



Argument Pedagogy for Everyday Life

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Abstract: This article assists argumentation and debate instructors in developing courses that provide coverage of foundational concepts while reflecting their own interests. Courses in argumentation and debate also offer instructors an opportunity to teach through applied engagement with contemporary events. We encourage instructors to reflect on the various contexts of argumentation and debate as well as challenging questions concerning the role of technology in the classroom, the conflict between normative and descriptive examples of argumentation, how much to emphasize the role of argumentation and debate in societal change, and the connections between argumentation and deliberation.

Communication courses in argumentation and debate offer undergraduate students the opportunity to learn about how reasoning develops; how arguments can be evaluated, strengthened, and countered; and how systems of reasoning function in a variety of real-world contexts (see Drury, 2019). Furthermore, the critical thinking involved in an argumentation course offers students an important skill set for active involvement in a democracy, namely evaluating the reasons and evidence people use to justify their positions, values, and beliefs.

Foundations

Most courses in argumentation and debate tend to have three general units comprising foundational content: overview of key concepts and considerations, building arguments, and contesting arguments.

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These three units offer a robust overview of the considerations arguers often have to make when engaging with others in personal, professional, and public life.

First, the argumentation course should define key terms, such as “argument,” “propositions,” “debate,” and “controversy.” This definition ensures that all students use the terms in a consistent manner. This unit also should introduce students to the idea of spheres of argument and the importance of audiences and co-arguers for argumentation (Goodnight, 1982). Spending time with spheres and audiences early in the semester helps students connect argumentation to their own lives and recognize the various contexts in which argumentation occurs. Finally, this unit should consider argumentation ethics in order to sensitize students to moral considerations.

The second unit addresses how to construct arguments and cases. There are numerous key concepts and theories to include here. First, the Toulmin model of an argument helps students visualize the component parts of an argument that they can use to build their own arguments and make sense of others’ arguments (Toulmin, 2003). Second, instructors should introduce the concepts of presumption and burden of proof to frame the contextual nature of argumentation, which should be coupled with a discussion of affirmative and negative burdens of proof. The unit should also include argument commonplaces, such as fact, value, and policy claims (including the stock issues case structure for propositions of policy) and common patterns or schemes of argument (e.g., cause, generalization, sign). Finally, this unit should introduce assessments of evidence/data, including how to find and evaluate supporting materials. As part of this instruction on supporting materials, instructors should discuss differences between types of sources (e.g., fact-based reporting versus news commentary), potential bias in sources, and the rapid availability of (dis)information in the digital world.

In the third unit, students should learn how to evaluate and refute arguments. Of all three units, this unit is the most idiosyncratic across instructors. Some common topics include strategies of refutation, including the four-step process of name, explain, support, conclude, and argument fallacies that help students pinpoint logical flaws. Some instructors may choose to include standards for cogency (i.e., acceptability, relevance, sufficiency) as a framework for evaluating arguments (Johnson & Blair, 2006).

Content Areas

Instructors of argumentation and debate classes often supplement the foundational content with material that engages different themes and topics related to the interests of themselves and their students. To supplement the discussion of the Toulmin model, instructors can include standardization, which involves translating prose arguments into clear support-claim relationships, or diagramming, which involves translating prose arguments into a visual representation of chains of reasoning. In both cases, the goal is to give students the tools needed to capture the progression of an argumentative case.

The three foundational topics largely address logical understanding of verbal argumentation but instructors might also consider rhetorical and dialectical perspectives toward argumentation (Wenzel, 1990) as well as non-traditional forms of argument, such as narrative argument (Fisher, 1984; Rowland, 1987) and visual argument (Blair, 1996; Godden, 2013). Similarly, argument spheres might be usefully complicated by discussing related concepts such as disinformation, especially through social media (Stevens & Baumtrog, 2018), or different metaphors for public argumentation, such as public screen, counterpublics, enclaves, assemblages, and networks (DeLuca & Peebles, 2002; Paliewicz & McHendry, 2017; Squires, 2002).

Finally, instructors might include studies or cases studies about various argumentation contexts, including but not limited to argumentation in citizenship and civic engagement, political argumentation (including presidential debates), argumentation in social movements and social change, legal argumentation, scientific argumentation, and (socially) mediated argumentation (van Eemeren & Garssen, 2012). Instructors also can introduce competitive contexts for debate, such as parliamentary debate, policy debate, Lincoln-Douglas debate, Worlds style debate, and Moot Court.

