From Cow Paths to Conversation

Rethinking the Argumentative Essay

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A glance at high school and college composition today will tell you "everything's an argument," in the symbolic sense evoked by Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz's (2012) composition textbook, as well as in the literal sense of student writing assignments. For secondary students, the Common Core Standards' "writing applications" tend to foreground argument, and standardized assessments like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) have students read and write argumentative essays.[1] Students pursuing US college education write argumentative essays to demonstrate secondary learning, English fluency, and writing proficiency (Wilcox and Jeffery 2013; Burstein, Elliot, and Molloy 2016), to determine placement in college composition courses (Gere et al. 2013; Aull 2015), and to show writing development in those courses (Crossley, Roscoe, and McNamara 2014; Aull 2017). For over a century, educators have assigned argumentative essays to bridge secondary and college-level writing, teaching students to write reasoned essays on a topic of relevance intended to persuade general audiences (Berlin 1985; Jolliffe 1989; Kitzhaber 1963). And in recent years, educators have pointed to the value of pedagogy-based disagreement to help students understand "what is at stake in the cultural controversies raging around them" (Filreis 1995: 162) and to motivate students to learn more and articulate their beliefs more persuasively (Kuhn and Udell 2003).

Unfortunately, such argument-based assignments often encourage taking sides in what Mikhail Bakhtin (1986: 150) described as the "complete vic-

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tory and destruction of the opponent"—a bivalent "they say/I say" approach that solicits metaphors of war rather than conversation (Lakoff and Johnson 2003) and normalizes the mission of converting others to one's point of view (see, e.g., Graff and Birkenstein 2014). Contemporary discussions about how to manage politically charged issues in the classroom largely fail to account for these agonistic implications of argument and often overlook additional ways to address multiple viewpoints or build consensus.

This article strives to render transparent the ideology and habits of mind cultivated by argument-based writing assignments and to consider how they may contribute to our current climate of polarization. We begin by providing a brief overview of the origins and critiques of argumentative writing in school. We then turn to experiences from two universities in which faculty, confronting the pedagogical limitations of argument-based essay assignments, introduced explanatory writing into their curricula. These explanatory assignments, based principally on the scholarly genre of the literature review, build on the tasks of exposition (describing, declaring, summarizing) and involve analysis, synthesis, and interpretation to account for multiple viewpoints. While argumentative writing, conventionally defined, sets out to prove a thesis and thus convert another to one's own views, explanatory writing seeks to comprehend and render something intelligible to oneself and one's readers. Argument and explanation thus differ as communicative acts: argument ultimately seeks to change or intensify the reader's beliefs, while explanation ultimately seeks to advance the understanding of the author and reader.

The two university cases we offer differ in scale, the first a collaborative project developed over a decade and a half, the second a recent, single assignment. We provide these two cases as context and as nuts-and-bolts models of potential use that serve pedagogical as well as civic ends. Ultimately, our research and combined experiences suggest that the argument-based essay may be what Kenneth Burke (1984: 228) called a "cow path," a routine that has been retained "not because it has been criticized, evaluated and judged to be the best possible process" but because it has not been sufficiently questioned. We conclude by considering an alternative way forward, one in which students, as young scholars and citizens, benefit from a deeper engagement with explanatory ways of knowing, writing, and relating to each other.

Argument-Based Essay Definition and Examples

We use the term *argument-based essays* to refer to the overtly persuasive essays that students commonly write as they transition from secondary to US college-level writing, such as for late secondary and early college writ-

ing assessments noted above (Aull 2015; DeStigter 2015; Burstein, Elliot, and Molloy 2016). While the argument-based essay need not be so singular and combative, it is regularly taught as a rule-governed process (e.g., thesis, reasons, evidence, counterarguments) (Walton 1990). It typically privileges proof of a single writer's argument (Knoblauch 2011; Heath 1993) and often asks students to aim to change others' views or actions on a topic of public concern (Aull 2017). Despite exceptions and alternative intentions, such normative uses of argumentative essays in school are influential and bear scrutiny as "constructed response tasks," shaping the writing produced in response to given parameters and expectations (Bennett 1991).

