Questioning with Authority:

Teaching the Art of Good Questions to Graduate Teaching Assistants

In our first-year writing courses at the University of Notre Dame, my colleagues and I concern ourselves with the teaching of claims, proofs, and responses to those claims and proofs. We teach what John Ramage and others, in *Argument in Composition*, refer to as "critical literacy." Among other things, this literacy challenges students to, while constructing a sound argument, "imagine counter-arguments, anticipate audience response, particularly skepticism and ignorance, and move deftly between claims of truth, reasons that warrant those claims, and evidence that supports the reasons" (31). Your home program may not prioritize outcomes precisely the same way, but these outcomes apply, at least in general terms, to a variety of writing programs. (We may diverge on means, but we most likely converge on ends.)

I'm not here today to talk about critical literacy and *students*. That is, I'm not necessarily here to consider how we teach undergraduates in our first-year writing courses; instead, I would like to consider how we teach graduate student teachers, those faculty not yet well-trained in composition theory and pedagogy. The topic is vast of course, so I shall focus on two small, related areas of a *teacher's* critical literacy: How might new teachers effectively assess the sorts of evidence students offer in written arguments?

And, while doing so, how might new teachers conceptualize their relationships with students, especially as those relationships are reflected or made manifest in the questions written in the margins of student papers? First, I will offer an endorsement of a system designed for assessing the relationship between claims and evidence. This is Richard Fulkerson's STAR system, explained in *Teaching the Argument in Writing*. Next, as part of a panel concerned with the roles questions play in writing practice and pedagogy, I will consider what James Crosswhite, in *The Rhetoric of Reason*, offers regarding the privileged role the questioner plays—questioner, defined in this paper, as the teacher responding to a student's written argument.

But first, a little background: This semester, I am leading a graduate-level teaching practicum, one required of new instructors the semester before they teach in our program. There, I introduce sixteen eager graduate students to composition theory and pedagogy. Our graduate student teachers come to us with English literature or similar degrees: philosophy, political science, theology, for instance. While some have previous teaching experience, few to none are trained in rhetoric and composition. They write very well, but few have thought deeply about the *teaching* of writing.

An example: Several weeks ago, during a spirited class debate about the relevance of teaching syllogisms and enthymemes in a first year writing course, I called a quick time out to poll the class: How many know what a syllogism is, I asked. About half the class, eight people, raised their hands. How many know what an enthymeme is? One hand. How many people know how deductive arguments differ, generally, from inductive arguments? Again, one hand. (Remember, a moment ago I characterized this debate as "spirited.") I surmised that I'm leading an intelligent and engaged—but dare I say it?—at least slightly uninformed group.

I am not suggesting our future teachers should come to my program with all the answers; their lack of training is, after all, why they're enrolled in our teaching practicum in the first place. Nor am I suggesting knowledge of enthymemes and syllogisms *is* relevant to the teaching of writing. That's a topic for another paper. What struck me about the experience was this: Why did they argue with such passion about topics they themselves admitted to knowing so little about? (Without asking them—yet—I suspect that one cause is simply the pressures of graduate school, where students feel they must be ready, at a moment's notice, to critique anything and everything.) Finally, I also wondered, might these same attitudes carry over to their working with students, especially when responding to student writing?

Consider, for instance, the tremendous variety of topics that cross our desks each semester: While grading even one small stack of essays, we may be asked to evaluate arguments about prayer in public schools, Title IX and college athletics, the drinking age, Terry Jones and the burning of the Koran, laws regarding texting while driving . . . the list goes on. Given such variety, I'm reminded of the saying about a "jack of all trades and a master of none": How do we fairly and adequately assess the strengths of arguments about topics so diverse that we cannot possibly be knowledgeable about the majority of them? (We're a smart group, but not *that* smart.) The problem is especially acute for beginning teachers, those educated enough to be running their own sections of composition, but not necessarily experienced enough to write helpful, thought-provoking comments—including questions—in the margins, for instance. Does asking student writers the right questions, ones designed to prompt reflection and revision, require rather sophisticated understandings of multiple domains?

