Argument as ground not mode: creating opportunities for nuanced argument using information literacy and case studies

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"But they argue all the time" says my student advisee. "We can't work out what is true and what is just their opinion." "Ah, I say, so no one is winning the argument?" I laugh, picturing the professors of the team-taught interdisciplinary humanities course she came to talk about. They would be formidable foes! She looks at me with concern. "Right. I need to drop that course. I can't work out what I'm supposed to _know_. They won't tell us what is *true*. I'm going to fail the exam for sure!" She doesn't get it. The goal of these humanities courses is to invite students into an ongoing debate about culture and its artifacts, interpretation, methodology, and analysis. Two and four credit courses, each focused on a different topic, the teachers say they are stimulating and exciting and the best students agree. They are the kind of thing our university does well. So why the panic? I've confronted this fear of disagreement before when I've team-taught, and it always fascinates me.

"First," I say, "they aren't arguing the way we do about which movie to see or which football team is best. Right?"

"Maybe" she admits.

"They are offering different ways of seeing the same thing. Right?"

"Yes, but that's the PROBlem!" Her anxiety rising again. "How do I know the right way to see it?"

We work through the complexity of the making of meaning, the role of discussion and disagreement, the importance of debate. I tell her the course should be a model of how to reach provisional conclusions—that to look for the one true answer closes down our ability

to assess new ideas and data. I persuade her to stay in the course and hope she'll keep her promise to talk to the professors teaching it.

You may recognize this story; it is so typical it is almost banal. We argue to win. The winner is by definition right. Bound up in the history of an elect and not so far from the fascination that fuels "survival" shows, the winner wins because his or her body, skill, talent, or argument is the strongest, and therefore the "best." The winner by definition has truth on his or her side. The loser deserves to lose. And once a winner is determined we do not need to revisit the argument. Even death sentence appeals are denied because a decision has been made. To "open it up" is seen as some sort of trick; a challenge to what we know is right.

And so it goes:

"America is divided into Red and Blue states"

"If you aren't part of the solution you are part of the problem"

"You're either with us or against us"

Such quotes form the wallpaper of our daily lives, background chatter to larger frustrations, disagreements, and wars. They merge with the other binary oppositions that shape Western Culture: good and evil, right and wrong, hero and coward, black and white. They make us hear opposition when it is not there, as my student did. They make us forget that there are other options. Presenting different ways of seeing things challenges simplistic binaries and is thereby to contemporary ways of seeing and knowing. But failing to invite students into non-binary arguments or teach them other ways to reach conclusions is to leave them as alienated as was my advisee. She was watching a performance to which she had no access because her response was conditioned by what she had learned about argument. If we are to

produce effective writers and thinkers—and thereby effective citizens—it isn't enough to just *enact* ways of thinking, knowing, reasoning, and making meaning; we need to *teach them* in all places and at all times. It isn't enough to declare everything an argument if we don't show how our understanding of the role and process of argument shapes the reality we experience on a day-to-day basis. If we can't get rid of binary thinking, we need to at least design our pedagogies and assignments so that they reveal how it works and then open other possibilities. Multiple possibilities. I believe that project-based/case study assignments that reveal what David called the "circulation of discourse" and that require and reinforce sophisticated information literacy in what Becky describes as a rhizome model are essential in that process.

It seemed for a while that the emergence of deconstruction into American academic life might allow a crack in our binary thinking. We might develop a language to explain the limitations of basing our thought on a simple system of privileged opposites, of two-sided thinking and simple side-taking. While structuralism helped us to see that meaning exists not in words themselves but in the differences between words, or to be more accurate the way we understand those differences—that the words themselves are just symbols, their meanings a relationship between opposing ideas; deconstruction reminds us—as my advisee surmised—that the ideas are not <u>equally</u> weighted. One is better. Stronger. And thereby favored in the binary opposition. And if they reflect Western power dynamics, they must be not fundamental *organizers* of all human thought, but *artifacts* of a purely Western thought structure. Of course here it is easy to fall into our own binary opposition and denounce binary thinking as therefore *bad* and non-binary thinking as *good*. Such is, of course, to miss the point. The challenge is to develop ways of thinking that try to open up that opposition, to

show how its unequal structure leads to simplistic thinking. To deconstruct an idea in its real sense is not a good or bad act, it is just an act. Actually, it is an event or a moment, but let's not split hairs about terminology, my point is that the possibility opened to us through deconstruction was to reveal how these unequally weighted binaries obscured thought. At the moment of deconstruction a binary opposition is shown to contradict itself, and undermine its own authority, making a different kind of thinking possible.

