

University of Windsor Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 9

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

Is data the plural of anecdote? Inductive arguments in composition

Patrick Clauss
University of Notre Dame

Laura Pinto

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Patrick Clauss and Laura Pinto, "Is data the plural of anecdote? Inductive arguments in composition" (May 18, 2011). *OSSA Conference Archive*. Paper 49.

<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA9/papersandcommentaries/49>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Is data the plural of anecdote? Inductive arguments in composition

PATRICK CLAUSS

*University Writing Program
University of Notre Dame
205 Coleman Morse Center
Notre Dame, IN 46556
United States
pclauss@nd.edu*

ABSTRACT: College writing classes are the ideal site for teaching argument. Writing students develop arguments with a frequency and insistence not present in other disciplines. Typically, however, when their curricula include reasoning instruction, composition courses over-emphasize deductive syllogisms and enthymemes. Inductive logic, the recognition of a pattern within a data set or an ampliative inference, is more useful in composition, and an effective composition curriculum makes ample room for the study and practice of inductive arguments.

KEYWORDS: ampliative inferences, argument pedagogy, composition, induction

1. INTRODUCTION

Lying in the dentist's chair recently, I spotted a poster warning about the dangers of chewing tobacco—standard fare at the dentist, where one is admonished to brush two to three times daily, floss regularly, and not even so much as think about eating candy.

What caught my eye about this particular poster was the caption at the bottom, located underneath two black and white photographs of a young man, Sean Marsee. "Sean Marsee," the copy read, "started using snuff at the age of 12. By age 18, he had developed a sore on his tongue. Doctors removed part of Sean's tongue, but the cancer had spread to his neck. Despite more surgery, Sean died a few months before his 19th birthday." Sean smiled in the photo on the left, a picture taken, it seemed, for his high school yearbook. In sharp contrast, in the photo on the right, Sean lay in a hospital bed, this time no longer smiling. Instead, an oxygen tube hung from his nose as he seemed to glare at the photographer (and, by extension, me, the hapless victim of my dentist's drill).

The argument's implied claim is clear: Smokeless tobacco causes cancer, not just in Sean's case, but in other cases, too. So, gentle viewer, if you start chewing or continue to chew tobacco, you could very well be next. Sean's story, of course, motivates viewers largely through the use of emotional appeals: One sees the smiling young man on the left, his whole future ahead of him, and one is filled with hope. Conversely, one sees the dying young man on the right, his life quickly coming to a close, and one is filled with sadness—or, for potential or current tobacco users, fear. A case practically torn from the pages of a textbook on rhetoric and persuasion, filed under "pathos."

Setting aside, however, the pathotic components, Sean's story is just that, a case. That is, Sean's case is a particular, specific example, one pulled from a much larger data set, and used, in synecdoche-like fashion (or, part for the whole), to stand for or exemplify other members of the data set—in this case, other users and potential users of chewing

tobacco, those who face or have faced similar risks of oral cancer and the other health problems associated tobacco use.

2. OVERVIEW

My discussion today is not about Sean’s story, tragic as it. Instead, I consider the ubiquitous nature of arguments relying on a strategy similar to that employed in the poster about Sean. I see the argument about Sean, the argument about the dangers of smokeless tobacco, working largely as an instance of inductive reasoning, defined here as the recognition of, or implication of, a (larger) pattern within a data set, based on a sample of that data set; and/or an ampliative inference, where the claim attempts to expand knowledge in the face of uncertainty (Holland et al. 1986: 1). Although such arguments are quite common, especially in the sorts of writing we typically assign first-year writing students, these arguments do not seem to receive much attention in textbooks in my own discipline, rhetoric and composition.

To illustrate the particular types of inductive arguments I have in mind, I will first offer several examples, including two from *The New York Times* and one from a student paper, a paper written for one of my freshman composition courses. While doing so, I will touch upon the relationships among inductive reasoning patterns and one of the four master tropes, synecdoche, where the part represents the whole. After commenting on the way inductive arguments are handled (or not) in several popular rhetoric and composition textbooks, I will consider a method for teaching writing students how to evaluate inductive arguments—their own, and those put forth by others. Finally, I will argue that the composition classroom is the perfect site for the teaching of argument, especially ampliative, inferential, inductive arguments.

