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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge Corwin Literacy, my publisher, whose design team finalized the artwork for Paraphrase Plus.

Building an Earnest and Amicable Argument Culture in the Secondary Classroom

DAVE STUART JR.

“I want students to see argument in a larger, less militant, and more comprehensive context — one in which the goal is not victory but a good decision, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own.”

—Richard Fulkerson, *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, 1996, p. 17

How do we build the kinds of argument cultures in our classrooms that typify Fulkerson’s description above? This question has led me to many insights in my ninth grade classrooms during the past decade. Even before public discourse in the United States devolved into its current state of name-calling, echo chambers, and zero-summanship, I was gratefully influenced by argumentation advocates such as Fulkerson (1996), as well as Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff (2014) or Michael Schmoker (2011).

A chief insight that the above mentioned thinkers provide is this: Not all argumentative thinking is useful to society; some kinds of argument promote the flourishing life, and some kinds of argument undermine it. This is why I appreciate the College, Career, and Community Writers Program’s (C3WP) brand of argumentation. It is something deeper and richer than a zero-sum showdown. It’s “not wrangling, but a serious and focused conversation among people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things cooperatively” (Williams & McEnerney, n.d.). It reminds me of Professor Lindsay Ellis’s call for teaching the goal of argument as “com[ing] to the best possible solution to a problem through discussion;” Ellis says we must help our students see that the right kind of arguing helps us “develop nuanced positions through a process of critical deliberation” (2015).

This kind of argumentation is foreign to my students, and so I directly teach them about it at the start of the year as something that we call “earnest and amicable argument.” The

label is a bit clunky — purposefully so. Its clunkiness makes it fresh-ground in their minds, free of the usual mental baggage attached to the word “argument.”

The word *earnest* is important in that this kind of argument involves “sincere and serious conviction” (“Earnest,” 2018). It’s the opposite of flippant, or apathetic, or half-hearted. And *amicable* is the other side of things, lest we become dreadfully serious. At its Latin heart (*amicus*), this word means “friend.” In Late Middle English, *amicable* started to show up to mean pleasant or benign. Earnest and amicable arguments are both serious and joyful, good for the mind and good for the soul. That’s what I’m after in my classroom.

After having a brief lesson on what I mean by earnest and amicable argument, where do we go from there? In this article, I’d like to share two macro-strategies I use for establishing this kind of argument culture in my room.

I use Graff and Birkenstein’s They Say / I Say templates to demystify the moves of argument. If my students are to engage in this countercultural kind of argument, this “earnest and amicable” kind, then I must provide them with the language “moves” that make this kind of argument possible. I know of no better source for these than those put forth for years by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. To help my ninth grade students understand how these work together, I organize a selection of the moves into something that I call Paraphrase Plus.

Paraphrase Plus (see Figure 1) is the central set of moves used in good, engaging Pop-Up Debates (more on those in a minute) — as well as the central set of moves used in effective marital conversations!

In the first month of the school year, I introduce one or two of these templates at a time, asking students to use them in their warm-up writing, in their early article of the week reflections, or in their think-pair-share conversations. By October, I’m ready to introduce Paraphrase Plus to students as a means of improving our whole-class Pop-Up Debates. I will discuss these next.

PARAPHRASE
_____, you're basically saying _____.
_____, I hear you saying _____.
_____’s key point is _____.
AGREE & ADD-ON
I agree with what you're saying and would even add _____.
You're dead-on, and here's another reason why: _____.
You nailed it. After all, there's the additional point that _____.
DISAGREE WITH REASONS
The primary problem with that is _____.
The reason that your statement can't stand is _____.
I don't agree because _____.
COMPLICATE
I can see why you'd say that—after all, _____.
But I can also see _____ being true.
Isn't it more complicated than that, though? I mean, what about _____?
Do you think you might be missing _____?

Figure 1: Paraphrase Plus: A Central Move of Great Discussions. (Source: Concept derived from Graff and Birkenstein [2014]. Special thanks to Erica Beaton for design inspiration. Image crated by Dave Stuart Jr.)

Starting in the third week of the school year, I ask students to engage in whole-class Pop-Up Debates, which we hold on a biweekly basis. Years ago, when I was first convinced of the need to increase the volume of arguing my students were doing, I went online searching for how to facilitate classroom debates. The best resource I could find was a description of something called the Lincoln-Douglas format, and I won't put *LAJM* readers through the confounding exercise of trying to figure out how to make a Lincoln-Douglas debate intelligible to students because I could never really master what it took to make it intelligible to mine. (Kudos to those who have!) But we did hold several debates in that format, and then we held some more because I was convinced that my students wouldn't become better arguers without actually receiving mandatory opportunities to argue.

As we continued using the Lincoln-Douglas format, I began taking pieces off: no more specific argumentative actions per speech; no more set time limits for a given component of speech; no more hard and fast use of binary debate prompts; no more mandatory coming to the front of the class. Eventu-

ally, we left behind the Lincoln-Douglas format completely.

We ended up with a structure I called Pop-Up Debate:

- 1. Every student speaks one time minimum to two times maximum, depending on time constraints as determined by the teacher. (I remove or modify maximums based on the needs of each given debate.)
- 2. To speak, students simply “pop up” at their desks and talk. The first person to speak has the floor; in other words, the teacher does not serve as the “who spoke first?” judge. When multiple students pop up, students must practice (and initially, they must be taught) politely yielding the floor. Argument is a collaborative endeavor, and collaboration isn't a finger-pointing delivery of, “You sit down. I was up first.”

Prior to every Pop-Up Debate that we hold, I teach an argumentative or speaking target skill. At the start of the year, these skills are so basic that what's happening during our discussions isn't really earnest and amicable argument — it's a bunch of students standing up and speaking in silos.

Target skills for Pop-Up Debates:

- Pop-Up Debate #1: Make a claim in response to the prompt.
- Pop-Up Debate #2: Make and explain a claim in response to the prompt.
- Pop-Up Debate #3: Use Paraphrase Plus.
- Pop-Up Debate #4: Use PVLEGS to improve delivery. (PVLEGS is an acronym developed by Erik Palmer in his book *Well-Spoken*. It stands for Poise, Voice, Life, Eye contact, Gestures, and Speed.)

When each Pop-Up Debate ends, I ask students to compare our early notes on “earnest and amicable” argument with how we performed as a group in the day’s debate. I ask students to respond — in writing, in pairs, or as a whole group — to questions like these:

- Where did you see evidence in our group of earnest arguing? Where did you see amicability?
- How could we improve as a whole group? How could you improve individually?
- Where do you see evidence that we’ve grown as a group of public arguers? Where do you see evidence that you’ve grown?

These post-debate reflective conversations are as fruitful for me as they are for my students. From these, I glean where we need to go next in our pursuit of a thriving, earnest, and amicable argumentative classroom. Whether building on Graff and Birkenstein’s sentence templates or improving our use of eye contact, each debate provides an opportunity for deepening our work as listening arguers and reflective speakers.

Conclusion

These two approaches to argument culture-building -- regular pop-up debates and explicit sentence templates à la Graff and Birkenstein — are the best tools I’ve found useful in building an earnest and amicable argument culture in my classroom. They have two important functions, in that they make argument both more accessible to all students and more appealing. In this way, these approaches set up the canvas for exploring the many useful and practical materials provided by the C3WP.

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Dave Stuart Jr. is a high school teacher whose blog about teaching is read by over 35,000 people each month. His book, *These 6 Things: How to Focus Your Teaching on What Matters Most* (Corwin Literacy), has encouraged and equipped teachers around the world.