

Arguing controversies through civic discourse

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Abstract

This article draws on Toulmin's model of argumentation to propose a way of engaging with controversial topics in ways that require not only the assertion of a point of view, but attentive listening to contrasting beliefs. Given the paucity of models of respectful listening in public discourse, school becomes a place where teachers can provide opportunities for contentious discussions to be conducted through civic discourse. The article begins with an outline of Toulmin's model, with an emphasis on warranting examples so that they serve as evidence for a claim, and engages with opposing viewpoints for a reasoned rebuttal and synthesis. The article then suggests that the topic of school dress codes would be a fruitful topic of student inquiry and argumentation, given the ideological basis of a dress code and the many differences of opinion surrounding them. Such instruction is illustrated through a method that relies on inductive reasoning and discussion as the basis for generating ideas in argumentative writing. The article concludes with a view of writing pedagogy that promotes responsible argumentation in light of critical responses that lead to a synthesis and extension of learning.

KEYWORDS: ARGUMENTATION, DRESS CODES, THESIS, ANTITHESIS, SYNTHESIS

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Introduction

Argumentation – the advancement of a point of view – is an essential form of engagement in human life. Argument and persuasion were formalized by ancient rhetoricians as among the essential modes of expression for all citizens to practice responsibly. Argumentation has thus been among the writing genres built into the “English” curriculum focused on reading (often literature), writing (or composing nonwritten texts), and language use in English-heritage nations, and undertaken in other disciplines in which persuasion to a point of view is practiced.

Argumentation, like other communication genres, is a product of cultural practices. The British philosopher Toulmin (1958) articulated a conception of argument grounded in Enlightenment scientific reason, initially to account for moral reasoning, and ultimately to apply to argumentation more generally. There are other cultural traditions that have produced different argumentative practices. Majors (2015) reports on African American argumentative conventions that rely on narrative presentation, audience participation, emotional commitment, and other factors not included in Toulmin’s formulation; Wu and Rubin (2000) find that Confucian principles are central to Chinese argumentation, but not those expected in U.S. universities; and many from outside the European worldview and from a feminist perspective (Farr, 1993) have begun to assert that the analytic and rational tradition is not exclusively effective for making points in ways that are convincing in all settings.

The Toulmin model thus may be more familiar and accessible to some students than others, depending on their socialization to Enlightenment argumentative practices grounded in reason and dispassion. Its values and elements therefore remain salient to making points in formal efforts to assert a position, such as academic and legal writing produced through what Scollon and Scollon (1981) called “essayist literacy”. Given its ubiquity in formal education, the Toulmin model has an important role in how students learn to write.

In this article I rely on Toulmin’s conception to provide the grounds for engaging in civic discourse that includes the thesis-antithesis-synthesis process. This formulation has been credited to the Germanic philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). It requires not just presenting an argument, but listening attentively to opposing views as a way to refine or reconsider one’s own position (Smagorinsky, 2023). In light of this sense of argumentation, I then outline instruction in arguing about school dress codes, a controversial topic in which every student has a stake, and thus a vested interest.

Why It Matters to Promote Civic Discourse

My national setting is the United States, where questions and concerns about freedom of speech are a fixture of public and academic discourse. Both conservatives and liberals accuse each other of denying free speech and imposing ideological doctrines, with education a major battle ground for these disputes. Schools, and especially universities, are often the targets of conservative criticisms for their liberal bias and stifling of free conservative expression. Political columnist George Will (2023) has scathingly written about “woke word-policing” undertaken by campus liberals as a “fever of foolishness” that discourages such words as “field” because to some it connotes slavery, and so must be retired from usage.

Meanwhile, in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis is imposing many conservative values on schools, banning speech about race and nonbinary genders, especially when it promotes a social justice agenda, in classrooms and mission statements (Nossel, 2023). In both cases, the question of whose speech is being denied by whom has a strong ideological basis. And in both cases, there is little ground for productive argumentation. It’s my way or the highway, and that’s all there is to it.