3. INDUCTIVE, AMPLIATIVE, PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE STYLE ARGUMENTS

I am interested in arguments where the arguer invokes a presumably representative example (or examples), one selected from a larger set, in order to demonstrate a claim about not only the particular example itself but also, more importantly, the larger set. Had I but world enough and time, I could provide a long list of examples. (While preparing for and then writing this paper, I stumbled across perhaps hundreds of examples in my own daily reading.) In the interests of time, however, I will consider three:

The first comes from a recent *New York Times* piece by Stanley Fish. In “So’s Your Old Man,” Fish (2011) examines instances of a *tu quoque*-style argument strategy, where one “deflects attention from the substantive claims being made and puts the spotlight instead on propositional consistency.” Fish begins by looking at a recent Leonard Pitts *Miami Herald* column, one in which Pitts, according to Fish, “criticized Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour for failing to denounce ... [a] proposal to honor Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest by issuing a vanity license plate bearing his name.” The NAACP had pressured Barbour to denounce Forrest and the vanity plate, to which Barbour purportedly responded, “I don’t go around denouncing people” (as cited in Fish). Pitts, disagreeing with Barbour’s statement, challenged the argument thusly: “Presumably ... [Barbour] would be equally nonjudgmental if his state were to consider similar honors to Osama bin Laden, convicted spy Robert Hanssen or Columbine killers Eric Harris and

Dylan Klebold. Their legacies, after all, are combined in Forrest: terrorist, traitor, mass murderer” (as cited in Fish).

Herein lies Fish’s objections to Pitts, and, more importantly for my purposes in this paper, the argument move I examine: Fish quickly summarizes his take on Pitts’s central claim, “that Barbour earn his right to be non-judgmental with respect to Forrest by being willing to extend the same generosity to bin Laden, Hanssen, Harris, Klebold and literally thousands of others.” Fish moves then to his larger point, that Pitts invokes the principle that “condemnation or the withdrawal from condemnation must be evenhanded.” “You get the right to say something critical of what someone of the opposite party said or did,” Fish continues, “only if you would be similarly critical when members of your own party said or did something similar. And you get the right to refrain from criticizing some only if you will also refrain from criticizing others.” Before he offers, though, his own assessment of this principle, Fish writes, “*This is a familiar move in political argument* [italics added] ... it is related to the tu quoque, or ‘so’s your old man’ move.” Fish immediately provides another example, offering that “We saw it in spades a while ago when Democrats lamented the incivility of public discourse and blamed right-wingers for proclaiming over and over that President Obama was a foreign Islamic usurper working to undermine American values.” Notice what Fish does here: Though his argument at first seems to be primarily about Pitts—Fish’s disagreement with Pitts—Fish uses the Pitt’s example or case to move to a larger claim, a claim about the frequent or widespread nature of this move, this “familiar move.” Save his last two paragraphs, when he returns to the Pitts/Barbour issue, Fish devotes the rest of his text to an examination of the merits of this “familiar move.”

In short, for Fish and his readers, the Pitts instance functions as a particular case, a part representing a whole. With Fish’s use of the clause “this is a familiar move in political argument,” one may reasonably believe that Fish has other specific cases at his disposal, other examples (in addition to the Pitts one) he could provide on demand. Time and/or spatial constraints—or, readers not needing more evidence—preclude Fish from furnishing those other examples. Instead, his argument relies on the (stated) inference that the Pitts case is one among many. For Fish, the Pitts example is sufficiently representative of the members of the larger group.

