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Reductions of the Already Reduced: The Neglect of Qualifiers, Rebuttals, and Backing in Appropriations of the 'Toulmin Model' in Contemporary Composition Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: Although the 'Toulmin Model' came relatively late to the field of composition-rhetoric, it could be argued that it now exerts a stronger influence on the study and teaching of writing in North American colleges and universities than it does on the study and teaching of speech, where it was appropriated much earlier. It is now nearly impossible to find a writing textbook or handbook that doesn't adopt Toulmin's 'layout' to talk about written argumentation; and the model is a central feature of many first-year writing programs. But a curious thing happened to Toulmin's model between its original presentation in *The Uses of Argument* and its later appropriation in composition-rhetoric textbooks and curricula. Although it was Toulmin's express purpose to develop an insistently non-formal approach to analyzing arguments, one that was capable of representing more of the complexity of real-world argumentation than the old syllogistic logic and was more open to the enormous variety of argumentative practices and criteria of evaluation across intellectual and practical fields (more 'candid,' Toulmin wrote), the Model that shows up in composition-rhetoric is often a drastic reduction of the original, one that turns Toulmin's approach into a version of the old syllogistic system that he was at such pains to reject.

For example, appropriations of the Model in composition-rhetoric textbooks have typically emphasized only the first three parts of Toulmin's six-part 'layout' – claim, data, and warrant – and either seriously neglected or even altogether eliminated one or more of the other three parts – qualifiers, rebuttals, and backing. The neglect of the latter, backing, has been especially pernicious, we believe: for Toulmin, implied or explicit backing statements, unlike the rule-like warrants, were precisely what made real-world arguments both substantial – that is, non-amenable to formal, geometrical assessments of validity – and field-dependent – that is, particular to the 'logic' of particular communities. And these are, ironically, the features of ordinary discursive argumentation that are often of most interest to contemporary rhetoricians and compositionists. The failure to 'see' them in Toulmin is both a distortion of his model and a potential disservice to our students

Furthermore, the neglect of rebuttals and qualifiers in Toulmin's model of argument is antithetical to the current dialogic theories of writing promulgated in composition programs. It is the rebuttals and qualifiers in Toulmin's model that help teach written argument as a social

activity. It seems rhetoricians and compositionists are working against their stated goal of teaching written argument as a dialogue when they neglect these two aspects along with backing.

In this paper, we present an empirical study of the appropriations of Toulmin in contemporary writing textbooks and educational programs and a discussion of why we believe the model has been reduced the way it has, what might be the implications of such reductions, and what writing teachers and scholars can do about it.

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