Even those in the academy not ready to make the deconstructive move and reject binary thinking must acknowledge the end result of that thinking: a simplified "Cross Fire" notion of argument in which each "side" takes a "position"—generally based on ideology rather than consideration of data—and cites "evidence" to support it. Other positions or interpretations, or even nuance within an argument, are problems to be eliminated or at best acknowledged and ignored. We see this in our classes and it dominates our media. This kind of thinking runs antithetical to academic and civic engagement and many professions, not to mention effective writing, yet it is reproduced in writing classrooms across the land, in high schools and colleges, and in textbooks[1]. Take a position. Form a thesis. Write an argument. Support your argument with researched information. Think about the best place to locate your summary of the counterargument and show why it is wrong.

And oh how boring the papers generally are! Rather than being invitations to follow a line of thought, they are dry recitals of socially sanctioned positions. It might be true that for this student, this argument is new. It might indeed be revelatory that there are arguments that can be used to support pre-existing beliefs or confirm already rejected ones. And we do need to remember this.[2] However, there is a reason we find such writing unexciting and the students unengaged–even as many faculty use grading rubrics and standards that reward such

formulaic writing. And there is a reason so many students go looking online for a prewritten "position paper" that simply states for them the argument they already believe. Why bother to write it when so many people have already written it? When no new work is being done no new learning is occurring and no ideas are being challenged. The writing becomes an exercise. Like sentence combining. It may be useful, but there is no *joy* in it. No engagement above a concern for correctness and right answers. Students don't learn to _research_, they learn to _find support_. Instead of gaining information _literacy_ they practice information _retrieval_.

To do as David did and teach information literacy before argument leads to more sophisticated arguments and selection of data to support them. To tell students that they are not permitted to form a thesis until they have completed their research by and large fills them with terror—even when we tell them as Becky suggests that they should be assessing and selecting or rejecting sources as they conduct that research. To suggest that they argue from several different perspectives astonishes them. To explain that argument can also be a way to explore ideas and make meaning opens the possibility that the papers they produce will not be "good" "clear" or "well organized." Or that we will have to teach students how to make the transition from writing-to-make-meaning to writing-to-engage-others.

As you might guess, it is my contention that we need to adopt just such a pedagogy. But I also believe that we cannot do it only in one course, most especially the "argument" course, whose writing style is always already imagined in the minds of the students, and too often the course descriptions, textbooks[3], and grading rubrics.

I believe that an outcome goal of all writing courses (actually all courses) should be to move students from a dependence on binary thinking and privileged oppositions to an acceptance that there are multiple conversations on each topic and the ability to use the skills of information literacy to join those conversations. We need to redesign composition courses to create opportunities for students to use writing to explore nuance and complexity and develop provisional positions through that exploration—even if what we sacrifice is the perfectly clear thesis and the ordered claim-support structure. We need to challenge them to acknowledge the comforts of binary thinking and help them see its limitations, and the ways that exposing the binary invites further thought.

I think there are many ways to do this, but I want to talk about a one that can take several forms. David talked about the Case Study model and you should check out the website to see how Golden Rice and the other case studies work—they are truly wonderful[4]; however, if such technological sophistication and/or resources seem impossible to imagine on your campus, imagine something else. What is important about the case studies is that they are information-rich and they create an opening for students to adopt different perspectives and positions and address different audiences with different purposes. Composition classes and textbooks can do pretty much the same thing in a low tech way, supported by libraries and the internet. First, we all need to find ways to incorporate into our classes the kind of information literacy Becky described—with or without a better name. This will allow students to do more than read with the intention of slotting their findings into predetermined categories, and will provide the skills they need to find and assess a variety of resources. Second, we need to offer open-ended assignments in place of the standard prewrite-write-rewrite argument papers students have come to expect—and dread. This involves

developing multi-faceted writing projects that invite students to both make meaning and allow them to understand how meaning is made. Finally, we need to find a way to effectively assess such writing without falling into our own unequal binary opposition that rewards form over content; logic over exploration; and closed, well-supported argument over open-ended examination of a provisional position. The researched or reasoned argument paper needs to evolve into something more interesting.