My second example, also from *The New York Times*, is a relatively recent David Brooks piece. In “The Flock Comedies” (2010), Brooks, quoting critic Neal Gabler, examines a phenomenon in television sitcoms: sitcoms in which television is seen as “a kind of friendship machine dispensing groups of people in constant and intimate contact with one another.” “Flock comedies,” also defined as “sitcoms ... [with] a multitude of characters on hand zooming in and out of scenes,” serve several dramatic functions, Brooks argues; one he explores is their role in satisfying the entertainment and emotional needs of middle-aged Americans. These folks, according to Brooks, have limited free time, especially time outside the home with friends. “So,” Brooks contemplates, “these flock comedies serve another purpose for the middle-aged. They appeal to people who want to watch fictional characters enjoying the long, uninterrupted bonding experiences that they no longer have time or energy for.” Before he gets to this section, however—arguably, the central claim in a roughly 800-word piece—Brooks must first establish, for readers, the markers or patterns in the group, class, or set upon which he is commenting. That is, he must provide representative examples of “flock comedy” sitcoms.

Brooks does so two different ways: First, to argue that television sitcoms have changed in recent years, he describes what television sitcoms used to concern themselves with: “For most of television history, sitcoms have been about families. From ‘The Dick Van Dyke Show’ to ‘All in the Family’ to ‘The Cosby Show,’ TV shows have generally featured husbands and wives, parents and kids.” Notice, here, that three examples are given—one from the ’60s, one from the ’70s, and one from the ’80s—in relation to the claims about the larger groups or classes, “sitcoms ... about families” and “TV shows.” Part for the whole, in other words: The qualities of “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” “All in the Family,” and “The Cosby Show” stand for, by way of ampliative inference, the qualities of most or all television shows (about families) in those three decades.

Second, Brooks turns his attention to a different type of television sitcom, sitcoms not about families in the traditional sense but instead about “groups of unrelated friends who have the time to lounge around apartments, coffee shops and workplaces exchanging witticisms about each other and the passing scene.” The parameters or markers of that group or set having been laid out, Brooks offers representative samples to support his claim. Nine television sitcoms, spanning over 20 years, are included, with shows such as “Seinfeld,” “Sex and the City,” and “The Big Bang Theory” included in the list. It is here that Brooks offers his television as a “kind of friendship machine” claim. Notice, of course, that his focus has moved, in that section, from the specific shows listed to “television” itself: again, a part for the whole reasoning pattern.

My third example of part for the whole/inferential reasoning comes from a freshman essay, written by Ben, a young man in one of my writing courses last year. Students were assigned to write an evaluation argument—essentially, assessing someone’s or something’s quality and providing relevant and specific evidence to support the evaluative claims. Ben chose to write about a high school history teacher, whom I will refer to as Mr. Smith. Ben’s introductory thesis about Mr. Smith was as follows: “Mr. Smith significantly devalued the quality of the student-teacher relationship and was an absolutely horrible history teacher in almost all respects.” To support this rather sweeping thesis, Ben moves the reader through a series of sub-claims in his essay, claims focusing on, among other things, students’ perceptions of Mr. Smith’s intimidating ethos, his failure to clearly explain difficult concepts, and his unreasonable rigidity. In a representative paragraph, Ben writes

Mr. Smith claimed to be a flexible teacher, but it did not take long for us to question both his honesty and his flexibility. Case in point: On quizzes Mr. Smith required that answers be taken nearly word-for-word from the text or his notes, and when discrepancies arose between the two, he was never reasonable about finding a solution. For instance, when grading a quiz on Africa’s geography, he was particularly inconsistent. He had asked us to list the four boundaries of the Sahara Desert. We had received these in his notes, and they were listed there as the Atlas Mountains, the Sahel, the Nile River, and the Atlantic Ocean. The book, however, differed slightly from his notes, saying that the Atlas Mountains were only the western half of the northern border while the Mediterranean Sea bordered the eastern half. Although we explored both of these resources in class, Mr. Smith refused to accept the Mediterranean as an answer. He even went so far as to pull up his notes and say, “Look, it’s right here in the notes I gave you!” Students protested, showing him the page where it explicitly stated that the Mediterranean *was* considered a border. He didn’t budge, however, holding firm to his belief that we hadn’t gone over this discrepancy in class despite the arguments of every student in the room. As a result of frequent and blatant inconsistencies such as this one, many students began to question Mr. Smith’s integrity, and he continued to lose control of the class.

