

Arguing and Listening for Civic Engagement

To highlight the importance of civil discourse, an English education scholar worked with teachers to develop strategies for teaching argument that promote respectful engagement with controversial topics.

Argumentation is an essential form of engagement in human life. Argument was formalized by ancient rhetoricians as among the essential modes of expression for all citizens to practice responsibly. Argumentation has since been among the writing genres built into the English curriculum, and undertaken in other disciplines. As I'll discuss later, although one model predominates in US schools and writing assessments, there is variation in argumentative practices by culture (nationality or ethnicity), mode (writing, visual art, music), manner (emotion, reason), and other factors. This problem creates tensions for teachers who hope to honor students' home and community knowledge while also preparing them for how they will be evaluated in school tasks.

The central problem I address in this article is that, in much of society in the United States, people express positions without listening to or engaging with a different perspective. As a result, people often don't really argue; they try to out-shout each other. Civil or civic discourse, in contrast, requires a degree of mutual respect that involves listening to and engaging with other points of view, even when speakers' beliefs are far apart. Carol D. Lee et al. provide a useful set of guidelines for understanding the qualities of civic discourse:

To engage in civic reasoning, one needs to think through a public issue using rigorous inquiry skills and methods to weigh different points of view and examine available evidence. Civic discourse concerns

how to communicate with one another around the challenges of public issues in order to enhance both individual and group understanding. It also involves enabling effective decision making aimed at finding consensus, compromise, or in some cases, confronting social injustices through dissent. Finally, engaging in civic discourse should be guided by respect for fundamental human rights. (1)

School provides a rare place in society where listening may be built into the process of argumentation, especially that which involves what Krista Ratcliffe calls *rhetorical listening*, which enables someone to hear beyond their cultural filters:

The rhetorical listening that I am promoting is a performance that occurs when listeners invoke both their capacity and their willingness (1) to promote an understanding of self and other that informs our culture's politics and ethics, (2) to proceed from within a responsibility logic, not from within a defensive guilt/blame one, (3) to locate identification in discursive spaces of both commonalities and differences, and (4) to accentuate commonalities and differences not only in claims but in cultural logics within which those claims function. As such, rhetorical listening enables us to hear textual strategies . . . such as voice and silence; relatedly but more encompassingly, it enables us to hear what Toni Morrison calls "the sound that [breaks] the back of words," thus enabling us to question the logos as we know it. (204)

Morrison and Ratcliffe are concerned with amplifying the voices of marginalized people. In a classroom that embraces civic discourse, this feature of listening is especially important when the

questions have complex social implications and when some voices ring more loudly than others across the discursive space.

IS THERE A PROPER WAY TO ARGUE?

Typically, argumentation is taught according to a logic formalized by Stephen Toulmin. Proficiency in writing arguments is important to school success and on state assessments, where the rubrics include most of the elements identified by Toulmin. Often, the traits of an argument are taught as a form. In the Toulmin model, these elements include the following:

- an overarching thesis that guides the major thrust of the argument;
- a set of points, or claims, that provide a set of generalizations in support of the thesis;
- for each claim, the provision of data or examples that support the claim;
- a *warrant*, which explains how the examples serve as evidence for the claims and distinguishes the claims from other seemingly identical perspectives that fall short of being supported by evidence;
- the anticipation of a counterargument, which is addressed through a rebuttal; and
- a concluding judgment that reviews the evidence and asserts the major points as having been substantiated.

Toulmin's claim-data-warrant-rebuttal model has provided the basis for major studies of the teaching of argument in schools (Hillocks, *Teach-*

ing Argument Writing; Newell et al.). It has also served as the model for school instruction in argumentation, often in the stripped-down form of the five-paragraph theme, under the assumption that it can be transferred to construct arguments

across the curriculum (for a critique, see Johnson et al.). Yet this structure does not suit all forms of argumentation:

