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FACULTY DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

Effective Argumentation in a Culture of Discord

Frank L. Cioffi discusses powerful connections between critical thinking skills and writing skills in this discussion of elements affecting students' abilities to engage in effective "argument". Cioffi is director of the writing program at Scripps College and author of The Imaginative Argument: A Practical Manifesto for Writers, *published in 2005 by Princeton University Press.*

Last October the comedian-philosopher Jon Stewart did writing teachers a great service. Accosting the hosts of CNN's *Crossfire,* Stewart accused them of shortchanging the American public by failing to offer a forum for genuine debate, and by reducing issues to black/white, right/wrong dichotomies. CNN apparently agreed, as it canceled the show after a 23-year run. And while I certainly admit that Stewart himself argued unfairly, his point nonetheless stands: Our media do not provide a forum for actual debate. Instead they're a venue for self-promotion and squabbling, for hawking goods, for infomercials masquerading as news or serious commentary. In terms of discussing issues, they offer two sides, pick one: Either you are for gay marriage or against it, either for abortion or for life, either for pulling the feeding tube or for "life."

This failure to provide a forum for argumentative discourse has steadily eroded students' understanding of "argument" as a concept. For decades my college writing classes have stressed the need to write papers with an argumentative edge. Yet students don't get it. Either they don't understand what I mean, or they reject the whole enterprise. A few years ago, one of them—"G.M."—wrote me an email message that exemplifies many students' position:

"In reading your ideas over the difficulty of [getting] students to accept an argumentative thesis, I wonder … how much one could say that it [has been] caused by the pre-millennial movement of pacificism? In my lifetime I have not seen something so polarizing as war and thus I have not felt the amount of momentary certainty that past generations have … Violence is on another level entirely, for I do not believe in war, but confrontation's very redeemable qualities are normally overlooked …"

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G.M. seemed to think I was advocating a verbal violence that he—his whole generation—was loathe to undertake. While I responded that written argument was by its nature nonviolent, I nonetheless understood from whence he drew his conclusions: He saw "argument" in media-defined terms.

Part of the problem of teaching argumentative writing is that "argument" means "heated, contentious verbal dispute" as well as "argumentation." Some writing texts make this confusion worse: One in front of me uses a handsome cover illustration by Julia Talcott that shows two people from whose open mouths issue, respectively, a red triangle and a blue circle. I don't think this kind of visual is likely to help matters. Like the figures in "Laughing Stock," the media feature arguers who have entrenched, diametrically opposed positions.

Students typically don't want to attempt "argument" or take a controversial position to defend, probably because they've seen or heard enough of the media's models—Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, or Al Franken, to name a few—and are sick of them. If I were an 18-year-old college freshman assigned an argumentative essay, I'd groan in despair, either because I found the food-fight-journalism model repulsive or because, like G.M., I didn't feel strongly enough about anything to engage in the furious invective that I had all too often witnessed. Maybe the unanticipated consequence of the culture of contentious argument—and this, I think, was Stewart's larger point—is the decline in the general dissemination of intellectual, argumentative discourse more broadly construed.

I propose that we teach students more about how intellectual discourse works, about how it offers something exciting—yet how when it succeeds, it succeeds in only approaching understanding. The philosopher Frank Plumpton Ramsey puts it bluntly but eloquently: "Meaning is mainly potential." Philosophical and, more generally, argumentative discourse presents no irrefutable proofs, no indelible answers. In fact, the best writing of this kind tends not to answer but to raise questions, ones that perhaps the audience hadn't previously considered. Or to put it in

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terms my college-age nephew uses, when you're writing argument, don't go for the slam-dunk.

At the same time, we should make students aware that they're not alone on the court. We need, that is, to emphasize more the need for counterarguments, which inevitably force writers to place themselves in the audience's position and to attempt to imagine what that audience values and feels—what objections it might intelligently raise. In *On Liberty,* John Stuart Mill asserts that 75 percent of an argument should consist of counterarguments. And, further, writers should not merely parrot these, but must "know them in their most plausible and persuasive form … must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of." Presenting and empathizing with counterarguments force an author to go somewhere new, to modify her initial position into one more nuanced, more complex, more problematic—perhaps to one of greater potential, to use Ramsey's formulation.

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Now this might be very well for philosophical or literary-critical discourse, but what of scientific discourse? What of historical or legal discourse? I suggest that all these fields require an argumentative stance, if not in the papers that students write at the freshman or even undergraduate level, then in professional journals and monographs, and that stance should be the model for student writing. While these models differ some from field to field, all academic writing starts with a problem, a hypothesis, or a question. And the idea is not to solve this problem or answer that question with previously extant notions. This kind of writing should offer something original, imaginative, something the audience would not have thought of before and might even initially reject. Yet it invites that rejection, seeks out disconfirmatory material, naysaying positions. Working against the initial rejection, it logically persuades the audience how a proposed solution betters other current solutions, covers a wider range of data, or undermines previous notions. In short, this kind of writing looks at other answers and engages them, proving them in need of some rethinking, recontextualizing, or reimagining. And though its answer might not be perfect, it's closer—it asymptotically approaches a truth.

