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Commentary on Andrews

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In Response To: Richard Andrews's [Lessons from ten years of research in argument: implications for higher education](#)

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Richard Andrews' work has consistently drawn attention to the importance of argumentation in school curricula, the difficulties that children and youth exhibit in their attempts to speak and write effective arguments, and the successes that students can achieve in argumentation. In a time period in education that has seen the rising prominence of narrative as a way of knowing, Richard has been steadfast in his promotion of teaching argument in schools and in the value of the kinds of reasoning that he sees argumentation promoting.

The present paper takes his concern for the development of argumentative abilities to higher education. Andrews reviews argumentation principles as they relate to novices within disciplines at the level of higher education, and in so doing tacitly reminds us that the students at this level may need a different set of rules and different ways of teaching those rules than do younger students or experts within academic disciplines. He has made note of some of these directions in past work (e.g., Mitchell & Andrews, 1994) and in this paper offers us a pedagogic scaffold which students in higher education might use to frame their composition of argument.

A point in this paper is Andrews' critique of the emphasis on the teaching of argumentation in higher education rather than on student learning of argument. Noting ways in which over-reliance on the academic essay may inhibit learning, Andrews calls for "a wider net of genres that allow informal and formal expression of the process and heuristics of learning as well as the demonstration of what has been learnt."

2. Regarding apprenticeship in a community

The questions that Andrews poses for scaffolding the learning of argumentation in higher education are excellent: they have the potential to take the students into deep questions about the structures and ways of thinking about their disciplines. For instance, he asks students to question "What genres and text-types are assumed, are default in the field? Can they be subverted, appropriated, played with to create a new angle on the exchange...?" and "What is the nature of evidence in this particular composition?" I agree that these are salient questions; significant and noteworthy questions. However, there is something missing in the mix, and that is the fact that each discipline in higher education carries its own way of knowing, its own answers to these questions, its own way of answering these questions.

Now, through his reference to what he calls cognitive perspectives, it might seem that Andrews has addressed my concerns. He emphasizes that "thinking will be grounded not only its social and political situations, but also in the specific disciplinary contexts in which [argument] is asked to operate. Cognitive approaches to argumenation, then, will be context-specific." However, he does not pursue the subtleties of what these statements mean, leaving us only with the idea that "graduates from university are expected to be able to 'think' creatively and imaginatively about their discipline" I do not disagree with this statement: however, I do find it insufficient.

Recent studies in genre theory and sociocultural theory add relevant insights to this dialogue about disciplinary communities. For instance, Young and Leinhardt (1998) discuss the complexities of writing effective historical argumentation, a process which "requires students to transform both background and document knowledge, read and interpret historical documents, and manage discourse synthesis" (p. 25). The argumentative composition task here is a complex and multi-layered one in terms of disciplinary knowledge and rituals alone. Young and Leinhardt refer to the work of Ball, Dice & Bartholomae (1990) noting that " 'the process of bringing students into the circle of disciplinary understandings' proceeds through enculturation, apprenticeship, and scaffolded participation" (p. 28). Lave and Wenger's (1991) sociocultural idea of legitimate participation in a community is salient here -- for many composition theorists see the issue as one of structuring communities and processes so that novices within a community are treated as legitimate participants while they learn community ways of thinking and acting. (See also Berrill, 1996.) For our purposes, this translates into finding ways that students in higher education (novices) can legitimately participate in their disciplinary (community) conversations while they are in the process of learning those very ways of thinking.

The meaning of this enculturation and apprenticeship in disciplinary knowledge has been informed and expanded with attention to argumentation in disciplines and in the workplace, notably through studies by Bazerman (1988, 1994), Freedman (1996), Lunsford & Ede (1996) and Russell (1997) who look at the wider discourse activities involved in the act of composing argument in higher education and workplace situations and who stress the need to look at wider social and cultural aspects of discourse production. This approach is interested in the wider community activities which are associated with the production of a single argumentative text as those activities inform the writing through a complex of community rules and practices. From this perspective, effective argument carries and reflects a much deeper understanding of the discipline, the community, than has been articulated by Andrews.

Often novices in a discipline either list information rather than integrating it as evidence in an argument (Young and Leinhardt, 1998) or they view disciplinary argumentation as discrete and formulaic (Stockton, 1995). These responses do not signify deep disciplinary knowledge, or as socioculturalists would say, expertise in the community. A frequent response of higher education

instructors to this is often not helpful to students: again Andrews and I agree. However, our reasons for agreeing stem from different premises and not surprisingly, our proposed solutions thus differ.