Further, how does one question with authority? For instance, how does one know just when to ask a student for more evidence, all the while maintaining not only an encouraging and supportive tone but also a respectful tone as well? I suggest that what is needed is not those multiple understandings I mentioned but instead a general guide for the assessment of particular types of arguments.

This guide should be not only easy to learn—regardless of one's training or background in rhetoric and composition—but also applicable *across* genres, texts, and topics.

It is not sufficient to simply tell students to "provide evidence." One must also guide students in not only what sorts of evidence to provide, but how much, and when, and where, and why, etc. And by extension, when working with new teachers in my program, I must guide them, too. To do so, I advocate the system Fulkerson lays out in *Teaching the Argument.* There, he offers a short set of questions for evaluating the strength of the claim/evidence relationship, questions easily remembered via "STAR" (44):

S for sufficiency of evidence: Is there enough evidence to warrant the claim drawn?

T for typicality of evidence: To what degree does the evidence offered represent the larger group being argued about?

A for accuracy: Is the information used as evidence true? and

R for relevance: Is the claim asserted relevant to the information about or evidence from the sample?

To demonstrate, he applies each of these areas to sample arguments. While addressing the **S**ufficiency of grounds issue, he provides two examples where arguers make inductive or ampliative inferences based on samples of larger data

sets. In the first, the arguer buys a bag of 50 individually-wrapped caramels, only to discover that the first three sampled are brittle and stale. The arguer concludes that the entire bag is probably brittle and stale.

Next, for his second example, Fulkerson offers a scenario about a high school history class; the instructor has assigned 50 students the task of explaining Prohibition in the United States. Fulkerson asks, “When you have read four papers of the fifty and found that all four show that students know little about Prohibition or have serious misconceptions about what life was like during the period, would you be willing to assert a claim about the whole group as you did with the caramels?” (45). Most readers, of course, would answer “no.” Thus, the sufficiency of evidence test is closely related, one surmises, to the typicality of evidence test: “If one caramel is like every other caramel, then sampling one [or a few] is enough” (46).

The varieties of evidence offered across the spectrum of real-world arguments, however, are not as uniform as caramels in a sealed bag, so the arguer often cites “more rather than less evidence, partly . . . to increase the likelihood that . . . data are typical” (46). Because a population of 50 high school students is not as homogenous as a population of 50 pieces of candy, an arguer citing data from the stack of student papers—that is, an arguer attempting to select out representative

samples or “parts for the whole”—would need to be more cautious with the types and strengths of claims offered.

Addressing the remaining two areas, **A**ccuracy of the evidence and **R**elevance of the claim, Fulkerson advises writers to “put yourself in the position of a critical reader,” one who will likely ask “How do you know that the factual assertion is accurate?” (49). “The writer needs to anticipate such a response,” he offers, “and build into the discourse a mini-argument for the accuracy of the evidentiary claims” (49). Explaining how one assesses the relevance of the claim asserted, he provides a sample paragraph in which the relationship between the claim and the evidence is not tight (50). “Probably, in revision,” Fulkerson concludes, “the bulk of the paragraph could be salvaged by modifying the claim, but if the claim is important to the author, then the supporting data needs major modification” (51). This is sound advice for any arguer: using the “R” of STAR (relevance of evidence to claim, of claim to data), consider the strength of that relationship.

First year writing students don’t usually argue about stale caramels or high school history essays about Prohibition. They do, however, frequently cite specific examples in support of a claim. Just last month, in my own first-year writing course, students submitted evaluation arguments that, no matter their particular topics, essentially ran along these lines: evaluative claims about Topic X, Y, or Z;

specific examples to back up, support, or show those claims. I read essays about, among other things, a memorable high school soccer coach, a favorite restaurant in a New Jersey beach-side town, and an excellent local health club. In all cases, as I responded to the essays, prompting students for further reflection and revisions with my comments and questions, I used STAR as one of my guides, a sort of cognitive filter through which I read the types and varieties of evidence offered across essays.

