

## **Workshops on Argument**

### **Introduction**

The writing of argument has not been a goal for middle school and high school English curricula. Textbooks for writing have focused on persuasive writing, a kind of writing in which it is necessary only to persuade an audience that what one claims is true or good or feasible. Both propaganda and advertising fall into the category of persuasive writing. The writer or speaker can use any appeal and no real evidence is necessary. In argument, the purpose is to make a reasonable case that something is probably true. That requires the presentation of evidence and an explication of how the evidence supports the claim. The Common Core Standards, adopted by more and more states, require argument as do many tests of writing including state writing tests and the SAT and ACT exams

### **Workshops**

In the fifteen years I have offered workshops on the teaching of argument of various lengths and at various levels of intensity. My goal at each level and length has been to meet the needs of participants as perceived by whoever has called on me to do the presentations. After initial contacts with participants, as the need arises, it has usually been possible to tailor the workshops more precisely to the needs and interests of the participants. My procedures have been to engage participants in activities that result in understanding the elements of solid argument and the ability to use similar activities in their own classrooms.

Each of the three workshops that follow is basic to understanding how argument works and to understanding effective teaching of argument. On occasion, I have condensed them to one three hour workshop. One three hour workshop seems to serve well as an introduction to the basic elements of argument. But I am never satisfied that teachers will be able to do more than the few activities demonstrated in their own classes. Something seems always shortchanged. It is much stronger to plan several workshops, each for a minimum of three to four hours. For the Denver Schools, a colleague of mine and I ran a workshop for three consecutive days, about six to seven hours per day with all three types of argument below and demonstrations in actual classrooms with workshop participants watching. That was perhaps too intense, but the demonstrations were very helpful, especially for teachers who might have suspected that students could not do such high level work.

For the best results, I recommend several workshops that include opportunities with key lead teachers trying out the various activities under the supervision of someone who knows how to operate and evaluate real discussions and actual small group work. If teachers do not know how to operate real discussions with a good deal of student interchange, if they do not now how to operate small group work, then the process will not engage students and little learning will take place. We have studies indicating that when teacher talk dominates, student learning halts.

### **Workshop I: The Basics of Argument (Argument of Fact)**

In general, workshops begin with an overview of the activities planned and move quickly to activities that have been used in middle schools, high schools, and colleges for teaching the basic elements of argument in the Toulmin model of argument (*The Uses of Argument*, Cambridge UP, 1958) combined with the Aristotelian model of *The Rhetoric*, including arguments of fact, judgment, and policy, all of which are arguments of probability and not conducive to the use of syllogistic reasoning. The goal is for participants to learn to develop the elements of such argument by participating in processes they will be able to use in their classes with their own students. One of the basic activities for teaching argument of fact or forensic argument involves students in examining a picture of a crime scene and an eye-witness account of events that the witness says led to the death of her husband. The basic question is whether the evidence available in the picture supports the eye-witness account. As participants encounter evidence they think contradicts the account, they must determine the rule or warrant that allows them to reach that conclusion. This activity is explained in detail in my *Teaching Argument Writing* (Heinemann, 2011). In addition, they must qualify their statements of warrants and evidence and sometimes develop counter arguments, and even backing for warrants.

The activity then changes to writing a report of the group findings, which is an argument, with the teacher serving as scribe and coach as the class develops the argument. Five paragraph formulas do not work for this report. The problem and the audience determine what form the writing will take. In addition, students need to learn how to report to a person or persons who have not been present at

the scene, how to cite evidence, and how to use linguistic features appropriate to the genre of argument: e.g., the need to contextualize the argument, the use of third person in warrants and backing, the use of if—then and other conditional clauses as needed, ways of expressing qualifications, and so forth. Each student writes his or her own copy of the argument upon which the teacher provides feedback.

Next, students work in small groups on a second crime scene and eye-witness account. Their task is to determine who the shooter might have been. To do this, they must select pertinent evidence, develop warrants that allow them to reach conclusions about the evidence, evaluate the evidence, and decide which pieces of evidence most strongly support their major conclusions. Then, the group writes a report to a person not present at the scene making their strongest case for what should be done. Needless to say, the teacher must monitor this activity carefully, providing guidance and support to each group.

If the written products of the groups are largely successful, that is contextualizing the argument, specifying evidence, delivering warrants, qualifying appropriately, and reaching reasonable conclusions, then the students work independently on a third crime scene. If not, students work in groups on additional crime scenes until most have become reasonably proficient. The independent work, of course, is a test of what students have learned to do without the help of other students or the teacher.

## **Workshop II: Arguments of Judgment**

Arguments of judgment include the same elements of the Toulmin model of argument as do arguments of fact (above). The main difference is that the warrants are always definitions of the term by which the subject is being judged. Further, in rigorous arguments, the definitions must be defended by means of what I call extended definitions, explanations of how the target is different from similar but different things or concepts. These distinctions involve the use of criteria which stipulate the differences. A major example I use in my book on argument is the definition of courage based on definitions by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. For an act to be courageous, it must be a moral one, the actor must be aware of a danger, must feel fear but control it, make a deliberate choice to act (rather than act in panic), must not perform the act out of fear of some other danger, and so forth. This extended definition which includes examples of courageous acts and counter examples of the similar but different acts becomes the backing for warrants. Any such definition becomes an argument in itself and must be carefully defended unless the speaker/writer can be certain that the audience will agree with the judgment or a very simple definition. But the easiest way to attack a judgment is to attack the definition and its backing. For example, even ninth graders will disagree over what should be considered courageous. Boys will frequently want to argue that bank robbers are courageous. They will argue against the criterion calling for morality as important to the idea of courage. Girls just as frequently disagree.

In the first activity, the teacher leads a discussion of a scenario about Superman stopping a rushing train which is about to crush Lois Lane.

Participants usually decide that Superman cannot be considered courageous because there is not imminent danger to him. With the teacher coaching, they develop the criterion that for an act to be courageous there must be some imminent and real danger to the actor. (Sometimes there is an argument about whether it has to be real. Why not imagined?) Next, working in small groups participants examine a set of 12 brief scenarios in which characters act in a context of some apparent danger. They decide whether the act is courageous or not. If it is not, they try to draft a sentence or two, a criterion, explaining why it is not. Following that activity, groups report their findings on one scenario to the full class with the class discussing the possible criterion and making final decisions on the wording of it. The class works through the entire set in this way. The next activity involves the participants writing out their own definitions of courageous action. They may use the criteria developed by the group but must incorporate their own examples and counter examples with explanations of why the counter-examples are not examples of courageous action.

Following activities involve reading various literary works and news stories and making arguments about whether the actions of characters are courageous or not. For my money, this work is essential to our work on literary analysis.

### **Workshop III: Arguments of Policy**

Arguments of policy are more complex because they include arguments of fact and judgment and then arguments about what should be done. First, the argument must explicate what the problem is (the facts of the case) and why it is

a problem (a judgment about why it is a problem, why it is a harmful or undesirable). Finally, such arguments propose a solution which in itself may involve arguments of fact and judgment. We have used a variety of cases for this workshop, some actual and some fictional: the problem of increasing crime at a high school, what to do about a high school girl promoting anarchy at a West Va. high school, Chicago loitering laws, and so forth. This workshop proceeds as do the first two, beginning with a problem with students working out its dimensions, then writing about it as a group, followed by small group work on another problem followed by individual work.