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When win-argument pedagogy is a loss for the composition classroom

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ABSTRACT

Despite the effort educators put into developing in students the critical writing and thinking skills needed to compose effective arguments, undergraduate college students are often accused of churning out essays lacking in creative and critical thought, arguments too obviously formulated and with sides too sharply drawn. Theories abound as to why these deficiencies are rampant. Some blame students' immature cognitive and emotional development for these lacks. Others put the blame of lackadaisical output on the assigning of shopworn writing subjects, assigned topics such as on American laws and attitudes about capital punishment and abortion. Although these factors might contribute to faulty written output in some cases, the prevailing hindrance is our very pedagogy, a system in which students are rewarded for composing the very type of argument we wish to avoid — the eristic, in which the goal is not truth seeking, but successfully disputing another's argument. Certainly the eristic argument is the intended solution in cases when a clear-cut outcome is needed, such as in legal battles and political campaigns when there can only be one winner. However, teaching mainly or exclusively the eristic, as is done in most composition classrooms today, halts the advancement of these higher-order inquiry skills we try developing in our students.

KEYWORDS

tagmemics; composition; win-rhetoric; *dissoi logoi*; pedagogy; argumentation

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How we use our material in the classroom can either lift students up, or squelch them.
— Professor Libby Miles, class lecture

Every ideology, all legal systems, and each individual's personal code of ethics that exist in our human world are built over and supported by frameworks of argumentation. Because of its power to shape our environment, it is no wonder why so many of us are obsessed, so determined to master the craft of constructing and delivering successful arguments. To write this description in classic Habermasian — all public social spheres are created and shaped by informed, well-argued citizens who are both willing and able to take on the important public role of entering, shaping, and creating discursive domains. These are often considered to be the most valuable members of society because they contribute toward a healthy democracy.

Unsurprisingly, then, the ability to argue well is considered to be among the most important skills a student will learn in college. Educators around the country work hard to build in their students the passion for and skills to actively and successfully engage in social conversations so they can have a voice on things that matter to them. For their dedicated work of growing students into 'actors or agents in political arenas' by building in young undergraduates an 'enhanced sense of civic responsibility', some educators ought to be hailed as social visionaries, insist many advocates, including composition scholar Derek Owens. Social activist educators deserve praise for their tremendous effort of developing in students the ability to critically debate in speech and in writing. Janet D. Johnson supports this philosophy, specifically for these reasons:

Naming these teacher candidates actions as literacy practices provides a framework for analyzing how educators engage in social justice work. First, it is important to understand how these candidates used their personal and professional agency to support their students' academic learning and social emotional life. Second, naming these forms of agency as literacy practices signifies that these are particular skills and practices that — while embedded in lived histories and experiences — can be cultivated in teacher education and professional development (Johnson, 2012: 148).

One common pedagogical method is a technique that stems from the aesthetic of teachers who, with an eye for discomfort, design unfamiliarity into their syllabi quite purposefully as to help students gain broad understanding of dissent, often by adapting a hyper-realist pedagogy intended to reveal the naked truth, so that students are forced to face up to developments that affect them and those around them. Activities are often designed to give students practice in writing arguments in favour of, or in opposition to, controversial issues that are considered to be 'difficult to address, but worth doing so because they have the potential to enlighten students about problems common to all human beings' (Rancer & Avtgis, 1995: 34). Sometimes the

topics are self-selected. Other times, writing activities are designed around themes on issues that are important to the instructor. For example, many of the debates that are taking place in composition classrooms around the world about today's hot-button topics, such as environmental welfare, feminist and minority rights, gay marriage, education and immigration reforms, foreign policies, and, as Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman sum up with poetic and dramatic savvy, that there exists in present day a sense of 'looming ecological catastrophe and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world' (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011: 2–3). This is in line with a form of feminism as described by Pamela Takayoshi, who draws on feminist technology theorists' constructions of technology as 'always ideological but never predetermined in its meaning for users as a way of beginning this project' (Takayoshi, 2000: 123). Because technology is never predetermined, we can shape outcomes to our favour. Because of this, argues Gwen Gorzelsky, scholars should take an experimental approach to studying literacy. She contends that scholars should 'examine how specific literacy practices address experiential knowledge because this form of knowledge most directly shapes people's actions and thus our participation in larger systems' (Gorzelsky, 2013: 399).

But despite these energetic efforts to teach 'the necessary critical writing and thinking skills needed to address the complexity of issues they will face at the academy and in life' (Sumner, 2001: 9), students have been accused of turning out sterile essays, essays lacking in any creative or critical thought (Alford, 2002: 115). Maxine Hairston is among several composition scholars who note with dismay a tendency for students to write dull-mechanical debates, arguments too obviously and clearly formulated, with whose sides are too sharply drawn. This is a typical result in cases when which side to argue is decided solely based on emotional response, or perception of which side will be easier to defend, or a sense of where the teacher stands. Also likely culpable, think a mass of composition scholars, is the attention paid to arguments on familiar topics such as abortion, capital punishment, and drug policies.

There is certain logic behind blaming of the subject matter for student-writing shortcomings. But this may not be the only — or even the primary — reason for said lack of success. One avenue we can use to hone in and unpack the riddle of said tendency for students to draw sides too sharply, too obviously, and too clearly formulated is to discuss it in terms of the ancient Greek concept of the *eristic*, in which the goal of a dispute is not to reach a truth, but to successfully dispute another's argument. In this material world when arguments are used to obtain consequences, it is not surprising that a particular amount of attention — pedagogical and otherwise — is paid to the *eristic*. The *eristic* is by far the most common type of argument taught in composition classes, because it is believed to serve the double duty of both

training students for citizenship and of helping students sharpen their ability to write cogent analyses, insightful interpretations, and persuasive arguments (Ervin, 2003: 385).