1. Different areas of inquiry adapt this structure to adjust to textual conventions and means of engagement that characterize how a profession or discipline works (Bazerman and Paradis). Toulmin recognized this variability, yet in much school instruction, the form is presented as having universal application.
2. Learning logic doesn't necessarily help students argue logically (Karbach), similar to how studying grammar has little effect on students' usage (Graham and Perin; Hillocks, *Research on Written Composition*; Weaver). There is an assumption that Toulmin's elements alone can produce logical arguments. Yet Hillocks (*Testing Trap*) found that state writing assessments often focus entirely on the presence of the elements, allowing specious arguments (in five-paragraph form) to receive high scores.
3. Arguments have deeply emotional origins, which helps explain why people often talk past each other and not with each other (Haidt; Smagorinsky). People on opposing sides of a political dispute often believe that they are logical, and their opponents soft-minded, because their perspectives are founded in their gut feelings. One challenge for promoting civic discourse, then, is to help students recognize when their emotions are preventing them from hearing someone else's opinions and points.
4. Toulmin's tradition emerges from the European Age of Reason. But other cultures engage in argumentation through other means. Members of nondominant cultures are subject to the traditions of the gatekeepers of the institution, whose socialization leads them to view departures from their own norms as intellectually weak. Yet African American argumentation, according to a variety of sources, often emerges from

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passion, includes narratives, involves performative elements, invites audience participation (resembling call-and-response patterns from Black churches), may include irony to reinforce points, and often violates the culture of politeness that governs school learning (Kochman; Lee; Majors). Non-Western people may seek consensus rather than engaging in argumentation; Easton observes that “traditional African styles of discussion and debate . . . focus to a greater degree on building consensus through overlapping and carefully dovetailed interventions than on oppositional jousting” (710). Toulmin’s features no doubt serve many situations well, including the assessment apparatus of schooling. But his formulation is not universally practiced. It might benefit classrooms to explore other forms of argument and discuss what works best in which situation.

5. Typically, argumentation in school is a strictly verbal form of expression. However, there are other ways to make a point, as the many propaganda posters created historically attest. Attention to this dimension of communication might look beyond words to identify ways of making points multimodally. The Latin American mural tradition, for instance, is highly political (LaWare) and has often been used to make points artistically. Various musical genres have involved attention to social issues, often in the form of protest. Personal identity can be expressed through the calligraphy of Asian symbol systems (“Art of Calligraphy”). A street mural I photographed in Guadalajara, Mexico, depicts a cackling blue pig smoking a pack of forty-three human cigarettes (see Figure 1), representing the forty-three students who disappeared in 2014, an incident that has only recently been acknowledged by authorities as a state crime (“Mexico”). The investigation into the disappearance has followed from many protests in all forms, including this dramatic mural, a documentary film (*Ayotzinapa*), and other exposés.



FIGURE 1

A Guadalajara (Mexico) street artist created a mural to protest the disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College on September 26, 2014. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

In school, such means of argumentation tend to be viewed as irrational or hard to grade. Students whose cultures view art as a legitimate means of expression are obligated to check their histories at the door. Like students who must code-switch to have their diction approved of in school, students socialized to other forms of argumentation must engage in shifts in speech genres to be rewarded with good grades. Instruction in argumentation thus comes with challenges, including the lack of good models for civic engagement; see, for instance, many school board meetings since 2020 where parents have engaged in shouting, threats, and intimidation to shape the curriculum (Borter et al.).

HOW DO WE PROMOTE CIVIC EDUCATION IN UNCIVIL TIMES?

How, then, can a civic education most fruitfully help students produce arguments that assist them in making their points? School appears to be uniquely positioned as a setting for exploring complex questions, especially with those with whom we disagree. When students observe argumentation in the world outside school, what they see would fail most academic tests, yet it might be effective in achieving the

speaker's goals. Fake news, often generated by bots originating from overseas, provides the evidentiary basis for many points of view (O'Connor and Schneider). Politicians advance their points through lies, distortions, emotional inflammation, belittling opponents, issuing threats, and other illogical means—and win. Cable news networks often rely on testimonials designed to generate anger, not clear thinking, to advance political agendas. Here I present a conundrum: I have argued that emotions underlie cognition (Haidt; Smagorinsky). Yet emotion unchecked by self-regulation rarely solves problems and often shuts down listening. Finding the right balance is part of the challenge of teaching argumentation.

WHAT IS THE MISSING DIMENSION?

In school, a teacher has an opportunity to promote a disposition in argumentation that is rarely required in the public forum: listening to and engaging with opposing ideas to arrive at a new way of thinking. I'll briefly outline what listening can achieve using the tripartite structure of dialectical thinking. First, there is a *thesis*: a proposition about life on earth expressed by one speaker (or one set of speakers). In response, another speaker presents an *antithesis*: a statement representing a contrary point of view.