From a sociocultural viewpoint, university instructors do not usually act as if they recognize the disciplinary apprenticeship of the students in their courses. If anything, through assignments and set tasks, students must continually prove themselves worthy of being allowed to apprentice to belong to the disciplinary community. This often occurs through explicitly negative feedback on argumentative essays written for courses. Andrews' call for multiple ways for students to demonstrate their learning is helpful here, for he argues that students may come to important disciplinary understandings through genres other than argument. That said, without elaboration it is very difficult to see how these ways of learning relate to development of effective disciplinary argumentation. Thus, although Andrews' emphasis on learners rather than teachers is central to my argument as well, the notion of learner and the role of non-argumentative genres assume different significance when they are informed by sociocultural understandings and the idea of apprenticeship.

On the other hand, instructors are not completely to blame here. Students themselves often do not recognize their role as apprentices in a disciplinary community. Early in their university careers when they are still taking courses in different disciplines, undergraduates often complain that every professor wants them to write in a different way. Our response to this comment, should be an enthusiastic, "Exactly!" Although novices seek a single way to write effective argument across disciplines using some kind of magic argumentation formula, the whole point of disciplinarity is that each discipline is a different culture where reasoning particulars take different forms, make different demands, require different types of evidence, and have different ways of bringing that evidence to bear on a larger argument. Yet institutions of higher education usually do not construct their own images in terms of apprenticeship in a disciplinary community. To enhance more effective disciplinary thinking (better argument), they must do so explicitly with both learners and instructors adopting the disciplinary apprenticeship model advocated here.

3. Regarding disciplinarity and argumentation

Andrews says that, "Argument is particularly susceptible to context because it is essentially dialogic." Certainly, the dialogic aspect of argument immediately renders the context as important. However, more salient are the notions of apprenticeship and enculturation referred to above which occur as a student learns about a discipline. As the novice slowly becomes an expert, she learns the powerful subtleties and meanings of precise language used in the discipline. As she reads in the discipline and receives feedback on her attempts to speak and write argument in the discipline, she learns the culture of the discipline. This enculturation involves the wider activities of the discipline: in history, for instance, it might well involve searching for primary sources and learning how to judge between those sources: in some localized history

cultures for instance, oral sources do not carry as much validity as written sources; domestic sources do not carry as much validity as public sources. Thus, the apprenticeship also involves learning subtle but powerful knowledge that affects the very way in which argument is structured and can be conducted.

Disciplinarity is about different ways of understanding and different ways of thinking: and, higher education is about enculturation into disciplines and ways of thinking in a way that is more profound than the term 'context' traditionally conveys. Learning how to argue in a discipline is thus one of the most powerful ways of becoming enculturated into the discipline. I would imagine that Andrews agrees with me on that. Learning to argue like a chemist, a mathematician, a sociologist, a geographer, a philosopher means learning to think like one. I agree with Andrews that what I am stressing as disciplinary learning need not, and probably should not, focus on argumentation structures to the exclusion of other genres. Yet, this is not the final statement.

Disciplines express their ways of understanding the world and their new knowledge constructions through their particular ways of arguing. Thus, experts in the discipline, the instructors, bear the responsibility of showing novices how compositions in these different genres contribute to the larger kind of argumentation engaged in by expert members of the community. For instance, a data table in a biological investigation is a crucially important part of the final argument the biologist is presenting: however, the apprentice biologist needs to understand why it does not speak for the whole argument and how it relates to the whole argument. From a higher education point of view, the nonargumentative genre needs to be situated within the multiple ways of thinking in the discipline, with its value and relationship to the whole noted as explicitly as possible for the learner.

4. *Conclusion*

Thus, Andrews' critique of the teaching of argument in higher education is an important one with its emphasis on how students learn argumentation. However, to achieve its full impact, the position needs to consider the purpose of higher education, which is disciplinary enculturation. Once that understanding is shared, learners and instructors take on the roles of apprentice and expert. This shift changes the nature of the relationship between the novice and the expert, the legitimacy of the novice, the way in which mistakes are viewed, and the way in which the culture of the discipline becomes an explicit part of the learning. As well, it enables the expert to explain non-argumentative genres as thinking tools, situating them within the larger disciplinary way of knowing and of arguing.

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