical, more logical, quite frankly, to be more “academic” and less “sophistic.” I was reading the same way Clauss does, though I would not describe it as Toulminian. And while I claimed that I was trying to put myself into the shoes of the intended audience, I really was not ready to do so. We academics value multi-sided arguments—in ways that I suggest much of the real world doesn’t. (Imagine an argument made by GM to purchase a new Pontiac that actually included multiple viewpoints.)

To finish the story, when I managed to slip some of the weaknesses of the argument into the class discussion, my students said, “The paper makes a good point. We really liked it.” In one of those occasions when honesty overcomes pedagogy, I spluttered quite loudly, “Well you shouldn’t have!!” That’s when I perhaps finally realized that I need to be just as much a teacher of reading as I am of writing. My point, if there is one, is that we do not always value genuine adaptation to context (whether viewed from a classical rhetorical perspective or a Toulminian one). And we can justify our desire to see students consider “the other side” equally well from either perspective.

And finally, what happens if we attempt to subject Clauss’s paper to a Toulmin analysis? The claim is certainly clear: Judicious use of the Toulmin model of argument helps the teaching of writing. And what are the grounds? Well mostly they consist of several pieces of student texts, which were written presumably after some exposure to Toulmin terms and which can be analyzed through application of the Toulmin model. Of course one can construct a warrant that authorizes such a move: something like “If a teacher presents Theory X and students later behave in ways that are consistent with Theory X, then Theory X deserves credit for their behavior.” A lot of our outcomes assessments, I suspect, rest on just such a warrant. But it would be truly difficult to provide appropriate backing for such a *post hoc* causal claim. Toulmin never claimed his schema distinguished good arguments from poor ones, merely that it described how arguments operate. Any student argument at all, including my student’s argument for more parking, must of necessity fit the model.

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