As do Fish and Brooks above, here we see a (student) writer offering a claim that relies largely on an inductive, part-for-the-whole style reasoning pattern. Immediately above, Ben's claims center around Mr. Smith's honesty, flexibility, and consistency—namely, that he is none of those things. To support these closely-related evaluative claims, Ben provides the anecdote of Mr. Smith's refusing to budge regarding the boundaries of the Sahara Desert. We assume that Ben, if pressed, should be able to provide other anecdotes or examples that also demonstrate Mr. Smith's apparent weaknesses. Ben gestures towards these other, unmentioned pieces of evidence with his use of phrases like "case in point" and "for instance," implicitly signalling that other evidence exists. Among other things, spatial and/or time constraints, however, prohibit the arguer from providing more evidence. The same was true in the Brooks and the Fish examples, too.

4. ARGUMENTATION AND REASONING IN COMPOSITION COURSES

The process of the arguer selecting out particular examples, particular members of a set of data, to arrive at and/or to support claims parallels the linguistic and cognitive processes made manifest in the trope synecdoche, what Corbett, in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (1990: 445), defines as "a figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole." It is worth noting that synecdoche is one of the Burkean "four *master tropes*": That is, along with metaphor, metonymy, and irony, Kenneth Burke (1969: 503), in *A Grammar of Motives*, sees synecdoche not just as a figurative usage of language (as does Corbett) but instead as playing a critical role in "the discovery and description of 'the truth.'" Consider, for instance, Burke's discussion of sensory representation and its relationship to the cognitive and linguistic processes made manifest via synecdoche. Burke writes (508),

Sensory representation is, of course, synecdochic in that the senses abstract certain qualities from the bundle of electro-chemical activities we call, say, a tree, and these qualities (such as size, shape, color, texture, weight, etc.) can be said to "truly represent" a tree. Similarly, artistic representation is synecdochic, in that certain relations within the medium "stand for" corresponding relations outside it.

Is this not similar to the processes the arguers cited above (Fish, Brooks, Ben) engage in? Certain qualities or entities are abstracted or pulled from a larger set and then offered to readers as standing as representative examples of that set. For instance, in the case of Ben's argument about his high school history teacher's failings, we assume that the man's inflexibility about the boundaries of the Sahara is synecdochic of his inflexibility regarding other matters, too. Part for the whole, in other words. Given the data Ben provides, together both the reader and the writer make the ampliative inference that the teacher was inflexible not just in that particular instance but in other, similar instances as well.

5. INDUCTION IN A SMALL SAMPLE OF WRITING TEXTBOOKS

I turn my attention, briefly, to induction's coverage in a small selection of some of the top-selling textbooks in my own discipline, rhetoric and composition. As a composition scholar and teacher, I am interested in how argumentation is taught in writing textbooks, one of our students' two main points of contact for argumentation theory and pedagogy.

(The other is, of course, the classroom itself.) Outside an introductory philosophy or speech communications course, undergraduates are most likely to encounter argumentation definitions and practices in their freshman writing courses—the ideal site for such contact. (More on this point at the end.)

One top-selling composition text focusing on argument is Faigley and Selzer's *Good Reasons*. Published by Pearson, this text is one of the most widely-used in my own program at the University of Notre Dame; our textbook representative tells me it is one of Pearson's top sellers across the United States. Many of our instructors and students regularly report that they find the text accessible, well-organized, and relatively comprehensive in its coverage. Nowhere in the pages of *Good Reasons*, however, does one find coverage of inductive arguments; nor is there any discussion of synecdoche or any guidance whatsoever in drawing sound ampliative inferences. (And, to be fair, deductive arguments and enthymemes, too often a staple of composition books addressing argumentation and reasoning, are not covered, either.) Instead, *Good Reasons* focuses primarily on argument modes or types: definition, evaluation, rebuttal, and proposal, for instance. Why is there, I wonder, no instruction in reasoning patterns, besides general argument modes and fallacies? How does one judge what are in fact "good reasons"?

