Argument Anthology

Conversing with those who speak back

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Rationale

As a teacher of first-year composition, I was frustrated by the quality of research and reasoning I saw in student writing. I wanted students to engage in what Kenneth Bruffee refers to as the “conversation of [hu]mankind”—and to engage in that conversation with curiosity and sincerity. I was comforted to hear Dennis A. Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn M. Cooper explain that I was not alone in my frustration:

Writing teachers have been teaching argument for decades. As a profession, we have taken generations of students through the laws of logic, the etiquette of dispute, and the lessons of preparedness only to receive in return the same stale and flat arguments on the big issues: abortion rights, gun control, affirmative action, and others just as large and just as canned. (61)

But I wanted more than comfort. I wanted students to take risks with topics they cared about, and I wanted to help them research and reason more effectively.

I now realize that the students in my class were not alone, but struggled with communication problems prevalent in popular and public cultures. As Deborah Tannen points out in The Argument Culture, many Westerners mistakenly think of all argumentation as adversarial, a view Louis Menand describes as seeing “two, and only two, diametrically opposed positions,” from which “the representatives of each side blast away at each other single-mindedly until interrupted by a commercial” (qtd in Lynch, George, Cooper 62). This understanding of argumentation appears time after time. Political campaigns and rallies are probably the most obvious examples of argumentation void of civility or reason. Cable news shows push an agenda, while hosts heighten the clash between one candidate or position and another to boost the show's ratings. Agreement and disagreement occur by affiliation and authority rather than reasoned judgments.

While developments in communication technology present certain advantages, the 24-hour flow of information can also foster entrenched belief and superficial argument. We may well live in what Marshall McLuhan calls the global village, yet people nevertheless divide into sects by seeking out shows, articles, and positions that reinforce what they already believe. When sectarianism
means isolation, individuals become more set in their own beliefs and unable or unwilling to understand others'. When people do engage, it is for briefer and briefer periods—whether it is with a sound-bite on television, a response to a Facebook post, or a flurry of text messages. The irony is that as we become more and more connected we can also become disconnected. In our rapid-fire mode of communication, it becomes difficult to recognize and respect the humanity of others.

During the semester after my frustration with argumentation began, I used an excerpt from *Philosophy of Literary Form* to introduce students to Kenneth Burke's parlor/conversation metaphor. Our class discussion helped me realize that—despite its strengths—the metaphor fails to account for the ways in which a spoken conversation is different from researching and writing a paper. One main difference with writing is that the participants (i.e., sources and advocates for a particular argument) are not present (or sometimes even alive). Even students who work diligently to research and reason through a problem often end up with writing that more closely resembles a monologue than it does a conversation. The problem—particularly for first-year writing students—is that they lack experience in trying to see beyond their particular worldview to imagine or understand those of others. Furthermore, for both new and experienced writers, it is easy not to take others seriously when they are absent. The situation changes, however, when others are physically present and can speak back.

**Description**

While frustrated with students' argumentative writing, I was also looking for ways to make collaborative work easier. I did not suspect that both of these goals could be met with one assignment. I began talking with a colleague about collaborative writing, and we realized that the anthology genre would allow students to retain individual expression and accountability yet still benefit from working with others. As well as offering an effective model for collaborative writing, we reasoned that having students create an anthology (in which they compile their individually written essays) might improve their argumentative abilities.

The anthology is assigned near the mid-point of the semester. Students start by writing their own argumentative essays. Though students brainstorm with peers, share sources, and respond to early versions of each others' drafts, individual essays are meant to be expressions of their best work, and each is graded accordingly. Once students have a rough draft of their individual work (after about four weeks of planning, researching, and drafting), they join with two to four peers who have written about similar issues.

Once students are in groups, I introduce them to the anthology assignment. I ask each student to bring an actual anthology to class—including anthologies of literature, science, or history—so that we get a wide sampling of the genre. In class, students analyze the genre by looking at tables of contents, page design, organization, and content of various sections. Groups then report back to the whole class; we discuss the generic conventions and strategies students might adapt for their assignment. For the remaining two to three weeks of the semester, I set aside most of class time for groups to talk and work in the computer lab. Each group reads all of its members' individually written essays, compiles them, organizes them, and writes an introduction and conclusion for the anthology.

Though the amount of writing students must do collaboratively is small, the type of thinking and writing they do together is important. For their introduction, students must write at least one full single-spaced page, which should

Introduce the broad topic that all group members are addressing and identify its importance to readers. Briefly summarize all of the articles included in the collection and explain your rationale for the
order in which they appear. Point out any themes common to all of the articles.

In the anthology's introduction, students must accurately condense the arguments of the individually written contributions. After they understand each others’ arguments, I ask them to compare and contrast their views.

The conclusion portion of the assignment also requires students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills, including what Benjamin S. Bloom identifies as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In at least two single-spaced pages, groups are required to answer two sets of prompts in their conclusion. First, students must

Describe how all of the essays relate to each other. On which major points do you agree or disagree? Try to be specific. On points you disagree, can these differences be resolved? On points you agree, what objections might some readers raise, and how might you respond? Are there questions you still have?