Typically, in society today, that's as far as it goes. People exchange propositions without listening, engaging, and growing. The process requires a third stage, the *synthesis*, which seeks a unity of opposites and generates a new perspective. A synthesis can only follow from listening carefully to opposing ideas and addressing them clearly and as respectfully as possible. Some thesis-antithesis engagements will undoubtedly not produce a new synthesis; ideas may be difficult to reconcile. For discussions with some possibility of finding a way forward, however, the process has value in helping to clarify ideas in the relief provided by contrasting views. The synthesis might be quite modest, involving more tweaking than a breakthrough into great new insights. What matters is how the engagement of opposing views contributes to one's formulation of a perspective on a social problem.

In school, the opportunity is there to promote listening and engagement that potentially help students modify and advance, rather than become entrenched in, their entering assumptions and beliefs. The sort of synthesis available through the engagement of opposing views has rarely been achieved in ideological conflicts, which often produce more wars than understandings. These scorched-earth battles to the finish are fought to be won. They are not undertaken as an opportunity to grow in understanding.

For growth, listening to and engaging with opposing points of view is necessary. Simply writing an argument, turning it in to the teacher, and getting it back requires no engagement. For arguments to serve a purpose other than demonstrating knowledge of elements for teachers, they need to be put into dialogue with a different point of view. Civil discourse rules would need to be followed for students to listen respectfully and attentively to each other's points and evidence, and to address them. Their disagreements would undoubtedly be passionate, and that's good, given the longstanding observation that classrooms are emotionally flat for students and teachers (Clement et al.; Goodlad). The standardization and testing emphasis of the twenty-first century has flattened them further. Engaging in argumentation—which would involve not only expressing a view but also putting it in dialogue with oppositional views—is one way to make classrooms lively and interesting for students and teachers.

HOW DO WE TEACH ARGUMENTATION?

How, then, do we teach argument in school in ways that honor multiple means of socialization while also adhering to the conventions that have traditionally driven instruction and assessment? How can teachers organize classrooms so that students have the latitude to think carefully and consider opposing points of view? How can students meet the conditions of the curriculum and learn how to think beyond the established opinions that prevent new perspectives from emerging?

The quest for synthesis amid multiple perspectives is applicable to many concepts that affect daily life. Disputed terms have often been subject to

impressionistic interpretations. In 1964, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said, during hearings on whether a film that included nudity violated laws on obscenity, “I know [obscenity] when I see it.” And yet *prima facie* impressions allow everyone to see what they want to see in human actions and in the terms they use to characterize them. Students need to go on more than what they think they see, based on the cultural lenses through which they observe a phenomenon.

One contested term invoked by people across the current political spectrum is *patriotism*. Patriots know patriotism when they see it. The disagreement over who is and is not a patriot has affected life in the 2020s, claimed by all who hope to steer the United States toward their own preferred ends. It is thus an appropriate topic for inclusion in a curriculum in which students are encouraged to link their studies with their social worlds.

In *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times: Identity, Inquiry, and Social Action at the Heart of Instruction*, Allison Skerrett and I offer curricula to help students explore sticky social issues in English classes, with each chapter coauthored by a teacher who implemented the activities. One chapter focuses on defining *patriotism*, with students analyzing texts to evaluate the speech and actions of characters as patriotic or not. For the unit on patriotism, Maggie Phipps of Clarkston High School, a mixed-demographic, Title I school outside Atlanta, Georgia, taught the material to her ninth-grade students. What follows is an account of how argumentation and listening helped the students come to understand the concept and evaluate characters according to their own definitions.

The volatile environment of the last few years has resulted in teachers being punished and terminated for becoming explicitly ideological in their speech and actions around their students. The teacher’s role, then, is to orchestrate activities and not to impose their views on students’ developing understandings and formulations.

Maggie taught the unit remotely during the COVID crisis. She began with videos of the January 6, 2021, incident at the US Capitol, and of a June 27, 2015, civil rights protest in South Carolina

ten days after Dylann Roof murdered nine African American congregants during Bible study at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. As part of the protest, activist Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole and removed a Confederate flag. Patriotism was claimed by many during these incidents, and students were tasked with defining patriotism and making judgments about people’s actions during the events. Students offered many interpretations, debating the difference between a protest and a riot and the role of violence in either. The class then read an article titled “Patriotism vs. Nationalism” and produced a T-chart outlining the main differences and similarities. These activities led to further discussion of issues that arose during their explorations.