Another top-selling argument text in composition and rhetoric is *Everything's an Argument* (Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, Walters 2009). Though inductive reasoning is mentioned, it receives only passing notice (p. 40): "Inductive reasoning is the process of drawing a generalization on the basis of a number of specific examples." Nowhere is instruction regarding how one assesses the soundness or strength of an inductive argument provided. The same is true, unfortunately, with other popular rhetoric and composition textbooks that concern themselves with argument. Wilhoit's *A Brief Guide to Writing Academic Arguments* (2009) contains no mention whatsoever of inductive claims and the assessment thereof. The closest the text gets is a warning against "hasty generalization" in the section on "Common Logos-Related Fallacies" (p. 22). Warning against hasty generalizations is good advice, of course, but insufficient guidance, I argue, in relation to the construction of sound inductive inferences. Conversely, Rottenberg and Winchell's *The Structure of Argument* (2009), perhaps one of the best-known argument texts in composition and rhetoric, contains a somewhat long passage about induction, relatively speaking. Their coverage of induction runs just over four pages, including a sample essay they tag as "An Inductive Argument" (p. 324). However, induction is included, curiously enough, in a chapter titled "Avoiding Flawed Logic" (pp. 322-366). A short discussion regarding the assessment of inductive claims is also included, with special emphasis on what Rottenberg and Winchell call (p. 323) "the quantity and quality of your observations." Unfortunately, though, more specific guidelines for assessing the strength of inductive inferences are not included.

My purpose here is not to offer an exhaustive survey of every textbook available to the writing teacher interested in argument. The offerings are many and diverse, so any claims I may draw from such a small sample need a great deal of qualification: e.g., It seems that, in composition textbooks, coverage of induction and inferential reasoning may not be as wide-spread and detailed as I would hope it to be. Additionally, because the textbooks available for writing teachers are many and diverse, should a teacher wish to include a section on inductive arguments in the curriculum, that teacher could undoubtedly supplement the curriculum with other materials, materials from outside the

previously-selected course textbooks. For instance, one practical, supplemental text is Corbett and Eberly's roughly 100-page *The Elements of Reasoning*. This text includes a succinct and useful discussion of "what logicians call induction and rhetoricians call the example" (2000: 33). To be clear, though, *The Elements of Reasoning* is not a writing textbook *per se*; that is, there is no space devoted to explicit instruction in composing, revising, and editing written arguments.

One promising writing textbook, a relative newcomer to the market, is Kirszner and Mandell's *Practical Argument*. Of the composition/argumentation texts with which I am familiar, *Practical Argument* seems to have the most comprehensive coverage of inductive arguments, providing students with not only with useful definitions but also sensible advice on the design and evaluation of inductive, inferential claims. For instance, in their chapter on "Understanding Logic and Recognizing Fallacies," Kirszner and Mandell define inductive reasoning by providing students with a list of observations about water pollution (2011: 102): e.g., "Nearly 80% of ocean pollution comes from runoff"; "Drinking water can be contaminated by runoff"; and "In some areas, runoff pollution has forced beaches to be closed." Immediately after, they guide students in the move to a sample inductive claim, that "runoff pollution ... is a problem that must be addressed as soon as possible ... [or] the consequences for people and wildlife will be severe" (103). Kirszner and Mandell devote, then, eight more pages to their discussion of induction; most promising, I believe, is their inclusion of guidelines for students to use in the assessment of their own inductive claims and the inductive claims of others: Are the generalizations too broad? Is the evidence insufficient? Is the evidence irrelevant? and Are there any exceptions to the rule (i.e., the inductive claim) being proposed? (105-106).

While I am encouraged by Kirszner and Mandell's discussion of induction in *Practical Argument*, I do not believe writing teachers, especially those teachers who focus on argument, have fully explored the benefits of including curricular practice in composing and evaluating inductive, inferential claims. Kirszner and Mandell's *Practical Argument* (and others like it) is a good start, but there is more to be done.

