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"Arguing to Learn": 4 Activities to Build Complex Arguments

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Argumentation is important for improving writing competency and in developing critical thinking skills, deepening concept understanding, and promoting conceptual change (Jonassen & Kim, 2010). "Arguing to learn" is a dialectic approach to argumentation in which students explore, collaborate, discuss, and write, developing an understanding of the complexities and nuances of the issues (Jonassen & Kim, 2010; Kuhn et al., 2016). This approach, which can be taught separately or in conjunction with the more traditional "learning to argue" approach, has been shown to encourage the production of richer, more complex arguments and deeper understanding of content (Chinn & Clark, 2013) as well as the ability to apply argument skills to new contexts (Reznitskaya et al., 2001).

"Arguing to Learn" Framework

A "learning to argue" approach and its primary written output, the traditional argumentative essay, focus on defending a position and winning, while the "arguing to learn" approach emphasizes taking the strongest pieces of evidence from various perspectives and creating a solution. The "arguing to learn" framework that we use in our high-intermediate and advanced level classrooms has students do the following:

- **Explore** perspectives about an issue by identifying what researchers are saying about the topic, its main arguments, and how these arguments are supported.
- **Collaborate** with each other by listening to differing perspectives.
- **Discuss** the perspectives, seeking to understand clearly the various arguments related to the issue.
- **Analyze** evidence by examining the various positions and evaluating the strength of each claim.
- **Synthesize** the arguments presented.
- **Build** consensus and **generate** solutions.
  (adapted from Ellozy, 2016)

This framework acts as a guide, helping us to select possible activities to do in class that will build students' skills. However, what we choose to focus on is ultimately determined by student need.

Introducing "Arguing to Learn" to Students

As with any approach or framework being introduced to students, it is usually a good idea to explain to students what it is and, most important, why we are using it. We have found that the following ideas are helpful to convey to students about "arguing to learn"—whether elicited from students in some way or through direct explanation.

- The term *argumentation* does not mean we are fighting with one another, convincing someone of our opinion, or trying to win an argument.

- Argumentation is about asking meaningful questions, exploring lines of reasoning, sharing and discussing ideas, gathering and analyzing evidence, and generating new knowledge and understanding. Ultimately, we seek to understand complex issues more deeply, which, in turn, can equip us to solve problems more effectively.

- It is more helpful to think of argumentation as "collective knowledge building" (Chinn & Clark, 2013) that contributes to an ongoing conversation. We need to recognize the complexity of issues—that issues are nuanced and multifaceted rather than binary "either-or" choices. When we think of issues and argumentation in this way, we are able to learn much more and develop a range of skills that will help us later on in our studies, careers, and life. These skills include teamwork, researching issues, analyzing evidence, actively listening, making connections, synthesizing information, building consensus, and solving problems.

Activities

After introducing the "arguing to learn" approach to our students, we move to activities. We have selected the following four activities, each of which targets some of the elements of the framework, and which we have found to be particularly successful with our students. Also included at the end of the article are materials for the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC; Jacobs, 2010), a cooperative learning technique which we have used in our classroom and which helps students to investigate more thoroughly the multiple perspectives of controversial issues and to develop the skills in the "arguing to learn" framework more extensively.

Activity 1: Language for Nuanced Claims

In this activity, students collaborate to explore how hedging language enhances arguments and provides space for dialogue. Have students first look at a prompt with claims written with and without hedging language to identify the difference between them.

For example, with the prompt, *Can intercultural marriage succeed?*, ask students to look at the two claims and spot the differences in terms of language:

- Intercultural marriage never works out because the couple will always fight over differences.
- Intercultural marriage can be successful if the couple develops their communication skills and is willing to make compromises.

Students should notice the difference between the absolute language (*never, always*) and hedging language (*can*) and how it affects the argument. More examples can be offered.

The next stage is to provide students with several more examples of claims that use absolute language. Have students discuss the claim and how far they agree or disagree with it and then work in pairs to rewrite the claims using hedging language. Have the pairs then compare the original and rewritten claims in terms of effect on the reader. End with a whole class discussion of what effect absolute and hedging language has on claims being made, leading to an understanding that hedging language promotes dialogue and further inquiry. As an extension to the activity, students could look for their own examples of absolute and hedging language and explain to others the effect.