Origins and Critiques of the Argument-Based Essay Assignment

Expansions in US higher education and middle-class literacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to widespread use of the argument-based essay as an assessment tool. More students graduating high school and enrolling in college resulted in diversely prepared students and insufficient teachers equipped to teach writing. Composition assignments changed around this time, eschewing previous "impersonal" assignments requiring students to draw on the views of writers or philosophers (Connors 1987: 167) in favor of the new "theme" essay demanding "the sincere and thoughtful expression of [students'] observation and opinion." Prompts included "My Reasons for Disliking History" or "The Chief Differences between High School and College" (Young and Young 1914, qtd. in Brereton 1995: 483), or "May We Rightly Indulge in Luxuries While Our Fellow Men Are in Want?" (Jolliffe 1989: 168). In the ensuing century, such topics as personal experiences, as well as individual responses to aphorisms and literary passages (Connors 1987: 176–79), appeared in both college composition and secondary assessments (Elliot 2005). David Jolliffe (1989: 170) observed that during this period students were often invited to emulate famous English and American essays that outlined their observations and argued for how such observations reflected the "entire society." Robert J. Connors (1999: 179) suggests that most composition tasks in the twentieth century prioritized essayist literacy that foregrounded the writer's own stance, with educators showing "a kind of resignation about how students ask[ing] to write on political or social or educational problems" inevitably wrote in generalized and vague ways.

Composition reading materials also changed: the nineteenth-century reading of "prose classics" shifted in the twentieth century to general, often argumentative essays from current magazines, a shift Warner Taylor (1929: 8) noted (and lamented) in his national survey. Since the middle of the twentieth

century, essay reading material, often initially published in mass readership sources, has served as "the core of a liberal education" for millions of US college students (Bloom 1999: 402), including some essays that reflect the influence of the first wave of feminism/multiculturalism in writing studies.

This first wave initially challenged argument as variously patriarchal, imperialist, and sadistic, and called for experimentation (Rich 1972; Gearhart 1979; Foss and Griffin 1995; Lorde 2003). However, by the late 1980s feminist critiques of argument had mostly been dismissed as bourgeois and quietist. The influential African American lesbian feminist scholar bell hooks (1989), for example, insisted that women students of color be encouraged to "talk back" and that alternative genres might prevent their voices from being heard within patriarchal culture. Others pointed to Hannah Arendt's insistence that agonism was the only means to safeguard against dangerous forms of consensus (Roberts-Miller 2002).

In the ensuing years, focus on social justice in many first-year writing programs followed hooks's lead in teaching argument as an urgent political and pedagogical task, preparing students to identify and question sites of ideology and to account for their own and others' identities and interests. Concurrently, a growing interest emerged in how to refine argument conceptually and pedagogically so that it was positioned less as a means of demonstrating logical validity and more as a socially situated rhetorical tool, with scholars in writing studies turning to rhetorics of argument produced by, among others, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), Stephen Toulmin (2003), and George A. Kennedy (2003).

More recently, a pedagogical rather than political critique emerged that views the argument-based essay as a "school genre," an impoverished teaching tool lacking in relevance and transferability (Russell 1995; Johns 2002; Wardle 2009). Historicist critiques point to insufficient evidence that the argumentative essay is in fact accessible, critical, and democratic (Haefner 2003; DeStigter 2015). Todd DeStigter (2015: 24), for example, argued that overemphasis on argument "imposes severe limits" on what counts as valid thought and legitimate political engagement. Similar concerns compelled the curricular changes we discuss in the following case studies.

Local Context Example 1: From Argument to Explanation in Penn's Writing Curriculum

The first task of the University of Pennsylvania's Critical Writing Program, founded in 2003, was to create a coherent program out of its many first-year and discipline-based writing programs and resources. Challenges abounded,

including faculty disagreement about what constituted good writing and how it should be taught and assessed. None, however, questioned whether students needed to learn how to write better argument-based essays. After a year-long debate, Penn adapted Kenneth Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing* (1985) to pilot a shared curriculum. His scaffolded argument strategies, combined with peer review and collaborative activities, seemed an excellent fit. Students learned the basic strategies and structures of argumentation: proposition, reasons, evidence, counterargument, refutation. Collaborative exercises helped them practice Bruffee's "conversation of humankind," promoting argument as a socially situated act of persuasion. The shared curriculum led to a shared vocabulary of terms and concepts still in use by instructors and students, though considerably expanded.