These concerns affect universities, where in Florida and other U.S. states, tenure is being dismantled and personnel matters are being turned over to governor-appointed officials (Kumar, 2022) who are dedicated to conservative values that deny the existence of racism, sexism, and other forms of demographic discrimination. And from a conservative perspective, the liberal policing of racism is itself racism (Rasmussen et al., 2022) and must be stomped out to the point of overhauling the composition of the faculty and refashioning it in a conservative ideology.

Each of these instances reveals the absence of productive dialogue or argumentation that engages with opposing ideas. To devoted conservatives, if it’s woke, it’s bad. To devoted liberals, if it ain’t woke, then fix it. As a result, what matters is the power behind one’s beliefs, and not the quality of the reasoning that has produced them. Winning is the end game, not using disagreement to advance understanding. The times call for civic discourse, a form of exchange that requires a stance of initial uncertainty and a disposition to listen to and consider opposing views. Without good models for students to follow in the public realm, school is an important site for teaching youth how to engage with dissenting beliefs, and to do so respectfully and with the intent to mature intellectually and emotionally through the process.

The Toulmin Model and its Variations

The Toulmin model for argumentation includes the following traits:

- 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* that explains how the examples serve as evidence for the claims, and that distinguishes the claim from other seemingly identical perspectives that fall short of being supported by evidence.
- The anticipation of a *counterargument*, which is addressed through a *rebuttal*.
- A concluding *judgment* that reviews the evidence and asserts the major points as having been substantiated.

The Toulmin model as adapted in secondary U.S. school education has often been truncated in such forms as the five-paragraph theme (Johnson et al., 2003). It has both historically (Nunnally, 1991) and more recently (Labaree, 2019) been dismissed as superficial and inadequate, while remaining a staple of school instruction. Its institution in the rubrics of high-stakes writing tests shapes classroom instruction that adopts and rewards its faulty conventions (Crusan & Ruecker, 2019).

This form focuses on the overarching thesis, claims, data, and concluding judgment. As Hillocks (2002) found when studying large-scale writing assessments that rely on a five-paragraph theme rubric, such a conception can lead to specious reasoning. Hillocks found instances of non-evidential examples even in the training materials for some state tests, which in turn awarded high scores in assessment because the essays contain the prescribed elements, regardless of how little sense they make in the absence of warranting. Further, in eschewing attention to the rebuttal of counter-perspectives, the form requires no engagement with disagreement and thus may allow points to be made in a vacuum, without contestation.

The five-paragraph theme's trait-oriented focus places it squarely within the formalist tradition. Formalism has been questioned for many decades in learning theories, with attention to thinking and composing processes favored instead (Braddock et al., 1963; Hillocks, 1986). Among the values of process-oriented approaches – and there are several conceptions – is the need for writers to have a motivation to write. Arguments have deeply emotional origins (Walton, 2010). Haidt (2012) argues that how people think reflects how they feel more than how they reason, and that their

arguments serve to justify their emotions after the fact (cf. Smagorinsky, 2018). The same rules of logic can produce conflicting positions that are based on different premises, draw on different evidence, and promote different outcomes. Even U.S. Supreme Court justices, presumably endowed with among the most judicious and perspicacious of critical minds, typically produce split decisions in which their logics are unpersuasive to one another.

What stands out is the open-endedness of good topics, and the availability of different conceptions in relation to the same prompt. A good topic for argumentation has no correct answer but may be undertaken by people with different ideologies and emotional responses. Each perspective benefits from engagement with counterarguments, if the disputants are willing to listen to one another.

A civic education, by promoting respectful listening, can help students produce arguments that enable them to make their points in the face of opposition. School appears to be uniquely positioned as a developmental setting for learning how to argue persuasively, especially with those with whom they disagree. In settings with fewer guardrails, such as the political arena, people often advance their points through lies, distortions, emotional inflammation, belittling opponents, issuing threats, and other illogical means – and win (Macagno, 2013, 2014). In school, a teacher may establish guidelines for civic discourse, helping students to discipline and regulate their responses so that each voice can be heard. School is one place where students may learn a form of argumentation that has a sound basis. It is also a rare place where a teacher may organize instruction to promote listening to and engaging with other points of view as students inquire into the meaning and conduct of civic life.

