

Emotion, Reason, and Argument: Teaching Persuasive Writing in Tense Times

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Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend any other office than to serve and obey them.

—David Hume, 1739

I like to think of myself as a reasonable person. Don't we all think of ourselves that way? When pondering the stickiest of issues, I like to believe that I arrive at my conclusions only after careful consideration of all sides of the question and astute attention to evidence. Through careful reasoning, I can determine what makes sense and arrive at the most firmly supported decisions.

But people who reach diametrically opposing conclusions to the ones I draw consider themselves just as logical. Our reasoning, our rational means of argumentation: All applied to the same issues, all with access to the same evidence, yet producing fundamentally different answers.

As a high school teacher in the 1970s and 1980s, I taught some form of argumentative or analytic reasoning and writing every year. All of my teaching methods emphasized rational thinking, the careful weighing of evidence, the orchestration of claims into a major point, and the warranting of examples so that they clearly provided evidence in service of generalizations and opinions. My friends and I have since gone on to write about such teaching (Smagorinsky et al., *Dynamics, Teaching*) under the assumption that if students learn unimpeachable reasoning practices in class, they will put them to work when they think and engage with people on issues in their academic, personal, and social worlds.

But in the last several years, I've begun to wonder about the assumptions I've been making about argumentation. As teachers instruct students

in how to make their arguments logically, we are all surrounded by people who make their points by shouting loudly, by humiliating and diminishing their opponents, by asserting points that are easily disconfirmed by evidence and their own statements from prior occasions, and by violating virtually every rule of rational thinking taught in English classes. Many of our nation's highest offices are presently held by people who have communicated to their followers through shared emotions rather than logical, responsibly demonstrated presentations of what is the best course forward for society.

In teaching logical argumentation, are we doing what school is often accused of: teaching abstract, idealistic knowledge that often doesn't apply in the "real" world outside school or, given how schools are often run, within them as well? Have teachers constructed a tension between the academic practice of argumentation and the real ways in which people make their points when seeking to get their way?

I have recently read a book that suggests that understanding argumentation as a strictly logical, unemotional, scholastic means of thinking might actually work in opposition to how people in fact arrive at decisions. Jonathan Haidt, in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, believes so. He is a psychologist who studies people's moral reasoning. Through many years of researching how people respond to the hypothetical dilemmas he constructs, he has concluded that people do not think solely, or even primarily, through rational argumentation. Rather, they first and foremost respond through gut reactions, which they then rationalize through whatever justifications they can come up with.

In other words, Haidt concludes that David Hume was essentially right: Reasoning is not what some now call “cold cognition,” a logical, emotionless sorting through of facts in order to arrive at a sound conclusion (Roth). Rather, people respond primarily through what he calls “intuitions,” or deeply felt, gut-level, often unconscious beliefs, and then provide supporting logic for how they feel.

Before continuing: I should point out a major oversight in Haidt’s argument, that being his attention to emotions while ignoring a major body of work on women’s psychology, beginning with Carol Gilligan’s “feminist psychology” of the 1980s and extending through the present. It’s quite remarkable that his sources are almost exclusively fellow male psychologists, when Gilligan and the field she invented would provide solid support for his claims about the role of emotions and relationships in moral reasoning.

Even so, his conclusion that Hume’s formulation helps to explain modern political and religious discourse has considerable merit. We can’t all be impeccably logical if we are arguing such contradictory points. Something else must explain what people base their reasoning on if we all consider ourselves to be driven by logic yet are so deeply at odds in what we believe. To Haidt, reasoning follows from what he calls intuitions, and what Hume calls the passions. Call them what you want: Haidt has found that these gut feelings, rather than our efficiently reasoning minds, are responsible for the positions people take, with their explanations serving to justify these emotional responses after the fact.

US schools have always been indebted to the European Enlightenment and its accompanying Scientific Revolution and Age of Reason. Schools embody the views of cold cognitionists such as Emmanuel Kant rather than David Hume and his belief in the passions. I have reproduced this value myself in my teaching of argument by emphasizing logic and reason. But what if I’ve been wrong all along? What if the logical reasoning I’ve emphasized instructionally is a chimera, a post-hoc way of rationalizing emotional responses? What if most English teachers, like me, have been teaching argument from the wrong premises?