But caution should be in place to be sure, because both honorable as well as dishonorable methods are used when the goal is to win at all costs. Of this subject, notable literary critic Wayne C. Booth re-coined the Greek term into the simplified English term ‘Win Rhetoric’ (WR) and identifies three sub-classifications of WR:

WR-a — the honest kind: My goal is to win because I know that my cause, my case, and my convictions are, like Jefferson’s right, my opponent’s cause absolutely wrong, and my methods will be totally sincere and honest.

WR-b: Since my cause is absolutely justified I will win at all costs, including the cost of integrity, if necessary.

WR-c: I know that my cause is unjust, but winning will be profitable to me, and I’m so skillful that nobody will realize my deceptions: I will employ rhetrickery¹ that appears to be honest (Booth, 2004: 43–44).

These sub-classifications are important to discuss in terms of this disconnect between desired and actual results in undergraduate student argumentation writings. While these social-visionary activist teachers undoubtedly intend to pass onto their student populations WR-a integrity, based on the below-par essays of discussion here, what pupils ingest and in turn exude are essays of the WR-b and WR-c kind. The students are not arguing their own causes with conviction, but again, simply writing what they believe the teacher wants to hear as a way to show they know how to win an argument in writing in order to win a good grade on the work.

Whether WR-a, WR-b, or WR-c, arguing to win is undoubtedly an aggressive approach. Aggressive argumentation is said by some to be responsible social and political engagement, because assertive behaviour in public conversation is, as argumentation scholars Andrew S. Rancer and Theodore A. Avtig say, an effective way to ‘get things done’ in this world (Rancer & Avtig, 1995: 16). Our reverence for this tool is so pronounced that it shapes the prevailing assumption that the ability to argue effectively is one of the most — if not the most — important skills a student will learn in college. There is a fair amount of logic in the idea of employing aggressive pedagogy when teaching the aggressive argument. A literal textbook example of WR-a at work can be found in the introduction of Harry Phillips and Patricia Bostian’s *The purposeful argument* (2012), where the mission of getting students to think of themselves

¹ Booth defines rhetrickery as cheating rhetoric, rhetoric of the dishonest kind.

as ‘agents capable of meaningful change’ is stated. This is a task the authors think is best reached by teaching students how to write stronger, more focused arguments because those who argue competently can become ‘the lifeblood of local action’. The authors elaborate justification for their stance in favour of the issue of allowing illegal immigrants to attend American community colleges. The goal is to develop a clear, long path of logic to persuade students to take this stance as well. This task is accomplished by effectively making their argument appear stronger and the opponent’s weaker. Using the Toulmin-based argument, the authors explain that backing for the warrant ‘would elaborate on why training, business, and services are important to the state’s quality of life’ (Phillips & Bostian, 2012: 180) a claim clearly meant to encourage students to consider these benefits. In this case, counterargument is ignored, as apparent in the demonstration of a middle-ground position. In such strategy, it might be decided that based on the information available and laws currently in effect, this issue should be resolved in court. But the authors argue that, meanwhile, ‘community colleges should remain open-door institutions and admit all who apply regardless of citizenship status’ (Phillips & Bostian, 2012: 181), a suggestion which allows the other choice — to bar illegal immigrants from community colleges — no consideration whatsoever; the possibility of this is simply not discussed.

It is commonly assumed that there is certain need for the teaching of black-and-white pro/con Win argumentation for reasons which range from personal development of critical thinking skills, to the outward-directed public-sphere, democratic debates.² There are other types of arguments, and reasons for engaging in them, which should be brought into the classroom as well. It is time to complicate the current composition pedagogy for these important reasons: 1) The prevailing conception of argumentation as the art of attack, of not just giving one’s side of the question but of defining it (Nilson, 1958: 237) by creating stiff, scripted arguments tends not to resolve conflict, but instead to escalate it; 2) Many students do not respond well to aggressive and/or overtly political teaching strategies; 3) The tried-but true [(claim) + (reasoning) = (proof)] formula does not generally prove one’s point anyway, but instead hinders the development of students’ critical reasoning skills, because the act of defending a thesis usually requires the striking down of all positions that stand in opposition, which serves to truncate and oversimplify most issues; 4) Arguments can be disguised as facts and deceptively used in place of a capital-T Truth, or the search for truths. This feature of oversimplicity is why we should better acknowledge complexity by creating pedagogy to override the commonly held conception of effective argumentation as

² The personal development model is under question due to contemporary understanding of stage-level development in young adults, a point I explore in detail later in this essay.

this algorithm: [(write a hypothesis) + (support it with evidence) = (proof of a truth)]. The limitations of this algorithm can be illuminated by a hypothetical example: You are a composition student who is currently learning about arguments of fact, the type used to determine whether something is, or is not, true. Reading about factual arguments in the *Everything's an argument* (Lunsford, Ruszkiewics, & Walters, 2010) course textbook, you come across the example of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker: Is it, or is it not, extinct? The proof of its continued existence rests largely on eye witnesses and a photograph of what appears to be this species of bird. However, others believe the fact that there are no unambiguous photographs, videos, specimens, or DNA samples from feathers or faeces of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker proves that it is indeed extinct.