Listening: The Missing Dimension in Civic Discourse

In Argumentation Theory, the “central object of study is argumentation understood as exchange of reasons in the context of doubt or disagreement” (Lewinski & Mohammedi, 2016, p. 1). The degree to which this exchange requires a receptive ear to opposing views is less clear. People shouting at each other are exchanging viewpoints and their reasons in the context of doubt or disagreement; they needn’t listen to promote their viewpoints. 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 in order to push their thinking further. This process involves attending carefully to an established thesis, articulating an antithesis, and resolving the discrepancies through a synthesis. Much argumentation consists of a battle between opposing theses, with the goal of

winning at all costs (Roberts-Miller, 2004). I've referred to this approach as "arguing to win," as opposed to the more productive and respectful "arguing to learn" (Smagorinsky, 2002). Arguing to win negates the need to listen carefully to oppositional views, and largely serves to entrench people in defenses of their prior perspectives (MacKuen et al., 2010).

In school, the opportunity is there to promote listening and engagement that potentially help students modify and advance, rather than become cemented in, their entering assumptions and beliefs. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis formulation is potentially productive, requiring an understanding of the contradictory points in play. 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 often-limited sets of elements for teachers or assessors, they need to be put into dialogue with one another in civic discourse. Lee et al. (2021, p. 1) posit that:

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.

Civil discourse rules would need to be followed for students to listen respectfully and attentively to one another's points and evidence, and to address them. Their disagreements would undoubtedly be passionate, and that's a good thing, given the longstanding observation that classrooms are emotionally flat for students and teachers (Goodlad, 1984). Engaging in committed argumentation is one way to make classrooms more lively and interesting for students. Argumentation grounded in listening to opposing views is essential if civic discourse is to take place.

The reliance on the Toulmin model undoubtedly requires new learning for many students who are unfamiliar with the claim-data-warrant-rebuttal-judgment features involved (Johannessen et al., 2009). School provides the opportunity for students to learn new repertoires of civic engagement so that they may successfully debate topics they care about, at least according to rules of civic discourse. Developing facility with these genres requires learning procedures for how to present their views convincingly. The emphasis on procedures does not negate the need to learn appropriate formal properties of texts. The process-product dispute produced some binary views in which relying on one negated the other, as in Yagelski's (2009) view that only the process matters, and in assessments

in which only the presence of elements matters (Hillocks, 2002). Rather, form, function, and process ought to be interrelated (Smagorinsky, 1997).

These procedures include listening to opposition, which in turn suggests the needs for two often-overlooked elements of the Toulmin model to be emphasized. First is the warranting of claims. In many scoring rubrics, the goal is to support a generalization with examples. What is missing is the argumentative warrant: the statement often including a word like “because”, in which the example’s relevance to the claim is established, rendering it into evidence. In Hillocks’s (2002) study of high stakes writing assessments, this element was not included in rubrics, allowing student writers to get high scores for simply including a claim and an example, no matter how feeble their relation.

The second is the rebuttal, where the writer anticipates and addresses possible disagreements or criticisms of the perspective and use of evidence. For these skills to emerge in students’ writing, it’s important to structure activities that place students’ ideas in dialogue with one another’s so that they need to engage with disagreement and do so in intellectually responsible ways. This anticipation of counter arguments is important in crafting arguments and is especially important in civic reasoning and discourse in which ideas that come in conflict have some possibility of being advanced through engagement: of reaching a synthesis through the unity of opposites that provide the pivot points for addressing a social need.

Teaching Argumentation

Teachers can integrate argumentation across the curriculum in ways that promote civic discourse. Primarily, argumentation should begin with ideas that are of interest to the students, so that they find a purpose for authentically undertaking arguments, and listening to those of others (Hillocks, 2011). Most schools are involved in disagreements over school policies, social issues, and other aspects of institutional life. There are cliques and conflicts. Budgets could be invested this way or that. There is much in the immediate environment that students know a great deal about, that they could fruitfully disagree about, and that they are committed to arguing about. Soliciting students’ perspectives, and providing them with relevant materials to consider, would be a good place to start. From there they proceed through a set of activity settings that provide peer support under teacher guidance, a structure that places them largely in control of their own discussions.