The shared curriculum blossomed into a grand experiment, with about 200 individual labs (writing seminars), 45 faculty, and 2,600 students producing shared data that was analyzed annually. An early finding was that our first-year students had considerable experience with argument in high school and felt they didn't need more. But we could see that there was room for improvement, and so on the cow path we stayed, teaching argument. As semesters unfolded, however, we began to notice how ill-suited the argumentative essay was in preparing students for assignments in other disciplines—including our own. While scholars certainly do use logical reasoning to test and validate knowledge, we rarely foreground this aspect of our work. Of course we disagree, but we are also notorious hedgers keenly aware of the limits of our knowledge, focused far more on knowledge-building than on conversion, and reluctant to take positions without being fully informed. We were thus giving students intensive practice in a way of thinking and writing that scarcely applied to our own disciplines or other professions. And what message were we sending students by asking them to argue when they knew so little about the topic?

Thus commenced a flurry of research projects and self-studies to better identify what students knew and needed to learn, including an ongoing mixed-method three-tiered longitudinal study of knowledge transfer, a National Science Foundation grant focusing on peer review in STEM fields, and a portfolio assessment program of research, using all-faculty monthly meetings and reviews, surveys, evaluation forms, research projects, and analysis of artifacts as findings (Ross and LeGrand 2017). Between 2012 and 2014 our peer tutors interviewed fifty-five faculty representing different disciplines in the College of Arts and Sciences, the Wharton School, Penn Engineering, and the School of Nursing. They encountered only three professors who saw

Table 1. Explanatory Writing in the Disciplines: Strategies and Types. Identified in a University of Pennsylvania faculty development session in 2012

Define terms	Compare or contrast data, concepts, processes, models, ideas	Present a problem
Analyze relationships	Illustrate claims or observations	Aggregate and analyze data to answer a question
Describe a methodology	Summarize and discuss scholars' work or evidence	Synthesize findings
Provide anecdotes, ethnographies, case studies	Describe evidence or examples	Move from description to interpretation, generalization, and classification

their disciplines as primarily engaged in "justificatory reasoning" (argument). The rest said that they worked within an explanatory framework; a few saw their approach as a mixture of the two. The professional disciplines (business, law, architecture, medicine, engineering) noted that their academic work was explanatory, whereas their work with clients or patients aimed to be persuasive but rarely argumentative in any formal sense. In fact, in a later faculty development session (held in 2012), participants put together a list of the explanatory strategies and writing they used in their disciplines (Table 1). Such findings called into question our argument-based pedagogy, and combined potently with mounting evidence that our incoming first-year students already had considerable practice in argumentative and narrative writing but scant exposure, as readers or writers, to explanatory writing.

In 2009 we added an explanatory assignment to the curriculum, a scaffolded source-based synthesis that built on the justificatory sequence: "Synthesize one of the assigned readings for the course with two or more of the sources it cites. Look for similarities and differences." We collaboratively developed materials and strategies for teaching explanatory writing. By now, even those affiliated with what we had come to consider the "argumentative disciplines" (philosophy, political science, English, legal studies) balked at the notion of teaching only argument. Damon Linker, at the time a senior writing fellow in political science, developed a handout for new instructors and students that encapsulates this:

> Most published work in political science employs explanatory reasoning as its general framework. Within that framework, the political scientist may employ justificatory reason selectively in order to falsify prevailing theories or hypotheses.

But the primary work of reasoning is explanatory, treating the hypothesis/proposition as the correct conclusion and seeking to narrate the evidence that confirms it. The exception to this generalization is normative political theory or philosophy, the one subfield of political science that tends regularly to employ justificatory reasoning. This is in part because this subfield relies on evidence (such as the interpretation of philosophical texts) that is less conclusive than empirical evidence, but also because this subfield seeks to establish the truth of normative (moral) statements (propositions) that are inherently contentious. And as you learn in the writing seminars, where claims are disputable, justificatory reason tends to reign.

As teachers, we have found this turn to explanation rewarding. We remark on the powerful rhetorical differences between a writer seeking to explain versus one seeking to convert, and the extraordinary differences in the intellectual work, mind frame, and relationship to one's audience involved. Hayden White (1988: 253) captures well the tentativeness and provisionality of explanation when he observes that "interpretation is a product of thought in the preliminary stage of grasping an object by consciousness, thought in the effort of deciding, not only how to describe and explain such an object, but whether it can be adequately described or explained at all." In our emphasis on argument, we were neglecting how such ways of knowing and interacting—being open, inquisitive, uncertain, humble, grateful for those who contribute to our understanding—are crucial habits of mind for academics, professionals, and citizens alike.