Mirroring Carl Rogers’s mediating approach to argumentation, such questions require students to understand each others’ positions and to carefully examine areas where group members agree, disagree, and are uncertain. Students are invested in doing this because 1) I evaluate how effectively they work as a group and 2) the different perspectives on issues are represented (and can be defended) by living, breathing people who are physically present and who can speak back.

The second part of the conclusion requires students to consider the larger purpose and context of their group’s work by asking the following questions:

What should readers do with this anthology? Are you hoping that they will change their mind? Assuming readers accept your ideas, (how) should they change their actions from this point forward? What areas might you or readers need to learn more about?

This portion of the conclusion continues to engage students in what they were supposed to have done in their individual essays: situate their argument(s) within larger intellectual conversations and cultural contexts.

The conversation metaphor continues through the final exam session. Groups orally present their anthologies to the class by summarizing the component essays and highlighting the central ideas that emerged from their experiences writing collaborative introductions and conclusions. The oral presentation gives students the chance to share their work with the rest of the class, allowing everyone to enter the intellectual conversation with comments and questions. The central premise here and in the textual version of the anthology is that students can go only so far by researching and writing in isolation; the presence of a live audience—that is, members who have different views and values—can help students stretch beyond their own perspectives and learn to reason more effectively.

Student Reactions

I was pleased to see the students in my class engage with the assignment and each other, especially during the last weeks of the semester, which are typically solitary and stressful. I suspect that this collaborative project, unlike most, allowed students to maintain an even workload and to avoid
what Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford call hierarchical collaboration, in which there is an uneven division of labor or one person fully takes charge. Conversely, I also suspect that, since students started collaborating after they completed individual work (which gave them time to think and write about an issue on their own), it was easier for group members to engage in true, dialogic collaboration (Ede and Lunsford 133-34). In addition to the nature of the prompts, which required students to synthesize all group members’ contributions, I also made sure to provide enough time in class for group members to speak and work together.

Paradoxically, the model of collaboration represented in the anthology assignment can also allow students to maintain their own convictions. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as Patrick J. Slatterly suggests in his comments about critical thinking. Shedding light on the nuances of collaboration, Slatterly explains that “Students cannot, and should not, will their beliefs and values out of existence; but if they explicitly acknowledge their preconceptions about a topic, they have a better chance of recognizing and understanding arguments that challenge their opinions” (372). Similarly, in advocating a cooperative, rather than competitive, model of argumentation, Josina M. Makau and Debian L. Marty suggest that collaborative activity paired with argumentative writing can help students “recognize that their views can only be enlightened by as comprehensive and open an exchange as is possible [and] view those who disagree with them as colleagues potentially capable of enlightening them” (87). In other words, for this model of collaboration, compromise is not required, but understanding is.

Several students reported in their self-reflections that their opinions changed in some way due to the anthology assignment. One student, who wrote an essay arguing for more government support for pregnant teens, identified an aspect she had overlooked when writing alone: “I had to change the way I presented my argument and focus on the financial aspects as well.” Another student, who wrote an essay arguing for a stricter immigration policy in America, wrote, “My argument remained relatively the same. The minor change I had was about the immigrants that fled genocide.” In both cases, collaboration helped these students develop a more sophisticated stance. Similarly, a few students mentioned that the assignment gave them more ideas or encouraged them to acknowledge other sides of an argument.

Despite the overall positive response, several students reported that the anthology assignment did not change their arguments. I suspect there are many reasons for this. One limitation was that some groups chose such a broad topic that the issues each member wrote about did not overlap sufficiently for comparison with those in their peers’ essays. For instance, one group that chose “government” included members who wrote about immigration policy, the don’t ask/don’t tell policy, the drinking age, and youth violence. A more effective group had the narrower focus of “gay rights,” with members writing about the historical influences on the contemporary public debate, laws related to housing for gays, and the don’t ask/don’t tell policy. As suggested earlier, I do not necessarily want students to change their minds when collaborating. However, I still think the value of the anthology assignment can be more closely realized if students improve their understanding of others’ perspectives; in the future, I plan to spend more time helping groups find a specific issue that each member can write about, or at least a topic narrow enough to ensure overlap and interaction among the individual essays and writers.

As I adjust the assignment, student reactions help me realize that it may be too ambitious to expect a single assignment to result in radical change, and that any alteration of basic beliefs or modes of reasoning and communicating is bound to be gradual. Nevertheless, helping students become better arguers and collaborators, both in and out of the classroom, is work I am committed to.

While I am comfortable with students having confidence in their ideas and being willing to defend them, as both teacher and citizen I fear that confidence may become arrogance, and a commitment to one’s convictions may take precedence over respect, critical reflection, or acknowledgement of contrary positions. Collaboration paired with argumentation—as an
“available means” of persuasion—helps students turn toward openness and understanding to engage in mutually productive arguments. Fostering engagement and critical thinking requires moving away from what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call “argumentation as war” and toward Burke’s notion of argumentation as conversation. And conversation is best with people who are invested and who can speak back.

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Works Cited