For writing teachers interested in continuing that work, I recommend Fulkerson's 1996 *Teaching the Argument in Writing*. Fulkerson offers teachers—and by extension, students—the most useful rubric that I am aware of for the evaluation of inductive claims. He does not label the claims he examines as inductive, preferring instead to frame them as "substantiation claims," which he defines as "all arguments of the first *stasis*, that is, arguments with claims that do not involve value judgments" (44). (Earlier in the text, Fulkerson dismisses the traditional definitions of or distinctions between inductive logic or claims and deductive logic or claims, calling such distinctions (11) "both difficult and unnecessary.") Substantiation claims are, he clarifies (44), "descriptive generalizations." Being able to evaluate such claims is of primary importance for students and teachers of writing, Fulkerson notes, because we typically ask students for substantiation theses that are based on reading, direct experience, or observation (44). Teachers and students must be able to, in other words, assess the strengths of a wide variety of inferential claims.

To do so, Fulkerson offers a short set of evaluative questions, easily remembered with the acronym "STAR" (44). The individual elements of STAR break down as follows:

- **S** Sufficiency of grounds: Is there enough evidence to warrant the claim drawn?
- **T** Typicality of data: Do the data represent the group of data being argued about?
- **A** Accuracy: Is the information used as data true?
- **R** Relevance: Is the claim asserted relevant to the information about the sample?

Fulkerson then works out, in some detail, the application of each of these areas to sample substantiation arguments. While doing so, he guides readers through the nuances of argument analysis. For instance, while addressing the **S** domain, sufficiency of grounds, Fulkerson provides two examples where an arguer makes an inductive or ampliative inference based on a sample of the larger data set. In the first, the arguer buys a sealed bag of fifty individually-wrapped caramels, only to discover that the first three sampled are brittle and stale. The arguer in this case concludes that the entire bag is probably brittle and stale. “And that,” Fulkerson remarks, “would be satisfactory reasoning” (45). However, using a different example, Fulkerson shows that the sufficiency of grounds issue is not easily settled on the number of data sampled alone. To clarify, he offers the example of a high school history class, in which the instructor has assigned a class of fifty students the task of explaining Prohibition in the United States. He asks (p. 45):

When you have read four papers of the fifty and found that all four show that students know little about Prohibition or have serious misconceptions about what life was like during the period, would you,” he inquires, “be willing to assert a claim about the whole group as you did with the caramels?”

Most readers, of course, would assert “no.”

The sufficiency of grounds test is closely related, one quickly surmises, to the next test in the series, typicality: “If one caramel is like every other caramel,” Fulkerson writes, “then sampling one [or a few] is enough” (46). The types or varieties of evidence offered across the huge spectrum of real-world arguments, however, are not as uniform as caramels in a sealed bag, so the arguer often cites “more rather than less evidence, partly in order to increase the likelihood that ... data are typical” (46). The typicality test also applies quite well to the example that Fulkerson provided earlier, the one regarding the 50 high school history papers and the weak claims about Prohibition. Because a population of 50 high school students is not as homogenous as population of 50 pieces of candy, an arguer citing data from the stack of student papers—that is, an arguer attempting to select out representative samples or “parts for the whole”—would necessarily need to be more cautious with the types and strengths of claims offered.

Addressing the remaining two areas, the accuracy of the data and the relevance of the claim, Fulkerson offers a clear, concise overview of these two tests of (inductive) reasoning. Both discussions are nicely tied to the writing classroom and the rhetorical dimensions of written argument. For instance, Fulkerson advises writers considering the accuracy of their own data to “put yourself in the position of a critical reader,” one who will likely ask “How do you know that the factual assertion is accurate?” (p. 49). “The writer needs to anticipate such a response,” Fulkerson offers, “and build into the discourse a mini-argument for the accuracy of the evidentiary claims” (p. 49). While explaining how one assesses the relevance of the claim asserted to the available data, he provides an example of a student paragraph, one in which the relationship between the arguer’s claim (about education majors and their future plans) and the arguer’s evidence

(regarding four examples of friends or relatives of the arguer) is not as tight as the arguer intends (50). “Probably, in revision,” Fulkerson surmises, “the bulk of the paragraph could be salvaged by modifying the claim, but if the claim is important to the author, then the supporting data needs major modification” (p. 51). This is sound advice for any student writer: using the “R” of STAR (relevance of data to claim, of claim to data), consider the strength of the relationship between one’s provided evidence, evidence made manifest on the page, and one’s claims, also made manifest on the page. Overall, I find Fulkerson’s STAR assessment rubric to be a sound, specific, and practical tool. Writing teachers and students would be well-served by devoting greater attention to this mechanism.