You refer to this example as you begin to draft your own essay, which will be to determine whether there are, or are not, Sasquatch. Your guiding research question is: Do Bigfoots exist? If you want to prove they do, you would point to multiple sightings by credible witnesses, photographic and video-recorded evidences, and that hairs have been found in places where Sasquatch are said to live that cannot be identified as belonging to any other animal. If you want to argue they do not exist, you might follow the woodpecker project by arguing that [(no physical body found) = (the animal does not exist)]. Still, nobody actually proved whether or not Bigfoots are real. But we did end exploration of the subject. We also hopelessly polarise the field, with some claiming there are Sasquatch, and others denying it, at times based on the very same evidence.

What often results in weak student essays is the hesitation to address conflicting sources or other types of counterargument for fear of weakening one's own position when, tasked with writing a Win argument, students hope to maximise efficiency and effectiveness by first forming a position statement, then inserting evidence retroactively to prove the truth of their claim. Flat, uninteresting, and sides-sharply-drawn essays often result from the current practice of teaching students to prove their position, a practice that often results in essays of which valid data that contradicts the thesis is undermined and ignored, counterarguments brushed over via use of devices like the straw-man fallacy. In other words, we teach our students that good arguments are carried by a cart that had been placed in front of a horse. In the classroom, this often entails the picking apart of arguments presented by others — even if the counterarguments hold some validity — to support one's own position (Rancer & Avtgis, 1995: 177).

What justifies the participation in arguments without using adversarial strategies, even of the well-intended WR-a type? Answer: Adverse techniques complicate the teaching of argumentation because antagonistic tactics often serve to perpetuate conflict rather than solve it. Despite our best efforts, students frequently rebel against democratic, often counterhegemonic

literacy work, responding with 'if not open resistance, then polite circumvention' (Ervin, 2003: 410). Does aggressive teaching make students feel so uncomfortable they simply withdraw? There is, after all, an overt relationship between learning and emotion. And this practice of aggressive teaching has been criticised by scholars who have raised concern about its effects on students' 'attitudinal and emotional reactions toward the course instructor and the course content' (Rancer & Avtgis, 1995: 129). Students may feel the instructor is 'too forceful in the display of teacher power' (Rancer & Avtgis, 1995: 129), resulting in lower levels of learning and poorer attitudes about school (Flowerday & Schraw, 2003: 207). Passive-aggressive teaching tactics might contribute to aggressive student behaviour, who might intimidate their peers, as suggested by Deborah Tannen in an example of a teacher sitting at the head of the classroom feeling pleased with herself and her class because the 'students are engaged in a heated debate. The very noise level reassures the teacher that the students are participating, taking responsibility for their own learning. Education is going on. The class is a success' (Tannen, 1998: 256). However, Tannen points out that:

only a few students are participating in the debate; the majority of the class is sitting silently, may be attentive perhaps either indifferent or actively turned off. And the students were arguing are not addressing the separate keys, nuances, or complexities of the points they are making or disputing. They do not have that lecture you because they want to win the argument — so they must go for the most gross and dramatic statements they can muster (Tannen, 1998: 256).

Aside from subject matter, another contributing factor attributed to student resistance comes from when students feel forced to pick a side they are not willing or ready to commit to. In fact, several studies conducted on the relationship between teacher argumentativeness and student affective learning support the theory that controlling environments leave students with a reduced sense of personal autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In a notable study by Rancer and Avtgis, for example, resulted in finding that student affective learning was higher in classes taught by low, versus high or moderate argumentative, teaching assistants. When students have lower affect for instruction, they learn less, engage in recommended course behaviours less often, are less responsive in the classroom, and are less likely to comply with a teacher's request. These are all behaviors that point to 'decreased student affective learning and a negative teacher-student relationship' (Rancer & Avtgis, 1995: 130). There is value in encouraging civic mindedness in students. But we should not force our own pet causes onto them. This practice of telling a student what to think and how to feel about a topic limits freedom of choice and devalues the important function of our work in the classroom: the development of critical thinking.

We humans have a strongly developed sense of curiosity. It is natural for us to seek understanding of the world in which we live. Some answers were fairly easy to find: water will, under most circumstances, boil at 212 degrees Fahrenheit and freeze at 32; if I try to pull out a casserole that has been baking in a hot oven with bare hands, I will get burned. But there are many other questions that are difficult or impossible to answer: Is there a God? Was it the chicken, or the egg, that came first? But if it is indeed true that the human brain operates mathematically and syntactically in the same or similar fashion as a computer, our search for answers to some questions is fruitless. As Roger Penrose aptly remarks, according to mathematician Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem, 'there is no way of encapsulating, in a computationally checkable way, all the methods of mathematical reasoning that are humanly acceptable' (Penrose, 1996: 192), an observation echoed by philosopher John Searle's observation that even syntax and computational structure 'are not brute facts about the external world, but rather, are interpretations of experience by an active mind' (Weed, 2003: 215). If Gödel and Searle are correct, our attempts will continue to be stymied by the stark reality that it may be literally impossible to find many of the answers we are seeking.

How frustrating, these Big Questions seemingly without answers. But we humans are highly adaptable animals. We find ways to cope, as observed by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who wrote of this phenomenon that 'irritation of doubt' leads us to rationalise as part of a 'struggle to attain a state of belief', and 'as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false' (Peirce, 1877: chap. 4). This seems, if not ideal, at least a workable compromise. We can go about our daily lives without this irritation of doubt, having convinced ourselves that we know how our world works. After all, we cannot spend all day at Shaw's standing in the produce section trying to discover the perfect apple, comparing and contrasting every shine, size, and texture on each one as to identify and select the one closest to perfect for our mid-day snack at the office because, eventually, it will be closing time and the pimply-faced young adult shop keeper, in hushed, polite urgency, will usher us out the door.