Yet can every student be an Einstein? Should we urge every student to come up with writing that resembles the professional writing of one's discipline, when many students have difficulty constructing paragraphs, constructing sentences, or construing meaning of central texts? Probably not at every level. I know that much writing instruction and many writing programs (such as, for example, the one I direct) are often expected to "help students learn how to punctuate." And I know that's an important tool. I sympathize with professors who must wade through mounds of hastily composed, unproofread, usage-dull essays that bring only a fixed glaze to their readers' eyes.

But if we focus on defining our genre and discourse, showing students what it is that we do, we might just get students excited about discovering new ideas, about reimagining old problems, about writing something that somehow matters. Then they will often realize the need to present their ideas in a more "correct," formal English. So they'll work on their papers, putting them through multiple drafts, consulting with tutors, with us. They might even start perusing usage texts. In short, we need to work toward providing students fulfillment in the very process of writing, rather than in only the grade we give to the product.

Not surprisingly, that kind of thought and writing process are difficult to teach. It's easier to give "evaluative" writing assignments for which there are more or less clear-cut answers: Summarize this. Give a précis of that. Answer this question. Give us an outline. Fill in the blank. True or false?

Using writing only as evaluative tool, these assignments invoke the consumerlike currency-exchange model. Think of how in the course of a semester so much of a discipline's dialectical ambiguity emerges, yet how often we will use "evaluative" writing assignments such as the aforementioned, with the expressed purpose of seeing if students "got" the "material," which even for us is

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slippery and elusive. And the transitive verb really matters here: I "got" a new iPod; I "got" a pair of Gap jeans; I "got" John Rawls's "veil of ignorance" concept; I "got" an A. This pedagogy resembles the consumer myth: There is an answer (a product, an idea, a methodology, a theory, a grade); it's this. Like consumerism, this pedagogy reduces enormously complex issues down to simplistic solutions: canned answers qua canned soup. Or as one of my colleagues puts it, "Human beings, pork and beans, they're all the same!"

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By offering such assignments, we unwittingly embrace what the media have led people to believe that intellectual debate and discourse consist of: People on shows such as *Crossfire* stake out a position, and they iterate and reiterate that position. They give examples of what they mean, and "defend" themselves by ignoring or deliberately misconstruing vicious attacks from the opposing side. But this is not intellectual discourse; it's discourse packaged as product. Academic, intellectual discourse—true debate, the attempt to genuinely advance knowledge, the use of imaginative arguments in general—cannot be easily captured in a half-hour television program. Such discourse requires time and labor. It requires sustained analysis and construction of an intended audience. It requires careful marshaling of evidence, organization of ideas, rewriting, rethinking. It may seem a little boring to listen to, and is often too dense to grasp at first hearing.

How is this "exciting" or at all attractive? Why would anyone want to engage in "academic" discourse, except for some deferred reward, such as, well, a college degree? Why, in a larger sense, do we do what we do? (It isn't for the money.) I think there are larger rewards to scholarship, to argumentative writing. We have a curiosity about how things work (or fail to), and the writing we do attempts to satisfy that curiosity, to explain problems to ourselves, to others. Though Richard D. Altick's book *The Scholar-Adventurers* might be a hard sell to the general public, his fundamental idea still stands: There are risk and danger to scholarship; it takes some courage to undertake it. For example, we might figure out more how the universe operates, but that discovery might well undermine our previously held conceptions. So while our writing might not serve to amuse, and it might not gather miscellaneous thumbprints in the waiting room of a car-repair shop, it might just advance human knowledge. Lofty, perhaps, but I think true.

Most people never encounter such discourse. And most students, on entering college, have no idea of what it's like. They've come from a culture that wants answers, not nuanced problematizations, not philosophy. They've been conditioned, as have most Americans, to seek out a position where a simple choice will solve the problem. They've been conditioned to see ideas as being part of a marketplace, just like sweatshirts, snowboards, or songs, and when they are asked to produce ideas, they look to that marketplace for a model. And students do this with their research papers as much as with their arguments. How often, in fact, does a student's research paper look like an amateur journalist's report of multiple facts and views, a superficial survey of *x* number of sources, with no argument even implied?