6. CONCLUSION

Stanley Fish’s claims about Leonard Pitts and the “so’s your old man” argument strategy, David Brooks’s claims about television “flock comedies,” and Ben’s claims about Mr. Smith, his high school history teacher, concern themselves with quite trivial matters, really: Compared to arguments about pressing international issues—global warming, the population explosion, economies collapsing across the globe—there are more important claims for writers to advance and readers to assess. Claims like these matter, though, because they provide students and teachers of writing opportunities to investigate a strikingly common and powerful cognitive process, whereby one moves from assessing or acknowledging the characteristics of members of a sample to inferring broader claims about the larger group or set. Such claims offer us, in other words, opportunities to investigate and hone the processes whereby we, as arguers—as writers, speakers, language users—move up and down what Hayakawa and Hayakawa (1990: 84) refer to as the “abstraction ladder.” To explain, they offer the fictional example of Bessie the cow (p. 84):

When we say . . . that “Bessie is a cow,” we are only noting . . . Bessie’s resemblances to other ‘cows’ and *ignoring differences*. What is more, we are leaping a huge chasm: from the dynamic process-Bessie, a whirl of electrochemico-neural eventfulness, to a relatively static “idea,” “concept,” or *word*, “cow.”

Hayakawa and Hayakawa’s observation is not only about Bessie, nor is it only about cows: The reader abstracts, in a part-for-the-whole, ampliative-style inference, and applies the principles to other examples as well. For instance, consider another example of moving up (or down) the abstraction ladder: The critically-acclaimed HBO television series *The Wire* focuses on, among other things, drugs, crime, and politics in Baltimore, Maryland. However, the series is not only about drugs, crime, and politics in Baltimore (the part) *but also* about drugs, crime, and politics in cities all across America (the whole)—if not North America, if not the world. While watching, the savvy viewer moves up and down the abstraction ladder, better understanding the complex social forces and problems in any city by having understood the complex social forces and problems in the Baltimore depicted in *The Wire*.

We abstract—we move from the part to the whole—for a number of reasons, according to Hayakawa and Hayakawa. One of the most important of these is the “indispensable convenience” (p. 86) that abstraction allows. As Hayakawa and Hayakawa note (p. 92), “The ability to climb to higher and higher levels of abstraction is a distinctively human trait without which none of our philosophical or scientific insights would be pos-

sible.” Imagine, for instance, if we did not have a word for the general class of objects known as “houses.” We would need hundreds, thousands, *millions* of words to describe every single house across the world—an impossible task, no doubt, for our limited memories and vocabularies. We *must* abstract from particular instances to general classes or groups.

However, while abstractions are necessary, they are often, Hayakawa and Hayakawa posit (p. 93), “used, consciously or unconsciously, to confuse and befuddle people”—e.g., as when blacks were deprived of their rights to vote “in violation of the Constitution of the United States,” which “was at one time spoken of as ‘preserving states’ rights.” The test of abstractions is, they offer (p. 93),

whether they are referable to lower levels. If one makes a statement about “culinary arts in America,” one should be able to refer the statement down the abstraction ladder to particulars of American restaurants, American domestic science, American techniques of food preservation, down to Mrs. Levin in her kitchen. ... A preacher, a professor, a journalist, or a politician whose high-level abstractions can systematically and surely be referred to lower-level abstractions is not only talking but saying something.

Their last point immediately above, about arguers not only talking but actually saying something, seems a fundamental goal of so many college-level writing programs: not merely communicating (i.e., “talking”) but actually arguing, arguing in reasonable, meaningful ways (i.e., “saying something”). Also consider this point from Hayakawa and Hayakawa (p. 95), especially relevant in its application to a writing program’s mission and goals:

The interesting writer, the informative speaker, the accurate thinker, and the sane individual operate on all levels of the abstraction ladder, moving quickly and gracefully and in an orderly fashion from higher to lower, from lower to higher, with minds as lithe and deft and beautiful as monkeys in a tree.