Activity 2: Argument Analysis

In this activity, students identify and analyze the claims and evidence of arguments. They also examine the language being used.

In groups, have students select an opinion piece (e.g., article, podcast, video clip) on a topic of interest to them and identify the claims being made and evidence provided for those claims. They may choose to highlight these in two separate colors or list them in two columns. Then, have them discuss the following:

- What is the author trying to say about the issue? What is their position on the issue?
- What kind of claims are being made?
- What kind of language is being used to make the claims?
- How strong is the evidence being provided? (Consider the sources it is based on and the

credibility of the evidence.)
- What kind of language is being used to support the claims?
- What questions, concerns, doubts, and considerations do you still have about this issue?

End with a whole class discussion to share insights about what students have learned. As an extension to this activity, students can discuss the same set of questions when engaged in peer review discussions of one another's essays.

Activities 3 and 4: Developing an Informed, Nuanced Position

The following two activities build on one another to help students learn to develop an informed, nuanced position, as well as build consensus and generate solutions.

Activity 3: Role-Play Activity

Divide students into groups and have each group select a character from a film that presents various perspectives. In our class, we have used *The Hate U Give* (Tillman, 2018). Each group discusses their character in depth in terms of their experience and viewpoints on racism. They then work to prepare a monologue for their character that presents this viewpoint. One person in each group presents the monologue to the class. The audience should take careful notes to prepare for the next stage.

In the next stage, after all monologues have been presented, students get into new groups in which each character is represented. Acting as a committee tasked with improving relations between police and the community, and using their notes to help them, they try to build consensus on a possible approach to improving these relations. Instruct the students that they will need to look carefully at the experiences and concerns of each character and try to articulate the various aspects of the problem as clearly as possible from multiple perspectives, and then brainstorm possible solutions. Once they have come up with an approach they think will work, described in several detailed sentences, they should present it to the class, after which the audience can raise questions and concerns to evaluate and revise the suggested approach.

Activity 4: Writing a Nuanced Position

After the role-play activity, this next activity further aids students in the development of a nuanced position they can use in their own essays. In groups, have students select a complex issue that they are interested in. In their groups, they first discuss why the issue is complex and brainstorm together some possible positions on the issue. After that, students find at least two academic sources relevant to the issue and take notes on the various positions presented, identifying claims and evidence. Then, together, they develop an essay prompt that requires

position taking. Have the students share the prompt on a Google Doc or on the board. Based on the two sources, students list possible main points to support and possible limitations/points against.

Each group then leads a discussion with the class about this issue to see if a consensus can be reached. As a class, a nuanced position that takes into account all of the multiple perspectives will hopefully be created. As an extension to this activity, students can follow the same approach as they prepare to write their own essays.

Final Thoughts

When considering implementing the "arguing to learn" framework in the classroom, it is important to keep in mind that students will probably struggle and need more time to understand and complete the activities than they may need for more standard argumentative essays. We are, after all, asking students to shift from the traditional approach to argumentation to one in which they examine multiple perspectives, reach consensus, and generate solutions that are more inclusive. In other words, students are arguing in order to learn.

Explore more activities here:

- Appendix A. "Arguing to Learn"_ Exploring Beyond the Traditional Argumentative Essay (PowerPoint)
- Appendix B. Language for Discussion Moves (.docx)
- Appendix C. SAC Worksheet Part 1 – Preparation against Prompt (.docx)
- Appendix D. SAC Workshop Part 1 – Preparation for Prompt (.docx)
- Appendix E. SAC Worksheet Parts 2-3 – Listening to and Expansion of Opposition (.docx)
- Appendix F. SAC Worksheet Parts 4-5 – Discussion, Synthesis, and Consensus (.docx)

Additional Resources

- Structured Academic Controversy: video clips (Teach the Earth)
- Structured Academic Controversy (Pedagogic Service Project, National Science Digital Library)
- Structured Academic Controversy: What Should We Do?
- Structured Academic Controversy (Teaching With Primary Sources)

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