Applied Assignments

A mixture of written and oral assignments helps students realize the foundational and content-oriented objectives by applying the content to their everyday lives. One common assignment is an argument analysis/diagram that requires students to (a) select an opinion editorial, or some other argumentative discourse, from news outlets such as *The New York Times* and create an outline or diagram that maps all of the elements of argumentation following the Toulmin Model and (b) analyze the substance and cogency of the argument. Another applied assignment for achieving foundational and content-oriented learning outcomes is to have students write their own opinion-editorial or advocacy speech regarding a contemporary social, political, or economic controversy. Both assignments help students organize their learned knowledge in meaningful ways while also allowing them to apply that knowledge to their everyday lives (see Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010) and exercise civic skills (see Hogan, Kurr, Bergmaier, & Johnson, 2017). Argument, then, becomes a tool for advocacy and possibly social change.

Other assignments include in-class debates or argumentative pitches, rhetorical criticism of argumentation, *in-situ* argumentation (e.g., a visit to the campus art museum and a short essay on the extra-discursive possibilities of argument), and impromptu speeches on contemporary issue questions.

Issues to Consider

Moving into the 21st century, we observe four issues that argumentation instructors should consider: technology in the classroom, the balance between normative and descriptive approaches, the place of argumentation in contemporary culture and politics, and the role of deliberation in argumentation courses. We believe these four issues offer future pathways for pedagogical research, such that our teaching continuously seeks effective ways to bridge theoretical content with our students' lived experiences of argumentation.

First, should instructors allow technologies in the classroom? This perennial question is pertinent to argumentation classrooms because of the historical privileging of face-to-face communication, dialogue, and dialectical exchanges within the argumentation canon. While argumentation may be transitioning from the public sphere to the public screen (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002), such technologies also can be a distraction or nuisance in the classroom. There is not a right answer, but such technologies may be considered for in-class use if students are using computers for class-related purposes (e.g., accessing articles or visual arguments, doing research, taking notes) and in non-distracting ways; however, instructors must reserve the right to just say “no” to focus on speeches, specific lectures, and group work.

Second, given the abundance of fallacious, and sometimes farcical, arguments through social media networks, how should argumentation instructors balance normative and descriptive approaches to argument? Teaching argument as it occurs in real-world communication may increase knowledge on

the myriad ways argument works in society, but it also may leave students without standards for how argument should be used or for what constitutes a “good” argument. And while normative approaches suture this gap, they also risk teaching students a model of argumentation that is, or rapidly on its way to becoming, outmoded in a networked era. Given the stakes of argument in society and the classroom, instructors must find their own balance between understanding how argument *works* and how it *ought to work* in everyday life.

Third, should instructors be willing or obligated to frame argumentation as an efficacious intervention in political life? Contemporary society features economic and social injustices that defy principles of sound argumentation, but often are framed in terms of partisanship. Additionally, many people perceive a growing national and international threat of fascism that demands safeguards, such as honest argumentation (see Giroux, 2016). In discussing the normative and ethical ideals of argumentation, instructors should consider if it is their proper place to (a) outline what is right and wrong with current argumentation practices and (b) equip students with argumentative tools for social change. Instructors should be aware that both approaches risk alienating some students and possibly creating challenges within the class due to diversity of political allegiances or orientations.

Finally, should instructors teach deliberation as a means of addressing the aforementioned concerns by putting a stronger onus on the students to generate communal knowledge through argumentation? Deliberation, broadly defined, is the process of identifying a public issue or problem, articulating multiple avenues of addressing that problem, carefully considering the benefits and drawbacks of each possibility, and then coming to a decision (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002). The deliberative perspective seeks a cooperative process that creates space for localized knowledge alongside expertise, considers multiple values at play within the issue, and fosters understanding across differences. As such, deliberation rejects an adversarial framing of argument, calling on interlocutors to see “those who disagree . . . as resources rather than rivals” (Makau & Marty, 2001, p. 88). In addition to evaluating argumentation from traditional debate standards, instructors can prompt students to consider whether arguments acknowledge and include diverse experiences and expertise (Drury, Kuehl, & Anderson, 2017). Using this deliberative perspective, students also may evaluate whether arguments fully address the implications of competing choices while navigating the tensions among those options (Drury & Carcasson, 2017). Given the growth of deliberative processes such as Citizens Initiative Reviews and participatory budgeting, argument instructors may find the deliberative perspective to be a valuable real-world connection to cooperative argumentation in public settings.

Conclusion

Argumentation courses are more important than ever in today’s political and media climate. These courses can help educate students for civic and professional life by emphasizing foundational concepts about argument forms and situations, offering tools for making sense of verbal and nonverbal arguments, studying relevant contexts of argumentation, and generating applied assignments that put the principles into practice. We also encourage instructors to carefully consider how best to (a) incorporate technology in the classroom, (b) balance normative and descriptive understandings of argumentation, (c) connect argumentation to political and social change, and (d) address the value of deliberation as a less adversarial mode of argumentation. Our hope is that this article provides instructors a blueprint to create argumentation courses that have high-impact learning outcomes.

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