The Art of Questioning, Good Questions

You'll remember that I began with the example of the spirited debate in my graduate teaching practicum, the debate about the relevance of syllogisms and enthymemes. I remarked that while most of the participants admitted to not fully understanding the issues at hand, that didn't stop them from confidently offering firmly-held positions. I suggested that the perceived ethos of graduate school itself may be a cause: To show that one belongs, one must join in practically any intellectual exchange, regardless as to one's training, experience, background. "Doubt grows with knowledge," as Goethe said, and these new teachers and graduate students may not yet be comfortable enough in their knowledge to admit their own doubts.

So, about the art of good questions. How might new teachers question with authority when responding to student papers? New teachers face all sorts of challenges, two of which deserve mention here: First, being confident but also realistic about one's own limitations. Second, questioning students in the margins of their papers without over- or under-estimating one's own authority. I remarked earlier that it is not possible to have more than rudimentary knowledge of all the topics students might select for their essays. I know a little about global warming, for instance, just enough to believe it's both real and man-made. What I need then, when I assess a student paper about global warming—one written by, say, a science major—is a system like STAR, a mechanism that is loose enough to apply across a range of topics but focused enough to give me at least a foothold as I consider the evidence the student writer offers.

I want to close by offering several issues James Crosswhite raises in *The Rhetoric of Reason: Writing and the Attractions of Argument*. About the questioner's role, Crosswhite posits that "To understand oneself as a questioner is to place oneself in a privileged role, maybe even a superior one" (88). Additionally, he remarks, "questioning is typically a privilege of the powerful. . . . Questioning one's superiors is often taken to be a sign of impertinence or rebellion. . . . In contrast, the questioning of one's subordinates is taken to be almost a duty of power" (88-89). (You'll recall that I "called a time out" in the class debate to

ask questions about syllogisms and enthymemes, exercising, I must admit here, my power as the instructor of record.) This is not to suggest that teachers should primarily understand their roles, and, consequently, their students' roles, as ones of superiors and subordinates. While this power dynamic is almost certainly inescapable—at least in any institution where the teacher assigns grades—I do suggest we embrace this role unquestioningly. I do suggest, again returning to Crosswhite, is that we recognize "that to argue with someone is to show a sign of deep respect" (96).

When the graduate students I'm working with leave my practicum at the end of this semester and join us as fellow teachers in the fall, this is what I want them to remember when they write questions in the margins of students' papers, questions specifically focusing on the claim/evidence relationship: To what degree is this particular sentence, paragraph, or page representative of the student's overall writing ability (via STAR), and, how can I show this student that, while I am in a privileged role as a questioner, I shall prompt this student for further argument precisely because I respect her deeply.

Thank you, and, no pun intended, I look forward to your questions at the end of our presentation.

Works Cited

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The graduate students in my teaching practicum and I have experimented with Fulkerson's STAR system this semester, as we discuss sample student arguments and the sorts of marginal comments we'd offer while reading. Results thus far have been good,

Overall, I find Fulkerson's STAR assessment rubric to be a sound, specific, and practical tool. Writing teachers and students would be well-served by devoting greater attention to this mechanism.

(Those of you familiar with Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* may note the parallels, here, between Crosswhite's understanding of argument as claiming and questioning and Toulmin's conceptualization of justificatory arguments, including ones brought forth in response to the "what have you got to on?" invitation for data and warrants (Toulmin 12).) It is not possible for the writer describing the memorable high school soccer coach to provide all the possible claims and evidence she may have at her disposal; she must select only those claims and evidence that not only develop the argument but also give it coherence

and unity. She selects, in other words, parts that stand for the whole—in a Burkean sort of “synechdoche-as-a-master-trope” like fashion. This is a common argument strategy in first-year writing and beyond.

Here, it must be noted, Crosswhite uses the term “argue” to encapsulate both claiming *and* questioning, a duality he works out in some detail in his chapter on “Questioning.”