We settle on assumptions and work to argue them convincingly as a way to wrest order and understanding from overwhelming confusion caused by what we do not and cannot understand. We often refuse to accept the fact that there is much about the world we do not understand because the unknown is scary. Ideology experts such as Hannah Arendt have provided an important reason why this belief-based explanation is so powerful: because in many cases, an individual cannot check for herself or himself and has to trust explanations learned at school, church, or from the media. We are biologically incapable of completely understanding our world, but we are often fooled by arguments that convince us otherwise. We often refuse to accept

the fact that there is much about the world we do not understand because the unknown is scary, so we engage in win-rhetoric argumentation strategies in overcompensation.

Irritation of doubt is also responsible for the tendency to provide ‘rationalizations’, defined by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca as justifications given *ex post facto* for decisions already made, the ‘insertion of the conclusion into a technical framework’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 87). We are inclined to simplify arguments, to insist on winning by proving our point, because of an urge to order our thoughts into describable metaphors. Such technique is a coping mechanism. Exclusive attention to win debates is the attempt to categorise and prioritise what little we can know of our existence and of the world in which we live. We settle on assumptions and work to argue them convincingly as a way to wrest order and understanding from overwhelming confusion caused by what we do not and cannot know. We argue to win not just to persuade others, but ourselves as well, that our perceptions are not mere desired truths, but instead are concrete realities. This ambition to prove one’s point at the expense of disproving all that do not agree is a biological adaptive response to the unknown, a way to impose order and clarity on otherwise overwhelming stimuli. Our tendency is to order our surroundings into describable metaphors. Human neurological circuitry has in fact evolved to detect and interpret information in ways that organise what would otherwise be overwhelming confusion, so that our experiential field consists of more or less stable objects within a world we can control and manipulate (O’Reilly, 2011). It is this natural instinct to make sense out of life that urges us to reduce its grey areas into either/or choices. But this same strategy that keeps us calm can also keep us ignorant, reciprocation logician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (deceased) calls ‘premature closure of inquiry’. Arguing against enlightenment theories of reasoning that the mind ‘weighs competing beliefs in an effort to determine which is most reasonable’ (Danisch, 2012: 417), Peirce argued that, having proved our thesis, we in effect end exploration, because the ‘settlement of opinion is the sole end of inquiry’. Because we have settled upon the solution, we no longer have reason to doubt. And when ‘doubt ceases, mental action on the subject comes to an end’ (O’Reilly, 2011: 43).

Why not infuse some negative capability into our pedagogy? ‘Negative capability’ as described by John Keats, is the ability for humans to be capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without feeling the need to reach out after fact and reason (Bate, 1987: 16, 17). Keats insists that the ‘only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing — to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts’ (Keats, 1901: 121; Bate, 1987: 18). He says that to categorise and label is to retard the intellect, render it static. According to Keats, a man who relies on easy classifications remains

‘content with half-knowledge’ as a result of this dogged determination to ‘make up his mind about everything’ (Keats, 1901: 121). Rhetorical scholar Ian Barnard suggests that our insistence on student essays that are clear (*e.g.*, a clear thesis, a clear example) is contemporary composition’s equivalent to premature closure of inquiry, because clarity often equates to simplicity, thereby oversimplifying complex ideas that would be better explained using difficult, even unclear, language (Barnard, 2014: 30).

Our preference for the prove-win technique used in Win arguments is driven by a centuries-long search for a test that could sort good from bad arguments, a practice which divulges the vestige of rationalist belief in the universality of logic, an ideology that naturally supposes the existence of an intrinsic truth to all arguments. However, this does not consider that logic itself is contextual as it is driven by material conditionals such as disciplinary and institutional constraints. There is no system of universal logic we can rely on to determine rightness/goodness or wrongness/badness in arguments. Moral assessment cannot be true, nor can it be false, because logics, which are ‘dependent upon different human practices’, develop out of different modes of reasoning (Keith & Beard, 2008: 24).

Premature inquiry closure is often apparent in the Win argument and its insistence on absolute distinction between the pro and con sides. The black-and-white driving logic is so pervasive as to make its way into common lore that every argument expresses either a positive or a negative position with respect to a certain proposition, meaning that any argument is a movement either toward (in favour of), or against (in opposition to), a proposal. This is in line with the incorrect yet common belief that arguments can be simplistically divided into two sides, and it is the arguer’s responsibility to choose and defend either a pro or a con stance. This model does not account for ambivalence. An ambivalent response to a proposition is an utterance that travels in circles or stands still, and so does not gain momentum in either direction — positive (for) or negative (against).

We should consider negative capability when engaged in arguments both inside and outside the classroom. The either/or system overlooks both/and conditions that surface in cases of overlap or blending between two or more seemingly opposing theories, or when competing theories each contain elements of the factual. This could be the cause of stalemates in debates such as Darwinism versus creationism, and whether souls exist. Beliefs surrounding these topics tend to be divided rigidly into black or white: If Darwin’s theory of evolution is true, then creationism must be a myth, and we evolve as per Darwinist theory. If created by a Supreme Being, we could not have evolved. If there are such things as ghosts and auras, then why is there no solid evidence for them; if they do not exist, then how do we explain the accounts of encounters with them that reach back for an aeon of history? The theory of

Darwinism is backed by supporting evidence in the form of fossils and fossilised imprints found around the world. However, these fossil data do not inconclusively support the theory of evolution for reasons such as the fact that fossil records often lack transitional forms and that there are 'explosions' of new life forms for which no evolutionary patterns can be detected. And even if they did, they do not inconclusively rule out an initial creation act. Whether in our world there exist ghosts and angels is another example of a debate locked in stalemate. The atheist is as convinced by his own disbelief as is the religious disciple, both driven purely by faith. But we can start to break up this stalemate by asking more questions of it. One can study many types of energies scientifically. The eon-old belief in ghosts and auras can be tested scientifically today using equipment such as thermographic cameras, audio recorders, and the Kirlian camera.