Our biggest surprise in making this change was how unprepared our students were to engage in explanatory writing. Expecting explanation to be simple and "uncreative," students find it astonishingly difficult to avoid opining, almost as if they are cognitively muscle-bound. We thus now spend the majority of the curriculum on explanatory writing, devoting only the final fourth of the course to argument.

In 2016, we converted from a "mutt genre" complex synthesis explanatory essay to a literature review (see Table 2) as we successfully—in students' views, as well as our own—converted to authentic genres and activity systems that promote greater transferability, deeper subject knowledge, and disciplinary understanding. Our final assignment is a brief public justificatory piece, a multimodal digital editorial that students base on the considerable knowledge they glean from their literature reviews. We are delighted to report that students now protest that they do not know enough to take a position. They are humble, provisional, and collaborative, exhibiting a healthy uncertainty.

Table 2. Penn Critical Writing Program Literature Review Sequence, 2017

Collaborative Workshop: Genre Analysis. Compare three professional literature reviews (history, communications, biology)
PowerPoint Presentation of article you wish to use as part of your review of literature (4–6 slides outlining article, field, biographical notes, discussion questions)
Library Hands-on Workshop: identify topic and seven potential sources for literature review (led by librarian subject specialist)
Outline Article Two
Abstract Article Three
Pre-outline Draft One Literature Review
Draft One Literature Review: Minimum three sources, 800–1,000 words
Peer Review one-on-one of Draft One
Draft Two: Revision, summarizing/outlining, integrating of additional sources (recommended final five to seven sources)
Multiple Peer Review, Draft Two
Draft Three, Midterm Portfolio Assessment, instructor and outside reader response
Final Draft (recommended 5+ sources) 1,600–1,800 words plus works cited, post-outline for final portfolio
Rubric for Assessing Literature Review (Abridged)
Propositional Content (reasoning, subject knowledge)
Invention (significance, novelty)
Genre (aware of genre features and function)
Rhetoric (attuned to audience)
Presentation (properly formatted, proofread)
Aesthetics (reader's engagement with text)

Along the way they have learned something about the difference between conversing and converting—that even as editorialists, they are wiser to generate understanding than to vanquish those with different perspectives. They enjoy the assignment immensely. Some have even published their editorials (see, e.g., Geyer 2016; Weich 2018; Feliz 2017; and Hosking 2016).

Local Context Example 2: From Argument to Explanation in a WFU Assignment

Like many universities, Wake Forest University (WFU) uses a directed self-placement (DSP) process for incoming students' enrollment into composition courses. Since 2012, this process has included an evidence-based essay and reflective questionnaire (Aull 2015; Toth and Aull 2014). The reflective

questionnaires inquire about the students' final two years of high school, and responses from the past four years show two trends: most students mainly practice argumentative writing, and students rarely practice explanatory writing. Specifically, at least 76 percent of recent incoming students wrote argumentative responses five or more times as juniors or seniors (1 percent or less had never written these). By contrast, only 22–25 percent of students wrote "essays or reports that required me to summarize other texts or views without making an argument" in the same years. Prior to college, in other words, these students practiced crafting and supporting their own individual view far more than they practiced summary or synthesis of information or other views; they appear to practice defending their own view much more than they practice giving equal discursive space to multiple perspectives.

These responses were confirmed anecdotally in instructors' experience of both first-year and upper-level students' understanding of what they were being asked to do in academic assignments: instructors repeatedly complained that students wrote generalized, vapid, yet emphatic arguments. Seeing how clearly and understandably this could stem from students' past writing assessments, Aull introduced two adaptations in collaboration with faculty. One was to change the DSP to a more obviously explanatory task, in which students read, analyze, and explain.[2] The other was to design, use, and share assignments on "source-based synthesis," or literature reviews. These assignments, an example of which appears below, helped to shift students' associations with academic writing away from argument and toward explanatory goals of analysis and connection across sources they read. Even the term *source-based synthesis*—which foregrounds other sources/views as the point of departure and the students' synthesis as the end goal—led to newly productive conversations between students and faculty. As the rubric expectations show (Table 3), the assignment rewards creative synthesis skills and prioritizes students' ability to review multiple sources in a focused, detailed way. Students' difficulty grasping this task—rather than reading sources solely vis-à-vis a thesis they want to prove—has ultimately been revealing and valuable for faculty and students alike.