Another element of the process could include opportunities for students to discuss their topic in small groups, away from the ears of their teacher and other classmates. An argument on a complex, newly entered, and

potentially threatening topic might benefit from exploration and rehearsal in a relatively intimate setting. A student might be more comfortable expressing a view to a small group of peers, especially when it is controversial, than they would be to a whole class of possibly judgmental listeners. They might benefit from initial responses to innocently phrased statements that help them see how they might be interpreted as offensive by others, helping to take on respectful stances in civic dialogue when engaging more broadly with classmates and teachers (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013).

This initial stage could also help students formulate their arguments and test-drive their examples as forms of evidence and takes the teacher out of an ideologically judgmental role of the sort selectively banned in several U.S. states (Russell-Brown, 2022). Students who help their classmates sharpen their points and defend them on a more persuasive basis can take on this role of refinement in ways that benefit both the recipient and the critic, who is developing critical faculties through the process, and coming to a better understanding of their own point of view. The idea of talking through an argument prior to actual writing can benefit students who are in the process of developing their ideas through speaking and listening.

A next stage might be for students to compose group arguments. Collaborative writing got some attention in the 1990s (e.g., Dale, 1994), but the individualization and competitive structure of schooling has always worked against coauthoring and collaborating in general (Slater & Griggs, 2015). And yet, adult writers often coauthor as a way to incorporate multiple perspectives in service of a major point; and theories of intertextuality assert that all ideas are derivative and in dialogue with prior (and future) discourse. For inexperienced writers of argumentation who are just learning the procedures, producing a coauthored argument would help with both content and form, procedures and products. Their essay would not necessarily be their final word on the topic. For that, they would need to put it in dialogue with the broader community of the classroom to engage with, respond to, and help to develop.

Groups could then study one another's arguments and provide feedback. If their initial effort represents a thesis, then an antithesis would become available through classmates' responses. This antithesis could then be used to help each group argue their points more sharply and convincingly. The point is not to reach class consensus, but to refine each perspective in light of others.

This initial instruction could then be adapted to the next phase of learning how to argue persuasively. If students demonstrate that they are ready, they could undertake arguments as sole agents of their ideas. If they need more practice, then another round on a new topic might be appropriate. This is where teachers' judgment comes into play, not in correcting

students' ideologies, but in determining how to sequence activities so that students learn how to persuade people of their ideas and do so in the least possible threatening way. It also requires a form of listening rarely modeled in the current political climate, where threat is often part of the ideological and rhetorical strategy (Kleinfeld, 2021).

Assessment could involve students' evaluations of one another's arguments. Do they persuade each other? Have they used evidence convincingly? Have they overlooked anything that might undermine their points? Is their expression clear and engaging? Do their points work together for a cumulative effect? Are there general conclusions about argumentation that the class can inductively identify? This approach would place students in an authoritative position in determining how well their arguments work.

Arguing about School Dress Codes

These procedures could be applied to a controversial issue that affects student life in school. Consider, for instance, the school dress code. In the U.S., every school has a dress code that restricts what students can wear, from nail polish to hair styles. There are many types of dress codes and uniform requirements, each a topic of considerable disagreement.

In many ways, a dress code embodies the cultural issues that infuse life in schools. In the U.S., dress codes often limit how girls can clothe themselves, typically to prevent the boys and men from getting distracted by their bodies, according to the advocates for such rules (Downey, 2022). Clothing conventions arising from Black culture are often banned, along with hair styles that make white people uncomfortable (Perry, 2020). The continuing crisis of school shootings has resulted in such rules as “no body armor” and clear backpacks (Tanno, 2022). In a time of rising homophobia, unisex attire may be considered inappropriate so that boys are boys, and girls are girls, to the satisfaction of heteronormative stakeholders (Pendharker, 2022). The dress code is not simply about dress. It's about whose norms govern life in school.