To do this I propose starting exactly where the media and cross-fire start: with the emotions. More specifically I think we need to start with the lives our students live. Topics like abortion, gun control, campus parking, or the death penalty seem to our students to have only two sides and are therefore the hardest to work with—but they are compelling issues nonetheless. I prefer to work with less obviously inflammatory topics such as an appropriate monument for the World Trade Center site, the debate about roadside memorials, agri-tourism, surveillance, trash, the politics of water, or golden rice. In many ways what I want the students to do is build their own database that they can access in much the same way as David's students can use the materials he and his colleagues have provided in the case study on golden rice.

Let's start with the pathetic appeal of the topic. Find me three people who have been hurt by this issue. You define "hurt." I might make some websites available to help this process, or it might be a moment when we begin the process of using the internet to provide background information. This is generally quite easy. Okay, now find me three people or institutions who have benefited and explain how. This is not so easy in some cases. Who else benefits from strict abortion laws or Wallmart's (modified) decision not to fill prescriptions for the morning after pill aside from the obvious answer "the fetus or potential

child"? There are no wrong answers here as long as the students can explain why they list these entities.

The idea that arguments have stakeholders and that these individuals and groups might make decisions based on emotions, beliefs, or self interest is unsurprising of course, but the idea that they form the base of much public debate takes on a new concern for students and makes them very willing to move into the next step of finding some facts that might support the argument of each stakeholder they have identified. Suddenly there are six people in the room not two. And generally each can marshal more than just emotion to support their claim. So this is the point where it might make sense to do a little historical research. Was it always this way? Were there—or are there—other stakeholders? Are we stakeholders? Do the same people take the same positions as they have always taken or are some stakeholders new to the issue. These questions will vary by topic of course. In more advanced courses, students can do citation searches to find who is quoting whom in their public and published pronouncements on the topic. Standard search engines will pick this up in the media, too. As they continue this research, the students are becoming qualified to speak on the topic and are also developing the kind of information literacy they need to read critically with an eye to bias, subtext, and the positionality and context of the author and source. They are developing the ethos that makes them qualified to offer something other than a cross-fire position, and the understanding that makes them want to join the conversation and offer an opinion. Once the writer is alive in the paper we will want to read it. Ironically it is precisely the privileging of logos over ethos that makes the argument paper so very dull—and the sprinkle of pathos often added to "captivate" the reader just makes things worse because it is added for the wrong reasons. Starting with the need for the student to

establish an authority on a topic automatically shifts the ground, creating the possibility foe

engagement and growth on the part of the writer and the reader—now there's a radical idea!

Ethos demands audience. Students know we have read more papers than they can even

imagine on these tired old topics. It doesn't really occur to them that they might engage us.

All they can do is demonstrate their superior logic and list of evidence. No wonder they see

these papers as exercises. No wonder they are tempted to cheat. What does it *mean* that

many of us fail to expect to be engaged? How can we expect them to learn and change their

minds while remaining closed to the idea that *we* might learn or change our minds? That's

another conversation, but the fact is that they have our number on that. So we need to think

about audience. Who *might* want to hear what you have to say? Who might be persuaded?

Pro-abortion? Maybe pharmacies that allow the pharmacists to refuse to fill a prescription

for contraception or the "morning after pill" if it offends their principles? Anti-abortion?

Perhaps you want to argue in favor of the REAL act[5] that would set up a federal sex-

education program that balances abstinence and contraception instruction. Anti-

contraception as well? Then argue for an abstinence program that works. As teachers we

cannot be like those pharmacists who refuse on the grounds that we are offended. But we

can suggest that students use their research to further debate, expand understanding, or

perhaps persuade people to act; what we should discourage is the knee-jerk harangues

against those who disagree. In other words, we need to find ways to make argument

something more than just an exercise in form. Maybe in addition to that paper they will

produce a project using their research and furthering their argument: a brochure, a poster, a

PowerPoint presentation, a website, a flier, or a wiki or panel discussion perhaps—with

more than two positions being put forth.