Some things are simultaneously true and not true. For example: it is simultaneously true and not true that I am sitting on the chair in my office. As I write this page, I am in my chair. I might revise while sitting in another chair, or propped up in bed, or in a library. In other words, as you read this, I may or may not be anywhere near my chair. Hence, that I am sitting on my chair, or in a coffee shop, or sprawled out on the University of Rhode Island quad on a clear, 70-degree spring afternoon, when considering the context of time, is simultaneously true and not true.

As another example: Which of these is least like the others?

- a) Aries the Ram
- b) Leo the Lion
- c) Pisces the Fish
- d) Virgo the Virgin

The anthropocentric choice is Virgo, as the chaste maiden is the only human of the group. But an equally valid choice under a different system of logic is c), because Pisces is the only fish, swimming in a sea of mammals.

Recall a parallel thread of rhetoric that has been around since at least classical Greece, but was eclipsed by the powerful win-prove ideology, undoubtedly modelled after Plato's version of dialectics, in which a back-and-forth questioning process will sort the true from the false as to ultimately reveal what is Universally True. The *dissoi logoi* describe the Sophistic pedagogical strategy of having students argue both sides of an issue so as to gain fuller understanding, a technique attributed to Protagoras, who is said to have justified this pedagogical approach by arguing that (at least) two opposing and contradictory accounts exist in every experience. A well-known example evaluates death as something that is not bad or good, but is just as good as it is bad — bad for the person who died but good for the undertaker who earns money as a result. Extrapolating from this example, scholars have drawn a model of Sophistic argument as being comprised of two opposing halves, one side pro and one

side con. But George B. Kerferd challenges the two-part model, offering instead his own reading, in which the essential feature of *dissoi logoi* 'was not simply the occurrence of opposing arguments but the fact that both opposing arguments could be expressed by a single speaker, as it were, within a single complex argument' (Jarratt, 1991: 50). In other words, the Sophistic argument is not a true-or-false algorithm divided into opposing halves, but rather each argument is a single, wholly-formed entity that is composed of a truth that is multifaceted and reticulate.

About Win-rhetoric's insistence of clear delineations between Black/White, Truth/Fiction: In the more advanced stages of intellectual and ethical development, individual are able to understand relativity and flexibility, 'truths' as unstable, continuous developments. Adults generally develop through these four stages: 1) dualism, in which the world is seen as black and white; something is either right or wrong, and 'authorities know' the truth; 2) multiplicity, in which students believe they must trust their 'internal voices' as there are too many conflicting answers to rely on external authorities; 3) relativism, in which the student comes to realize there are disciplinary reasoning methods that account for different opinions on the same topic; 4) constructed knowledge, which is the integration of knowledge learned from others with personal experience and reflection.

The Sophists were ahead of their time. They were teaching toward higher stages of intellectual and ethical maturity. According to several twentieth-century theorists who wrote of stage-level development (Perry, 1968; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Piaget, 1970), people who are in the lower levels of intellectual and ethical development believe the world exists in clear, black-and-white delineations. Notice how closely the practice of win argument resembles the lowest stage of dualism, in that there is the expectation of a clear delineation between claim and counterclaim. Perhaps that student essays sometimes turn out flat and dispassionate is because they are taught to argue in the low, limited level of the dualistic argument. Are we slowing down students' progress through the stages of development with our very pedagogical practices that we hope and expect are teaching critical thinking skills? Would emphasis on exploring rather than winning arguments help them develop more quickly through the stages? In more advanced stages of development, it becomes easier for us to see variation and definition in the grey. We learn to understand that many truths are relative, flexible, unstable, and continuously in development. Too important to ignore is the link between stage-level development and the ability to understand complexity and multiplicity of arguments, and this renders it integral to integrate works such as Perry's into our curriculum.

Patricia King's research on stage-level development has uncovered a link between moral sensitivity, the 'seeing things from others' perspectives' (King,

2009: 610), with character traits observed in those who have reached the advanced stages of relativity and multiplicity. King argues that cognitive and moral development in college students are linked, possibly interdependent. Moral development, she insists, 'does not simply represent an increasing knowledge of cultural values usually leading to ethical relativity. Rather, it represents the transformations that occur in a person's form or structure of thought' (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977: 54). She prophesizes that educators who 'aspire to promote development as well as content mastery help students understand the basis for their decisions, explore alternative bases and approaches, and consider the criteria used to compare the quality of alternative explanation' (King, 2009: 599).

Despite the potential benefits of incorporating cognitive process theories into writing pedagogy, to date this has not been successfully done. Patricia Bizzell explains that the failure in this case was that cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, were 'misused to diagnose struggling students as mentally retarded, arrested and what Piaget and Vygotsky call the egocentric stage of cognitive development, aka dualism in Perry's scheme' (Bizzell, 2009: 175). This explanation suggests that the disenchantment came about not because stage-level theories were debunked, but because of the political implications of referring to struggling students as mentally retarded people, stuck in the dualistic stages of development.