Disagreement about norms can provide a fruitful area to teach argumentation. Dress codes affect all students, along with the adults in the building. Everyone has a stake in what is possible to wear in school, and the proliferation of perspectives virtually guarantees that beliefs will come in conflict with one another. What follows is a way of analyzing dress codes to teach students procedures for undertaking arguments that include Toulmin's elements and that need to be in dialogue with opposing views, broadly following the instructional approach advocated by Hillocks (1995) involving a “structured process” (Applebee, 1986; Smagorinsky et al., 2010)

approach that engages students in the study of manipulatable materials to construct arguments in relation to ill-structured problems.

Students might use the following set of opinions, each with its own argumentative perspective, to help generate their own argument in favor of a position on dress codes. Using the procedures above, they could be presented with the following material. After reading and discussing each source and unpacking their means of providing a rationale for their opinions, students could evaluate the quality of the arguments and use their critique to generate a school dress code, accompanied by a Toulmin-style argument defending their point of view. These perspectives would need to engage with one another so that students hear opposing views and use them to clarify their points and perhaps adjust their thinking in light of persuasive opposition.

Students might be presented with the following task:

Topic: Dress Codes in School

Should there be a dress code in school? Why or why not? If so, what should it prohibit? The following perspectives provide opposing points of view on dress codes. Each is taken from real statements included in U.S. school dress codes or critiques of those codes. While considering them, think about your own school's dress code and what you agree and disagree with in it. What ideology is behind each point of view? What are the claims? What are the illustrations, and are they justified by warrants? Is opposition anticipated, and if so, is it persuasively rebutted?

Your ultimate task is to develop a dress code that you would like to see in your school, and to present an argument for why it includes the allowances and prohibitions that you specify in your code. What follows is one type of disagreement about dress codes. After a statement of opinion, contrary views about it follow. Your task is to take both arguments into account as you discuss the issue. Feel free to explore related issues surrounding dress codes, drawing on your knowledge of your own school and community, the rules governing other schools, dress codes in the workplace and in public, and any other factor that might inform your development of a school dress code.

Opinion: Dress codes should be abandoned because every restriction is discriminatory to some members of the school community.

Perspective #1: Agreement, there shouldn't be school dress codes at all.

Dress is distracting only to the distracted. Schools should have no right to tell students how they should dress. School dress codes should be abolished so that students have the freedom to wear whatever they want to

school. One of the main objections is that clothes, especially those worn by girls, are distracting. But cell phones are distracting, yet they are allowed, and cause many disruptions. Talking in class is distracting but doesn't get kids sent home. Mostly, it's girls' exposed flesh that gets disciplined.

Teach boys, don't discipline girls. Instead of banning "sexualized" clothing, schools should develop programs to teach boys that girls should be respected and not objectified. Male teachers and administrators who gawk at girls should also be required to attend sensitivity training, because they often are as bad as the boys in class. In not creating programs to educate boys about girls, especially their bodies, schools contribute to "rape culture": environments in which sexual assault and abuse are normalized, and girls serve the needs of boys and men both sexually and in other areas of life. If developing self-control is important in adolescent maturation, then school should be more proactive in creating a culture in which boys and men don't view girls as their property, and learn how to both control their own urges and respect the autonomy of others.

Kids have good judgment. The assumption behind dress codes is that kids don't have the good sense to know what is appropriate to wear. What is "appropriate" is a matter of interpretation, but appropriateness when codified is inevitably discriminatory, and disrespects students' ability to make sound decisions. These decisions may include how to express themselves through apparel selections, hair styles, and the messages printed on shirts, backpacks, and other aspects of attire.

Free expression. In a free society, students should have the choice to dress in ways that express their personalities, cultures, affiliations, and any other aspect of themselves. There should be no prohibitions aside from those that break civil laws, such as bans on public nudity. Even those are often discriminatory, allowing men but not women to appear in public shirtless. Schools are sites of socialization, and students are learning how to be biased against women and girls through the dress codes imposed by schools.

Perspective #2: Disagreement, school dress codes promote good habits.