My suggestion is that if we reject the binary thinking displayed in the classic argument paper we need to change the grounds for that paper, not the students. We need to ask what our teaching of argument has privileged and what effect that has had on our students, their papers, and ourselves. As teachers work to find a way to engage themselves with the student arguments they have to read and evaluate, they may also find themselves—as I did—rethinking argument pedagogy and practice. And this in turn may change the way we assign any thesis-driven paper. Comparison papers might more productively compare three or four ideas, issues, positions, or responses and make an argument in the form of a recommendation. Analytical papers might invite students to approach a topic or text from the perspective of a different stakeholder. Such a change can be supported from the Derridian move to deconstruct oppositions and Western thought, and Bourdieu's emphasis on reflexive research always mindful of the impact of positionality and internalized practices and structures. Regardless of our own theoretical stake, projects and case studies allow us to teach information literacy and to complicate argument instruction. Thus invited into the very intellectual discourse that we enjoy, students are more likely to use writing to trace and create meaning and share their evolving position. And that produces papers we want to read and they remember writing. Instead of watching an argument performed for them in the classroom, with the related alienation my advisee reported, such assignments invite students into the chaos, uncertainty, and provisional thinking that is at the heart of the academic and social endeavor. And that is a binary opposition I am happy to describe.
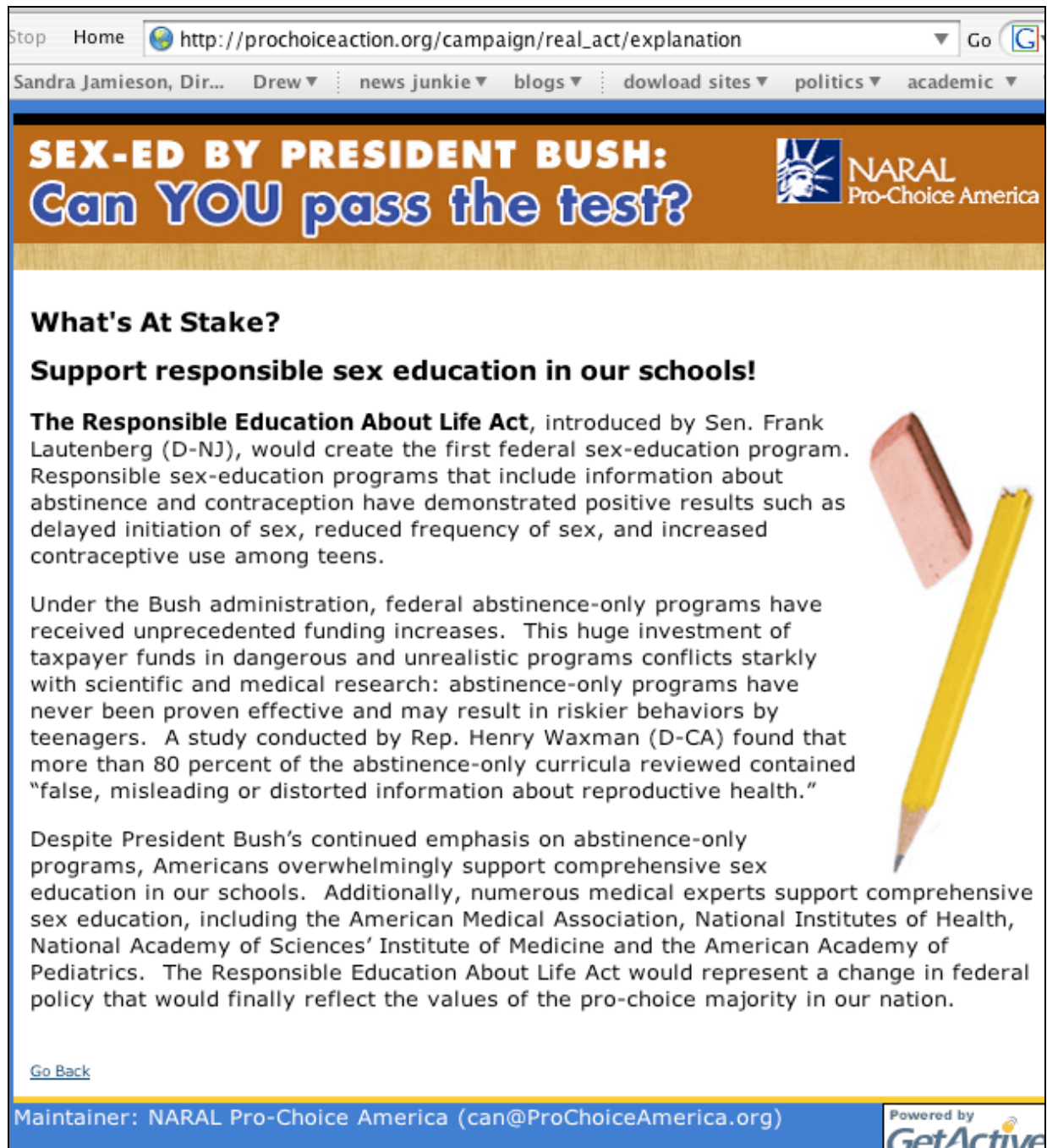
<u>Notes</u>