I don't want to disparage consumer culture too much, since I often define myself against its dazzling and dreamy backdrop, but consumer culture (and the media, which are a part of it) often works against us in higher education. It makes arguments all the time, but

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SITES TO SEE

Google Scholar – Beta Version

http://scholar.google.com/

Google Scholar enables searching specifically for scholarly literature to find articles from a wide variety of academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories and universities, as well as scholarly articles available across the web. The tool orders search results by relevancy, so the most useful references should appear at the top. This ranking takes into account the full text of each article, author, publication, and how often it has been cited.

AdjunctNation.com

http://www.adjunctnation.com/

Adjunct colleagues may want to check out AdjunctNation.com the website for Adjunct Advocate magazine. The site features teaching tools, conference information, communication tools and blogs, calls for submissions, career information, and other resources for full and part time adjunct faculty.

Peer Review

http://www.aacu-edu.org/peerreview/index.cfm

A publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), *Peer Review* provides briefings on emerging trends and key debates in undergraduate liberal education. Issues focus on a specific topic, providing comprehensive analysis, and highlighting changing practice on diverse campuses.

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they're not sound, intellectual arguments. It manufactures a need, it contrives a teleology. For example, now there's an even better TV or home gym or soap to buy; now you can improve your looks, your skin, your mood, your erectile capacity. In short, the consumer myth suggests that some consumer products can end, even satisfy, our hydra-headed desire. So the culture offers the beauteous product with one tentacle, but if you take it, two new beckoning heads pop up. More insidiously, consumer discourse, by concretizing satisfactions for the desires it creates, implies that any desires not satisfiable by culture—i.e., not purchasable—can only be perverse or bizarre; any complicated solutions, absurd.

Student writing resembles in microcosm the consumer-product myth insofar as it offers contrived problems for which there are equally contrived, predictable, prepackaged solutions. Indeed, this writing too often offers ideas that can be supported relatively easily, with abundant, even overwhelming, evidence. Consider, for example, the "five-paragraph essay" so often taught in high schools around the country and further abetted by the new SAT exam. Paragraph one offers an introduction, including a thesis at the end of the introduction. It's best if this thesis has three points. The subsequent three paragraphs develop and explain these thesis-supporting points. The last paragraph, the conclusion, sums up the paper and restates the thesis.

Nothing wrong with that, is there? Well, there is. It resembles the script for commercials. It inhibits, even prohibits freedom of thought. It's static—more noise than signal. There's no real inquiry going on, no grappling with complexities. It seeks only support, and readily available support at that. It can appear to be heated, resembling the screaming-heads model. But it's one-sided, and it goes nowhere, except to its inevitable end, which resembles or reproduces its beginning.

When we try to teach argument in the classroom, we have to fight a model of discourse that, zombielike, still stalks many classrooms. At the same time, we're pressed to provide a better model for students: the reasoned, calm approach, the one that engages and responds to counterarguments, that strives only to approach an understanding. The model for this in public discourse is as hard to find as the genre is to explain or justify. It's no surprise that we can't stick an ice pick through the five-paragraph monster's gelid heart.

One student told me writing in the argumentative mode was "scary." It's just not something they've been taught to do—yet its being tantamount to a transgressive act can make it much more attractive.

The best argumentative writing expands and transforms the ideas of the writer. It questions itself, actively seeking out emergent problems along the way. And it ends not with a definitive, an in-your-face "So there!" (or a "You should just read the Bible!"), but probably with more complex questions, ones that push the continuum of the subject matter. Of course students don't initially like this model: It's not very tidy. It doesn't offer an easy answer or position. It seems to waver, or to embody a predetermined "flip-flop" mentality. (This is the kind of thing that weakened John Kerry's credibility with voters.) But at the same time, students know that the model is better than the five-paragraph essay. One student told me writing in the argumentative mode was "scary." It's just not something they've been taught to do—yet its being tantamount to a transgressive act can make it much more attractive.

Why so? I think this might stem from a very simple human emotion that both the culture—and many writing assignments, too—seems desperate to eradicate: longing. Frederick Exley, in *A Fan's Notes*, talks about this issue. After college, his protagonist plans to get a certain kind of apartment in New York, a certain kind of job, and a certain kind of girlfriend. He even plans to be a "Genius." He has all these longings that need to be fulfilled. But in fact, what he hadn't really learned in college was that longings are better left unfulfilled: "Literature is born out of the very longing I was so seeking to suppress," he writes. Writing argument is all about longing—a longing for the truth. And this longing is inherently unsatisfiable.

Emerson frequently argued for the value of "conation," that is, the perpetual striving for something. We don't want to perpetually strive—or long—for anything, much less the truth. We want more immediate gratification: Get there, solve it, and get out … People simply haven't been given the right models of how to think. That's our job; that's what academic argument's about. Jon Stewart was right to have attacked *Crossfire* and its brand of discourse. Now it's up to us to create an intellectual alternative—not just for our students, but for the public as well.

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