Although incorrectness is valid criticism against the misapplication of stage-level development theories to argumentation pedagogy, the potential gains are too important to ignore. Attention to such pedagogy may, in fact, help override debilitating habits of mind our education system, beginning as early as elementary school. Influenced by the belief that the 'ability to make rational choices among competing alternatives is crucial for active and mine full participation in contemporary society [and that] it is skills of argument that help people resolve controversies' (Reznitskaya, Anderson, & Kuo, 2007: 472), a team of researchers reported in dismay that in a study conducted on elementary-school-aged children's argumentation abilities reported with dismay that only two percent of fourth graders can 'present a position and consistently supported with well-chosen reasons' (Reznitskaya, Anderson, & Kuo, 2007: 450). The authors are clearly suggesting this is a flaw in our educational system. I am concerned by this attitude that students at such an early age would be expected to argue so firmly. Perhaps this is a phenomenon not accounted for in Perry's and Piaget's stage-level-development models — that we start off in the relativistic stage — and this is part of the reason why so few fourth graders can consistently defend a position. In other words, perhaps kindergarten through fifth grade, and freshman through senior years in college, follow an opposite pattern — children start out thinking relativistically and are taught to think dualistically, and in college,

undergo an evolutionary shift in which they slowly progress from the dualistic to the relativistic.

Invested so in this project of improving argumentation pedagogy, I gave it solid shape in by introducing the concept in the two sections of WRT201 (Written Argumentative and Persuasive Texts) I taught at the University of Rhode Island during the Spring semester of 2010. I loosened the definition of persuasive to include the persuasion of self while exploring topics. For all five of the paper topics I assigned that semester — an argument of fact, of causation, of proposal, of evaluation, and of justification — I announced that I would judge best papers as those that worked not to win, but to explore arguments. The goal was not to defend or prove a single position, but to show what valid arguments exist on all sides of the issue via an essay split into three or more distinct sections. I asked my students to split their papers into three or more distinct sections. Each section was to contain a defence of a specific viewpoint on the same topic, so that each essay would contain at least three fully developed positions. For example, a paper on a political issue could include one section defending a liberal stance, another with a conservative argument, and a third with a middle-ground thesis. The goal was to give students the opportunity to explore various perspectives as to loosen the grip of bias, and in this way encourage them to reflect more deeply about the issue in its entirety. When assigning this paper, I stressed to my students that, in this assignment, they were to treat arguments not as win/lose battles, but as jumping off points, opportunities for interrogating even our very own previously conceived answers.

In a class session during the beginning of the semester, I illustrated what an essay might look like: One section might argue for the closing of Planned Parenthood because the organization provides abortions, and it is morally wrong to abort an unborn child. Another section could argue in support of Planned Parenthood. A student's justifications for this might be that women should be allowed the right to choose, or that the organization provides other services than abortions, such as free breast examinations to underprivileged women. In a third section, the students might make an argument for compromise: Even people who would otherwise not condone abortion should consider special circumstances. For example, if one or both of the parents have physical or mental health issues that might be inherited by the child, an abortion might be justified. Or at least be easier to stomach. Other considerations that further complicate the argument that a foetus is either merely a clump of cells or a life in its own right are questions such as whether there is evidence of consciousness in an unborn foetus, and if foetuses have the ability to feel pain, and if the existence of a heartbeat offers proof of life.

I optimistically expected that my WRT201 experiment would be a brilliant success. I was certain my students would appreciate this somewhat unconventional approach to writing an argument to fulfil a requirement in a first-year

composition classroom. Unfortunately, what I envisioned in my eager imagination was not at all what transpired in the real-world classroom. Instead, clearly indicating the stronghold that win-rhetoric has, my students that semester engaged in conversation such as these:

I'm going to argue that Dr. Kevorkian murdered 130 patients, and this was wrong. (An overheard conversation in the classroom.)

But if we address counterargument, isn't that kind of defeating the purpose? (Discussion with a student during an office-hour meeting.)

This is a weak essay, because it's like he's arguing against himself. I don't know what he's trying to prove. (Student feedback on a peer's early draft.)

Clearly, a few short months are not enough to reverse such deeply engrained arguing-to-win ideology. End-of-semester student reflection letters make this clear. Here is one response: 'Another example would be in the first peer review where I wrote to Christine³, stating, "One of the main things is I felt as if [...] you're just portraying both sides of the argument and never really picked a side until the last sentence"'. This shows my failure in these WRT201 classes: the assignment was to refrain from picking a side. I lost the battle. And maybe my defeat was warranted. After all, who am I to dissuade any other person from holding a firm point of view? There are many practical reasons for doing so. Think how debilitating it would be, if we were to refuse to make any decisions. Should I (or you) buy that dress? Should I (or you) become a vegan? Adopting my strategy would not be useful in many careers as well. Think of the politicians who are called 'flip-floppers' when they appear to change opinions. Imagine how detrimental it would be for a courtroom lawyer to admit, 'Your Honour, my opponent does bring up a good point that I had not considered before'.

Still, I believe that composition pedagogy should become better adapted to strategies that accurately reflect the complexity of most arguments while also encouraging development of physical and emotional maturity in students. How we teach arguments, how we define them in the classroom, how we manage our grading criteria, and what features we decide will characterise the well-written argument are key points to consider as we further develop argumentation pedagogy, written and otherwise. Sterile essays lacking creative and critical thought are not the fault of subject matter, but result when students, concerned about their grades, try to please by arguing in favour of the teacher's position. Overemphasizing Win-rhetoric pedagogy runs the risk of devaluing a function of writing that is equal in importance to communication and debate:

³ 'Christine' is a pseudonym chosen by the student.

the use of writing as an ‘instrument of learning and personal development’ (Burnham, 1986: 152).