Throughout society, yelling at and belittling the opposition wins elections, sells deodorant, and intimidates would-be participants out of stating

and defending their views. Perhaps English teachers are not teaching what works in real-world argumentation, where passions are high and drive how people think and act. That’s a daunting prospect for those of us who believe that students benefit from learning to think like academics and not like the people who end up running things. If anything, cold technicians are viewed by many as lacking the passion needed to lead, no matter how logically they speak. That is one confounding tension upon which to teach a fundamental part of the curriculum.

I don’t make this observation to bash teachers. Teachers are often following curricular standards developed outside their classrooms and teaching to policies with which they may disagree. They often do so surrounded by colleagues who have been socialized to accept Enlightenment values as appropriate through a lifetime of English classes conducted according to rationalist assumptions. The deep, historical structure of the educational process has long engrained Enlightenment assumptions in classroom practice, and in my own writing about teaching argumentation.

Meanwhile, schools tend to deflect and discourage attention to emotional issues such as racism, misogyny, and the many sensitive issues raised in much young adult literature. Better to read about Hester Prynne’s adultery than your own parents’ and to discuss Hawthorne’s technique rather than moral dilemmas that are visceral and uncomfortable. But as Christina Berchini notes, eliding issues that prompt passionate responses to challenging social inequities leads to sterile classroom discussions and renders potentially provocative texts mute on the topics they address. The Enlightenment may have produced an Age of Reason, but it’s also in part responsible for dull classrooms that avoid tough issues (O’Donnell-Allen) that are suppressed by a focus on the author’s technique and not students’ felt response to the characters.

Haidt is careful to acknowledge that intuitions are not necessarily innate and fixed and can be modified through social engagement. I’ve gone through this process of conceptual change—to Haidt, an “innate” feeling amenable to modification—throughout my lifetime as my experiences have shifted my views toward such matters as human sexuality. When I was very young, I had appropriated from my homophobic surroundings a

gut-level revulsion for and fear of people inhabiting the LGBTQ+ spectrum. That gut feeling, that passion, changed over time as I had more experiences with more types of people, read more about sexuality, and felt less weird about other people's same-sex attractions and other nonheteronormative orientations. The gut, in my experience, can change: perhaps through a dose of reason, but also through other sorts of interpersonal experiences and ways of knowing.


Perhaps I've just given a rationalist argument for overcoming prejudice. But I would say that my reasoning, my formal academic knowledge about human sexuality, *followed* my experiences with people, through which I began to see the humanity of people unlike myself and the inhumanity of people sharing my demographic traits who considered people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum to be subhuman. In that sense, I did exactly what Haidt would say that people do: I followed my gut, even as my gut shifted its response, and used reasoning to rationalize my new perspective. What motivated my thinking was the compassion I felt for people who were treated unfairly, by me and others, not my consultation of sources to improve my logic.

If Haidt is right, how should argumentation be taught in English classes? If schools are deeply invested with structures that discourage attention to passion—for Berchini, attention to racism, but for others, engagement with other emotional issues—then teachers have little to worry about, because they can teach argumentation in service of issues that students don't care about, leaving the passions at the roadside and focusing on cold logic applied to abstract problems or mechanistic topics such as the author's technique. It's not clear, however, whether this approach will pay off when students disagree on things that matter to them and their beliefs come from the gut rather than following a logical, analytic process.

What, then, might be required for argumentation to originate from its source, the gut-level responses, rather than to proceed solely from logic? First, it seems that kids would need something to argue about that they care about. Reading a text that concerns racism and reducing it to explaining the author's technique, as practiced through the "scientific" methods of New Criticism and the Common Core State Standards, seems guaranteed

to make school a place of bloodless, technical thinking of the sort they will not practice elsewhere. The tension, then, appears to be fundamentally built into the edifice of schools and their Enlightenment infrastructure, one that views the emotions as corrupting influences on thinking rather than the principal motivation for cognitive-affective mentation.