Maggie then provided a set of ten statements based on actual opinions or facts from surveys or research. The intent was to provide a wide range of views on patriotism rather than to lead students to any specific interpretation. The statements included views on respecting the military, declines in patriotic feelings, playing patriotic songs, feeling unpatriotic because of discrimination, and other contrasting points of view. Students needed to listen to each speaker, and, in turn, to their classmates’ views. Maggie created small groups with an emphasis on diversity of membership, and gave each group the task of focusing on one of the ten statements. She also provided them with sentence stems (e.g., “I concur with _____ because”; “I respectfully disagree with my classmates/you. I believe that _____ because”) to help them phrase their perspectives.

In response to students’ struggles with the task, Maggie shared a story of her mother, who told Maggie that she was hard on her because she loved her and expected much of her. Her story led to a discussion of love, which produced a new class question: How might patriotism be seen as love? Maggie then linked their discussion to a state standard specifying Toulmin-esque features for argumentation. She made the pragmatic choice to focus on this form as the means by which she and her students would be assessed.

She asked, “Should students be required to say the Pledge of Allegiance?” and provided students with links to a set of videos concerning the Pledge of

Allegiance, such as “Student Arrested after Refusing to Stand for Pledge of Allegiance” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOcVbVk2hyI). Each student had a contrasting set of views to consider and resolve and then build into their conception. Maggie’s sentence stems helped students follow rules of civic discourse and rhetorical listening, with disagreements prefaced by statements such as “I respectfully disagree with”

After studying “Pledge Laws: Controlling Protest and Patriotism in Schools” (www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/pledge-laws-controlling-protest-and-patriotism-in-schools), Maggie shifted to extended definitions of argumentation and patriotism, providing students with an outline of the elements to include. She led the class through the generation of one illustrated criterion, then had the class examine a series of songs to decide if they were patriotic. I provide summaries of two essays taking opposing views of the same song, Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA.”

In the first essay, the student took the position that Springsteen’s song was not patriotic. The student pointed to the performer’s wearing of a USA bandana while dancing, saying that he deserved better than what his country had provided for him.

Teaching controversial issues is challenging, especially in an era when, in some states, laws have been enacted to shut down selected topics altogether.

The line “I’m ten years burning down the road / I’ve got nowhere to run and nowhere to go” illustrated to this student how the speaker is against his country instead of for it. The student further quoted the lyric “So they put a rifle in my hand / Sent me off

to a foreign land / To go and kill the yellow man” to suggest that the speaker was forced to fight rather than being given a choice. The student noted that even though it was patriotic to fight for his country, the fact that it wasn’t a choice and the quoted lines indicate resistance resulted in a judgment that the song was unpatriotic.

The second essay evaluated the song as patriotic in that it brought awareness of the Vietnam War and the veterans who fought in it. Doing so,

the student wrote, could lead to eventual solutions to similar future issues. The student wrote that as a protest song, it benefited society by raising awareness so that people would pay more attention to the problem. This student saw the speaker’s allusions to being drafted and forced to fight as a constructive criticism designed to teach a lesson about entering conflicts that are costly to society in human lives. This criticism, the student argued, was a form of patriotism.

The discussions that produced these opposing views did not include shouting and histrionics. Rather, the essays followed from conversations that required listening and resulted in respectful disagreements.

Teaching controversial issues is challenging, especially in an era when, in some states, laws have been enacted to shut down selected topics altogether. In the example from Maggie’s classroom, I have tried to illustrate how the contentious question of patriotism might serve as the basis for teaching a curriculum standard—the teaching of argumentation—in ways that relate the classroom to the social world outside school and help students address opposing perspectives without rancor. The students appear to have taken the instruction to heart during a remote learning era in which many students nationally had difficulty staying engaged (Einhorn). If making connections between school and personal lives benefits learning, and if listening helps to advance one’s own views, then this approach has potential for enhancing students’ experiences with their in-school learning. **EJ**

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PETER SMAGORINSKY is Distinguished Research Professor, emeritus, at the University of Georgia and Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Universidad de Guadalajara. He has been an NCTE member since 1984 and can be contacted at smago@uga.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This guide provides teachers with strategies for helping students understand the differences between persuasive writing and evidence-based argumentation. Students become familiar with the basic components of an argument and then develop their understanding by analyzing evidence-based arguments about texts. Students then generate evidence-based arguments about texts using a variety of resources. <https://bit.ly/3IKucPz>