I do not deny the importance of teaching students how to win arguments, and I admit to my own failed attempt to introduce *dissoi logoi* into the classroom. Still, I keep looking for ways to bring alternative pedagogies into the classroom. Reflecting on that failed WRT201 classroom experience, I eventually decided where I went wrong. I did not do enough to help students see how very many parts and tangential issues found in most arguments. To rectify this shortcoming, I looked into heuristics, and decided that Young, Becker, and Pike’s Tagmemic Grid⁴ might be helpful. That following semester, upon assigning my students the task of writing a persuasive paper on the topic of ethics, I encouraged (required) them to begin by filling out a Tagmemic Grid template as a pre-writing invention exercise.

TAGMEMICS AND THE QUESTION OF ETHICS.

TOPIC: STEALING

Stealing viewed as a static particle, as a snapshot of a single feature in a unit:

In contrast, what is it and how do you define/describe it?	In variation, how is it similar to or different from things similar?	In distribution, what parts and characteristics make it up?
Dictionary.com defines stealing as 1) To take (the property of another or others). 2) To appropriate (ideas, credit, words, etc.) without right or acknowledgement. 3) To take, get, or win insidiously, surreptitiously, subtly, or by chance.	A wallet can be physically stolen; a copyright law can be violated (stealing someone’s story, essay, <i>etc.</i>); one can steal food for survival; we can steal metaphorically (stealing one’s heart or girlfriend) or in sports (stealing first base).	Context of ethics. Stealing is less of an ethical concern than killing because ‘stealing’ suggests stolen material possession versus the taking of another’s life. Stealing might be more immoral than some lies (<i>i.e.</i> , of the white variety). Stealing first base in baseball is of ethical concern if the base was stolen illegally according to the rules of the game.

⁴ The Tagmemic Grid is a nine-celled multiperspectival grid that offers users the ability to organise and view data according to these concepts: a particle, which highlight different features of a unit; a wave, in which no clear-cut boundaries are defined; a field, which focuses on the relationship that connects the unit to other units. Each of these three categories ranges from: contrast, which observes the unit as a fixed object; variation, which considers the unit as one in a group; distribution, in which the unit is classified in a larger context.

Stealing viewed as a wave, as a fusion, smear, or flow:

In contrast, what is it and how do you define/describe it?	In variation, how is it similar to or different from things similar?	In distribution, what parts and characteristics make it up?
Historically, there was only the concept of the common ownership — <i>this</i> tribe settled in <i>this</i> area; <i>that</i> tribe settled over there. Jean-Jacques Rousseau explained the concept of land ownership by an individual person was developed when someone put a fence around a plot of land and said ‘This is mine!’ and got enough people to believe it.	Stealing is similar to the concept of private property, which has been blamed for leading to great economic and political conflict. Capitalism, communism, and socialism are three political systems that developed in response to the idea of ownership.	Historically attached to material conditions (steal land, steal a horse, etc.). Today, it has expanded to include ethical concerns. (Is it wrong to steal for greed? Is it right to steal food from the rich to give to the poor?) There are linguistic aspects as well, such as the metaphor ‘steal one’s heart’. Abstract concepts such as ideas can be stolen (hence patents and copyrights).

Stealing viewed as a field, as an independent unit connected to other units within a larger system:

In contrast, what is it and how do you define/describe it?	In variation, how is it similar to or different from things similar?	In distribution, what parts and characteristics make it up?
Generally, stealing is categorised under the wider system of ethics, defined by Dictionary.com as a system of moral principles; the ethics of a culture. Ethics also include the moral principles of an individual: His ethics forbade betrayal of a confidence.	The rules of conduct recognised in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc. (e.g., medical ethics; Christian ethics). The ethics of one culture and of different individuals of the same culture are often at odds.	Ethics is that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

This activity worked fairly well in helping me achieve my goal of getting students to think more deeply and widely about ethical arguments. There are drawbacks to this method, however. First, because it is so unfamiliar and somewhat complicated, it took quite some time before students were able to successfully complete the grid, taking valuable time out of the semester I hoped to spend on other topics. Also, the essays resulting from data extracted from

the grid were not necessarily argumentative in nature, but more informative and explorative. Although I applaud any successful attempt to reach deeper understanding of a topic, this in itself does not fall under the genre of an argumentative essay.

Nevertheless, I decided to follow the ‘third time is a charm’ philosophy and try yet again, this time by introducing the Rogerian argument⁵ into the classroom. In the following semester, I assigned my students the task of writing a Rogerian argument on a topic of their choice. I stressed to my students that goals of arguments are not always and only to defeat opponents, but very often are (or at least should be) used as means to ‘resolve conflict and achieve social cooperation’ (Yagelski & Miller 14). I instructed them to keep in mind that this particular subgenre of the written argument is not a pro/con debate in which the goal is to defeat one’s opponent, but is instead about confronting complexities that arise in the case of complex and highly debated issues. I explained that this particular argument structure is most applicable to emotionally charged situations, I explained, and this fact can and should influence what topic each student chose to write about. Whereas an argument of fact might work to prove whether there are or are not Sasquatch, a Rogerian argument might be more appropriate in situations when reducing tensions is part or wholly the goal, such as when working through a personal disagreement with a co-worker, friend, or family member. Using a section of Robert P. Yagelski and Robert K. Miller’s textbook, *The informed argument*, as a guide, I created the following template for my students to use as they drafted their own Rogerian arguments.