School has its own rules. Regardless of the changes in styles from year to year, the need for modesty, neatness and a well-groomed appearance never change. Students (and adults) align themselves with certain dress styles and grooming fads that may be acceptable in communities outside school but are disruptive in school. We must set standards that are clear to the students and can be enforced by the administration. Parents need to agree with school policies and encourage positive attitudes toward them.

Modesty matters most. Modesty is a requirement for school attire. Modesty refers to dress and deportment that avoids the encouraging of sexual attraction in others. It involves the avoidance of impropriety or

indecenty. Schools should prohibit slutty attire that debases the female and excites the male to the point of distraction.

Boys need help coping. Boys are falling behind girls in academic achievement. Providing additional distractions by exposed female flesh or tight, provocative clothing only depresses further their chances of focusing on academics and becoming high achievers.

Girls can dress as they want outside school. After school, on weekends, on vacations, and after graduation, girls can wear the tightest, sexiest, skimpiest clothes they want, as long as their parents approve. In school, they should learn that school and work environments are not social places, and so require rules and regulations that restrict some of their freedoms. Since fashions change continually, debating them is a waste of time, since the trend will be gone before the issue is resolved. Rules should be established that stand the test of time and are impervious to changing tastes that students can follow on their own free time, but not in school.

Reducing criminality. Criminal elements should not be promoted on clothing worn to school. Any group associated with violence or criminal activity should not be allowed. The promotion of violence is also evident in camouflage clothing that promotes a militaristic, and thus violent attitude. Clothing that is torn or ripped, even according to a fashion fad, degrades the school environment and should not be allowed; it suggests shabbiness and a lack of respect for others. Students should be required to tuck in their shirts to provide a clean, crisp sense of grooming.

Future success. Success in the professional world should be cultivated throughout schooling and should be encouraged through the dress code. Extreme hair styles (e.g., mohawks, faux-hawks, words/ designs shaved into head, partial head-shaving of the head) and artificially colored hair should not be permitted. Hair should be well-groomed, clean and neat, and should not cover the face or eyes. Boys should wear their hair neatly groomed and of appropriate length without needing to be tied back in a ponytail, man-bun, dreadlocks, or other such fashion. Student attire may not include feathers, temporary or permanent tattoos, black/dark nail polish, or body piercings (other than modest ear piercings for girls). Boys must be clean-shaven. By adopting these habits in school, students will make a seamless transition to the workforce or college and be dressed for success.

Students would read these various perspectives and dress codes and discuss them. The task is inductive and open-ended; there is no “correct” dress code, and every dress code will invite disagreement. The students’ job is to generate a dress code based on their evaluation of the positions and rules included in the materials they read, and to write an argument explaining and defending it. The examples they generate may come from their own knowledge and experiences as students. They are also welcome to solicit opinions from elsewhere from their own school dress code, various adults

and students in the building, sources they consult through outside reading, parents and other stakeholders, and any other source that informs and enriches their understanding and perspective.

Small groups would be good forums for conducting these discussions, allowing students to explore the ideas and get feedback on their initial thoughts. The goal is not consensus, but advancement of understanding through their engagement with the thesis and antithesis available in each point, and progress toward a synthesis that is available from the unity of opposites.

They also need to listen to one another's points of view, rather than being ideologically rigid and impervious. They needn't accept each other's points but need to hear and evaluate them thoughtfully. When others speak, they need to listen; and when others disagree with them, they need to be respectful whether they agree or not with a critic.

The first stage of the process, then, concerns the students' reading and consideration of the viewpoints expressed in the materials provided to them; and their discussion of dress codes with peers. They might then engage in a broader class discussion in which the ideas they have begun to formulate come in contact with a wider range of opinions than the small group of possibly like-minded students might have generated. The teacher's role is to make sure that the discussions are conducted with civic engagement in mind; that is, that disagreements are respectful and allow each speaker to present a view without interruption or attack. Disagreements need to demonstrate that speakers addressing the point under dispute are heard and respected, and not simply dismissed.

A next stage could be for students to return to their small groups to draft a possible dress code for their school. How this stage goes could be flexible. One possibility is for the students to produce a group effort that involves compromises, which would reflect how committees developing rules typically operate. Another would be for each student to develop their own dress code that provides a more individual, personal statement on the challenge.