The trickier issue seems to be how to teach analytic and argumentative principles that, even if they do not provide the basis for thinking, could at least have more appropriate post-hoc relevance. One solution might be to evaluate how arguments are made in the public forum, and to see what is at their basis. Typically, classroom instruction in argument is approached according to good and bad reasoning, not the viability of gut feelings. However, it might be interesting to present students with different public arguments and begin with the question, What gut feeling is behind this point of view? What values motivate it? Are those values learned or inborn? After this exploration, perhaps students could consider the reasoning employed to support that gut feeling and what assumptions it relies on. What is the tension between logic and passion? How does one drive the other? What forms of persuasion do different passions rely on to convince others of their truth value? Ultimately, what produces persuasive discourse: passion, reason, or something in between?

I am only beginning to think about this question and can only, in the absence of students to teach, begin to formulate a pedagogy that operates from Haidt's premises. It's possible that Haidt is wrong and that by emphasizing the role of gut feelings in the teaching of argumentation, I am setting the teaching of writing back a few centuries. If that's how you feel, then I'd encourage you to explore those feelings and see how you've come to develop them and how you then justify them. Teaching is often a work of passion. Silencing the passion central to what people believe and how they argue those beliefs increasingly strikes me as out of synch with how people make and defend their decisions about matters that they care about. 

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Peter Smagorinsky began teaching in the mid-1970s and now teaches at The University of Georgia. He is still trying to figure it out, in spite of having been an NCTE member since about 1983.

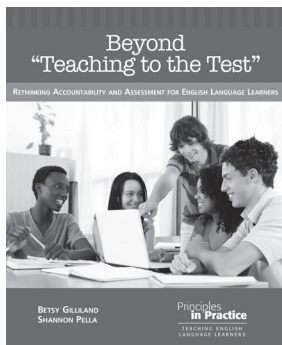


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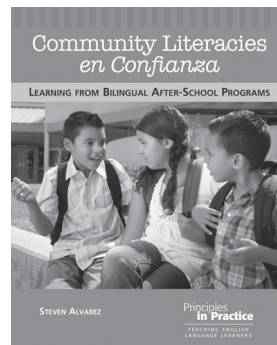


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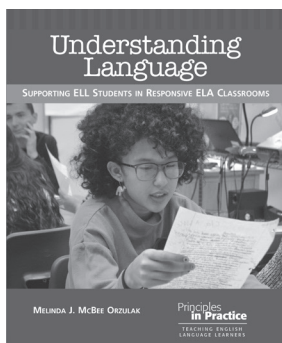


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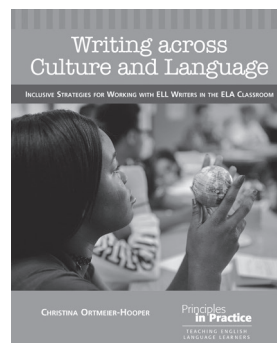