TEMPLATE FOR WRITING A ROGERIAN ARGUMENT

Like all subgenres of argumentation, the Rogerian is context-specific, and so more appropriate for an argument between two friends who truly want to understand each other’s positions than it would be for use in a courtroom or political debate. Because it looks quite different in both arrangement and content than most arguments you’re used to seeing and writing, I’m providing the below template for you to refer to as you draft your own Rogerian argument.

- 1) Introduction: This is a summary of the topic of discussion. This first section should not contain any ‘sides’ discussion, *e.g.*, what the arguments in favour/against are. Merely describe what the topic is about using neutral language. You are detached here. Think like a reporter: who/

⁵ The Rogerian argument was named after the American psychologist Carl R. Rogers, who proposed that we try to understand an adversary’s position, by listening to the, before adopting a point of view.

what/where/when/how. Forget about ‘why’ for now, you’ll develop the ‘why’ in later sections).

- 2) Summary of ‘Opposing’ Views: Describe fairly and fully what the ‘opponent’s’ position is regarding this topic. Your point here is to give them the floor first, confirm that you are paying attention and working to completely understand where they’re coming from. Please notice that you still haven’t stated your own position on the topic. Be patient. Your turn will come later.
- 3) Statement of Understanding: List any and all ways/situations/contexts when the ‘opponent’s’ point of view/proposal/etc. might be most appropriate. This could be real, or it could be hypothetical, or a combination of both. The more credence you can give to this section, the more you are showing that you truly understand the other viewpoints(s) and are insightful and respectful enough to ‘get it’.
- 4) Statement of Your Position: Ah, finally it’s turn to express your position! This section is what most closely resembles a traditional argumentative essay’s first paragraph, in which you state your position in a thesis-driven manner.
- 5) Statement of Contexts: Ditto Part 3, except now its turn for you to point out when your viewpoint/idea/etc. is most appropriate.
- 6) Statement of Benefits: Here’s the WIIFM (‘What’s in it for me?’). Tell your audience how he/she/they/it would benefit by adopting your position.

To date, I have had the most success with this Rogerian argument assignment.⁶ Several students said that the assignment was eye opening for them; they had no idea there were other ways to write arguments rather than the standard five-paragraph Aristotelian eristic argument. I did have some resistance to this assignment, mostly by students who did not think it applicable to themselves. One such student was a bright young computer science major, a very logical and linear thinker. He said in class that he can think of absolutely no use for him in his personal or professional life to ever use the Rogerian argument. In response, I said:

Let’s imagine you are dating a girl you really like. You get in a big disagreement, and your girlfriend says, ‘If you don’t [do this, don’t do this, change this] then I’m out of here!’ If you really like the girl and you want to keep her around, which argument do you think you’d have more success in applying? The Rogerian or the Aristotelian?

My young engineering major replied: ‘Ah’. He then smiled and sat back in his chair. That was good enough for me.

⁶ By the time of this writing, I have assigned the Rogerian argument to several semesters’ worth of students.

I urge once again that we do not forget that the majority of our students are young and still developing mentally and emotionally. We tend to slow their development using the very same pedagogical strategies we hope and expect will help them develop maturity and critical thinking skills. But we need, instead, to serve as guides by meeting them at their level of maturity, to be their gentle mentors as they explore arguments for themselves. This means teaching the sort of relativism that denies the rewarding of Win-rhetoric skills. If we are to be social visionaries who teach English in a way that will give our students the critical thinking and arguing skills to successfully engage in and influence public sphere conversations, then in our classrooms we can guide our students through these complex stages of development so they can reach the level of maturity necessary to sustain committed engagement with matters that affect them. The time for such implementation in our teaching styles is now, while composition studies as a field is still defining itself, still trying to discover what it will become when it reaches toward mature stages.

Let us urge responsible teachers of rhetoric to not insist that their students prove a point before we are willing to evaluate their arguments as successful, but to support them as they explore and negotiate multiple sides of issues. We should encourage the writing of tentative and open theses that are ready to shift and mature at a rate that coincides with the progressive development of their human originators. Instead of pressing upon our students the responsibility of hunkering down in a camp and fighting to defend one particular position, we should instead encourage them to explore issues from various perspectives, to look for strengths and flaws in all sides of arguments, and especially work to uncover what questions about the topic are still unknown. This practice would lead students away from the homunculus notion of much Win-rhetoric, that all arguments are constructed out of two parts that stand in black-and-white opposition to one another — one side is true/right and the other is false/wrong. As students learn, as they continue to mature emotionally and intellectually, they will eventually construct their own arguments that are complex as they are simultaneously committed but still open to the possibility that they might be incomplete and partially correct at best.

Despite the obstacles of which there are certainly many, it is important to create a new discourse surrounding teaching in English studies, a daunting but critical task of which we can start by opening up a forum for critical reflection, and for spirited and informed debate from a multiplicity of positions and perspectives. Likewise, our students are working to define themselves, are growing through stages of development. Rather than squelching their own growth, rather than indoctrinating them into our own ideologies, we teachers and researchers of composition must lift our students up by providing loose scaffolding that will support but not constrain them as they, along with their ability to write arguments that are reflective and deliberative, grow. There is little to be

lost and much to be gained from letting students learn about commitment by first coaxing them away from feeling obligated to commit. We need to do this because it is important work and we have access to them at a critical stage in their development, when the majority are just entering adulthood and starting to define what kind of people they will become.

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