1. In some popular argument texts we see a pattern. The section entitled "Audience" is about a page long—or less. Likewise "Exigence"—"arguments need a reason to exist" "Often that reason is a problem that needs to be solved (what candidate to choose) or an event that needs to be responded to (an accident), or a circumstance that requires speech (a wedding toast)" (Fahnestock & Secor, 12-13)

　　　"Mature reasoning" may be well-informed, self-critical, aware of context, and able to keep their audiences or readers in mind" but to assign less than two pages out of a possible 800 to explain these issues is not to foreground them. Even textbooks with case studies assignments tend to be formulaic—because that is what potential adopters tell publishers they want, so it is what publishers demand of authors and authors agree to do, thereby never challenging the desires of those who do not write textbooks. A circle in which "ideology works all by itself," as Althusser puts it. Here's one that appears after several interesting essays arranged in a case study: "Using these two sources and any other field or library research, make a case either for or against X. Be sure that you clearly define what you mean by X." The final assignment at the end of a casebook of some 30 texts on 9/11: "Write an essay stating and defending your own position on torture. State your claim precisely. Defend your position with reasons designed to appeal to as broad a range of readers as you can" (414). The position does not have to be pro or con, and the readings do offer several different perspectives, but the binary is not really shattered—the choices are pro, con, and undecided, even though it is possible to be strong pro, contextually pro, or reluctantly pro!

2. Richard Light observes "a surprising number of undergraduates describe learning how to use evidence to resolve controversies in their field, whatever their field, as a breakthrough idea . . . [We] need to realize that students may not know how to search for, gather, and interpret evidence to decide on what they believe, and to chose among alternatives in their field" (Richard Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, Cambridge, MASS: Harvard UP, 2001. 122)

3. Here's a good example of formulaic argument assignments: "describe an experience that made you do X, then analyze it and explain why it had that effect. In the second part of your essay, persuade others to create such experiences." The "others" here could be parents, teachers, legislators, administrators…the point is that the structure is set. Students might learn something from their analysis, but the chances are they will write about something they have already worked out. (Crusius & Channell).

4. The Golden Rice Case Study is available at http://mycase.engl.iastate.edu/ along with other case studies, research data, and conference papers written about them.

5. REAL NARAL Prochoice America "Support Responsible Sex Education in Schools"
 www.prochoice.org/campaign/real_act/explanation Accessed March 2, 2006

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SEX-ED BY PRESIDENT BUSH:
Can YOU pass the test?

NARAL Pro-Choice America

What's At Stake?

Support responsible sex education in our schools!

The Responsible Education About Life Act, introduced by Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), would create the first federal sex-education program. Responsible sex-education programs that include information about abstinence and contraception have demonstrated positive results such as delayed initiation of sex, reduced frequency of sex, and increased contraceptive use among teens.

Under the Bush administration, federal abstinence-only programs have received unprecedented funding increases. This huge investment of taxpayer funds in dangerous and unrealistic programs conflicts starkly with scientific and medical research: abstinence-only programs have never been proven effective and may result in riskier behaviors by teenagers. A study conducted by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) found that more than 80 percent of the abstinence-only curricula reviewed contained "false, misleading or distorted information about reproductive health."

Despite President Bush's continued emphasis on abstinence-only programs, Americans overwhelmingly support comprehensive sex education in our schools. Additionally, numerous medical experts support comprehensive sex education, including the American Medical Association, National Institutes of Health, National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Responsible Education About Life Act would represent a change in federal policy that would finally reflect the values of the pro-choice majority in our nation.

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