To persuade others of the merits of their system, students would need to construct an argument defending their position. It might be a collaborative effort, as committees do; or it might be done individually. Students should be reminded that their arguments should include the following elements. In what follows, a hypothetical argument is presented, one that students are not obligated to agree with.

- A major thesis or point that takes into account the claims made on behalf of their position (e.g., A dress code is necessary as a way to minimize the chance of violence in school).

- A set of claims that work in service of this overriding thesis (e.g., Dress codes may specify that clothes and other accoutrements such as backpacks must not enable a student to conceal a weapon that endangers others)
- For each claim, at least one example and ideally one contrasting example (e.g., For example, baggy pants may easily conceal guns, knives, explosives and so should be banned. This rule is accompanied by rules that prohibit the wearing of excessively tight clothing that accentuate body shapes and invite distraction. The definition of “baggy” and “excessively tight” is a judgment that school officials must make clearly so that the rules are enforced fairly, and so that cultural styles are not discriminated against.)
- A warrant that explains how the example serves as evidence for the claim (e.g., The elimination of baggy clothes will improve school safety, which is more important than honoring students’ cultural styles that favor loose clothing. Students need to understand that what matters most is their safety, not their fashion choices or their community’s values. A safe school promotes academics, which is what school is for.)
- Following the orchestration of a set of claims, examples, and warrants into a related set of points, a rebuttal of possible disagreements (e.g., Those who argue that banning baggy clothes is discriminatory need to look at the big picture and accept the reality that there is school violence, that baggy clothes help students conceal weapons, and that the best way to support the academic mission is to ban them in the school dress code.)

The position illustrated here is controversial and is not designed to influence students’ thinking. Indeed, they should be invited to agree or disagree with its premises and details. The point is to illustrate how to argue a position, not to specify which position they argue for. Students may well take to heart the dictator’s rule in the movie *Bananas* (Allen, 1971) requiring everyone to change their underwear every half-hour, and to wear it on the outside of clothing so it can be easily monitored. What would matter is the degree to which the students could defend such a rule, and how they would address the counter-positions taken by classmates whom it might affect.

Discussion

This approach to argumentation is consistent with the approach developed by Hillocks (1986), one that he found highly effective in teaching writing according to task demands. It centers discussion on a topic that affects

everyone in the school, and so includes a strong possibility of interest and commitment. It involves students' engagement with materials, similar to the ways in which "manipulatives" are used in mathematics, to think about and discuss a problem. Talking about the materials as a way to generate procedures is central to this approach; talking precedes writing in this conception.

The teacher's role is to provide the materials and set up the activity, not to talk and model beyond what is minimally necessary; and then to serve as orchestrator of discussions, with additional responsibilities for ensuring that students engage with one another's ideas by listening and considering their merits. The task is open-ended such that each student may take a different tack on the topic. The process includes these generative stages, then either collaborative or individual writing, and then feedback on their writing that may produce new drafts.¹ The real audience for the students' work is their classmates, followed possibly by their initiation of a broader school discussion regarding its official dress code. This phase involves social action on a matter of concern to everyone in the school, and so can potentially produce changes in the school environment.

Argumentation is a central feature of civic life. The models provided by adults often serve students poorly, instead teaching them how to be insular, dismissive, divisive, self-righteous, and parochial in their thinking. For a society to advance, the sort of synthesis available from the conflict of ideas is necessary; and for the conflict to be productive, it needs to involve listening to opponents and building perspectives through the refinement available from a useful critique. Ultimately, then, activities like this one can promote the development of an academic skill, the generation of strategies for civic engagement, and the production of useful ideas and codes that benefit the broader community.

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Notes

1. My original draft of this manuscript preceded the issue of CHAT GPT and other AI writing bots; in short order, its release confounded teachers who emphasize such writing process steps. The jury remains out, as I complete a final draft for publication, regarding how this technology will affect writing instruction in schools and universities. My assumption that a vital topic will move students to express their own views, and not to copy and paste the crowd-sourced views and information that enable AI to generate composite texts, is a thesis that is about to be tested in writing classrooms.

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