Case Study Conclusions

At both WFU and Penn, students appear habituated to argumentative writing and less prepared for explanatory writing. Penn has engaged in a decade-long effort, and WFU has more recently discovered the same need as they introduced explanatory writing into their curriculum. In our combined experiences, students are initially frustrated but ultimately find the work useful

Table 3. Wake Forest University Literature Review Assignment

This source-based synthesis assignment asks you to review research about [topic in course]. In your review, you will tell a particular "story," or focus on a specific thread, that emerges in the sources. Many academics call this a "literature review," or "research review," and it is often a section in contemporary journal articles, dissertations, or books. In popular genres, you will likewise see this in a kind of review section, sometimes in a less formal or structured way.

There are a range of "stories" you can tell, but take care to focus on one you can reasonably cover in approximately 1,000–1,200 words (i.e., you cannot address all major points of the research you review in that space). As you decide on the focus, take care to think through the relationship between the sources and how they do and do not relate and connect (methodologically, disciplinarily, thematically, etc.).

Note that in this assignment you will devote most of your development to reviewing sources in such a way that shows the story you are telling about a particular topic: rather than defending a persuasive stance, the intellectual process you are foregrounding is your ability to thoughtfully review existing arguments through the lens of a particular thread of your choosing.

Rubric (abridged)

Focus, Design, and Coherence of Review (80):

- Writer's selection, clarity, and emphasis place texts in conversation with writer's central thread and with other texts and shows improvement throughout process.
- Central thread in terms of scope and cogency
- Relevance of and context for selected texts, and attention to the texts on their own terms (e.g., in quotes, central concepts)
- Clarity of central thread in emphasis (or framing) and principled organization
- Consistency and command of writer's focus and alignment

Conventions and Style (20): Conventions facilitate synthesis; are in line with similar examples of academic, evidenced-based literature reviews for an academic audience unfamiliar with material

and even empowering. As Kalyb Sims, a Penn student, recently remarked, "Knowing how to do a review of literature means I can learn about a field and a topic on my own even after I leave here" (pers. comm., 27 December 2018). Equally important, students are relieved to be released from pretending to be an authority, happy to replace their patchwork-plagiarism and thesis-driven essays with the activity of gathering and making sense of sources sufficiently to explain them to others. We, in turn, find ourselves reading their reviews with interest and regard. Tellingly, Penn added reader engagement as a rubric and portfolio assessment criterion, a reflection of how engaging and assessable students' literature reviews and editorials had become.

Concluding Remarks

Deborah Tannen (1998: 3) warned that our spirits were being "corroded by . . . an atmosphere of unrelenting contention—an argument culture" that urged us to approach the world in "an adversarial frame of mind." Our review of existing scholarship, as well as our experiences with our own students, suggests that we may be unwittingly promoting this adversarial frame of mind through writing assignments that teach students that their primary job is to take positions and convert others to their point of view (see also Aull 2016, 2017). Teaching the conflicts in order to render ideologies transparent (Graff 1992), we have seemingly neglected to simultaneously consider the ideology of our own assignments, imagining that pedagogical "position-taking" is a neutral activity rather than, for example, one with troubling Cold War roots and bleak implications (Filreis 1995: 168).

Thus, with the best of intentions, we have contributed to a century-long cow path that risks naturalizing discord and disagreement and exposing students to the mere end product of all that goes into authentic scholarship and civic policy. Rendering transparent this ideology of position-taking and writing as a drive to convert others to our point of view, we can reconsider this cow path. Along with teaching them how to recognize and craft arguments, we can also guide our students to develop tools that help them acknowledge and make sense of differences and complexities.

Notes

1. See examples from SAT (College Board, "Sample Questions," collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sample-questions/essay, accessed December 10, 2018), ACT (www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation/writing-sample-essays.html?page=0&chapter=0, accessed 12 August 2019), and Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, "English Language Arts Standards: Writing: Grade 11–12," www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/, accessed 10 December 2018).
2. The 2017 DSP main task description: "After reading *Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds*, write an essay in which you analyze and explain what you see as Kolbert's main argument about the relation between strong feelings and deep understanding about issues" (Wake Forest College, "The Writing Program," college.wfu.edu/writingprogram/directed-self-placement, accessed 11 June 2017).

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