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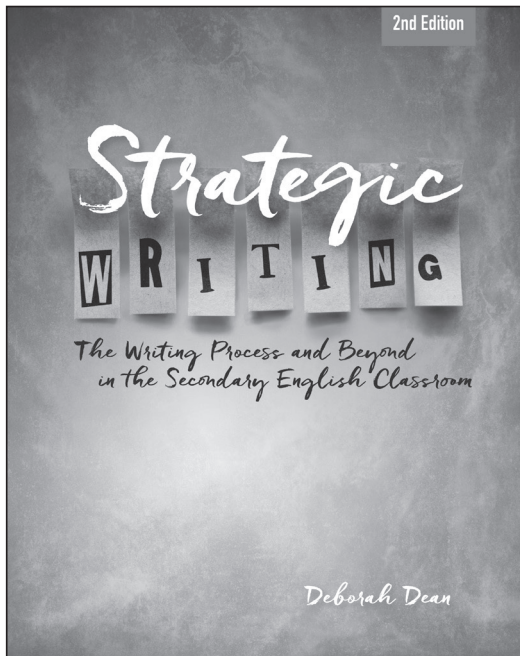
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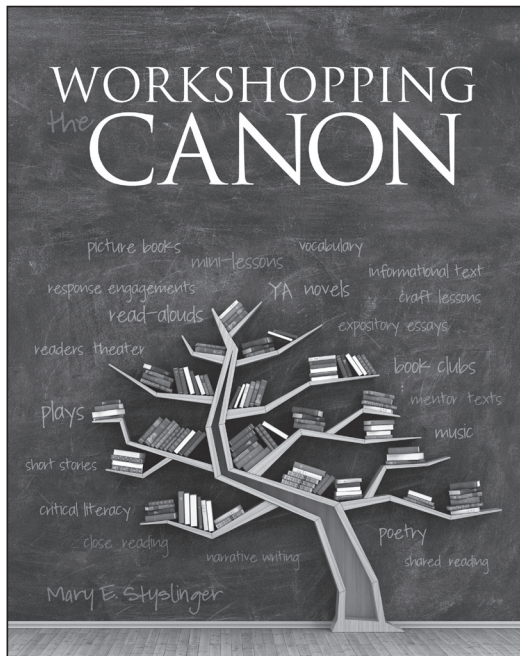
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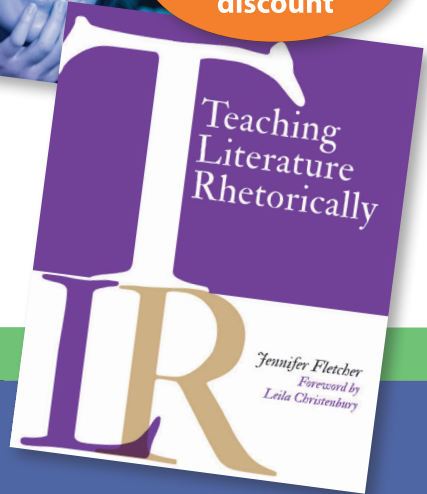
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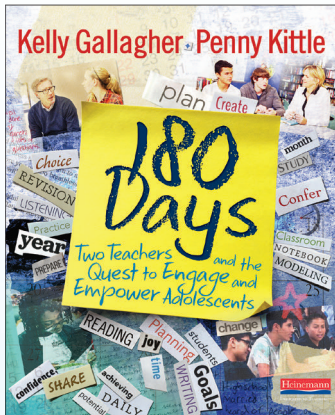
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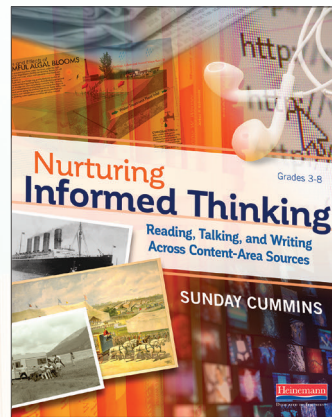


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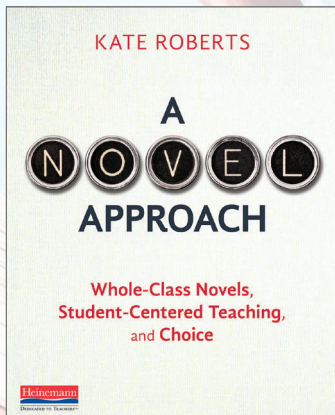


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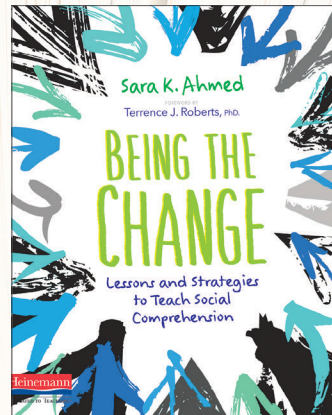


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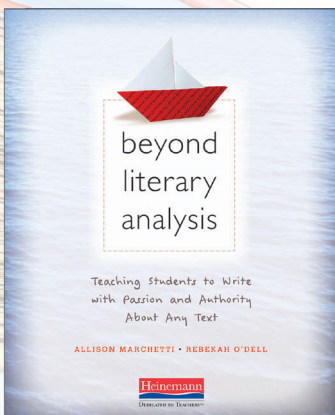


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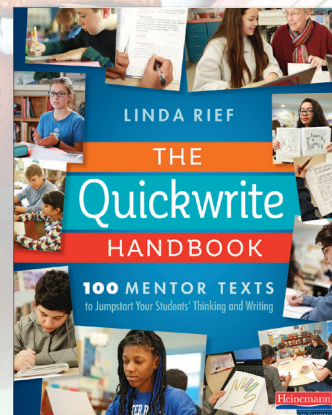


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