And, I conclude, a university-level writing course is an ideal site for the teaching of such graceful and orderly argument. As Crosswhite observes in *The Rhetoric of Reason* (1996: 3)

college students probably think more seriously about written reasoning in their composition courses than they do in any other course. In writing courses, they are challenged to formulate, develop, clarify, defend, and revise their own ideas with a frequency and insistence that are not present in any other field of study. Writing courses provide unique and profoundly important matrices for developing the reasoning abilities of college students.

One reasoning matrix that composition scholars and teachers need to explore further is part-for-the-whole, inductive-style ampliative inferences, the moves one makes up and down the abstraction ladder. By incorporating into their curricula straight-forward tests of the strengths of inductive arguments, including Fulkerson’s STAR mnemonic and rubric, university-level writing teachers have a powerful tool at their disposal. Inductive arguments are, in the composition classroom and beyond, far more common than is typically recognized, and an effective composition/argument curriculum should make sufficient room for their study and practice. Data is usually not the plural of anecdote, but without a rubric like STAR, how do we decide when it is?

IS DATA THE PLURAL OF ANECDOTE?

REFERENCES

- Brooks, D. (2010, October 21). The flock comedies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/opinion/22brooks.html?_r=1&ref=opinion
- Burke, K. (1969). *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Corbett, E. (1990). *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. (3rd ed.) New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corbett, E., and Eberly, R. (2000). *The Elements of Reasoning*. (2nd ed.) Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Crosswhite, J. (1996). *The Rhetoric of Reason: Writing and the Attractions of Argument*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Faigley, L., and Selzer, J. (2009). *Good Reasons with Contemporary Arguments*. New York: Longman.
- Fish, S. (2011, March 14). So's your old man. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/14/sos-your-old-man/?ref=opinion>
- Fulkerson, R. (1996). *Teaching the Argument in Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE Press.
- Hayakawa, S., and Hayakawa, A. (1990). *Language in Thought and Action*. (5th ed.) San Diego: Harcourt Brace.
- Holland, J., Holyoak, K., Nisbett, R., and Thagard, P. (1986). *Induction: Processes of Inference, Learning, and Discovery*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Kirsner, L., and Mandell, S. (2011). *Practical Argument: A Text and Anthology*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Lunsford, A., Ruskiewicz, J., and Walters, K. (2009). *Everything's an Argument*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Rottenberg, A., and Winchell, D. (2009). *The Structure of Argument*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Wilhoit, S. (2009). *A Brief Guide to Writing Academic Arguments*. New York: Longman.

Commentary on “IS DATA THE PLURAL OF ANECDOTE?: INDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS IN COMPOSITION”

by Patrick Clauss

LAURA PINTO

*College of Education
Niagara University
Toronto ON
Canada
laura.pinto@utoronto.ca*

1. INTRODUCTION

Clauss’ calls for inclusion of argument and inferential reasoning in introductory writing courses with special emphasis on a type of argument he calls “inductive.” He illustrates in a number of ways how such courses can provide students and teachers with an opportunity to investigate powerful and common cognitive and persuasive techniques.

The paper begins by offering illustrations—from the press, as well as from the author’s own composition class—of the use of a particular type of argument which makes its point by citing one or more examples. Calling such arguments “inductive,” he goes on to outline their role in composition, and to compare the treatment of such arguments in several popular composition textbooks. Clauss insists on the need to provide students in introductory writing courses with a “sound, specific, and practical tool” for appraising arguments, and cites Fulkerson’s STAR framework (Fulkerson 1996) as a noteworthy example of such a tool.

2. APPROACH TO ARGUMENT

Clauss’ account very much exemplifies a particular approach to argument, one which has its roots in rhetorical approaches to argument. It appears to reflect Aristotle’s emphasis (*Rhetoric* I, chapter 2) on examples as one of the two kinds of “proof” found in rhetorical contexts (the other being what he calls “enthymemes”). It also reflects Aristotle’s remark that examples in rhetoric correspond to “induction” (*epagogé*) in “dialectic.” Picking up on this remark, Clauss uses the word “induction” for arguments that depend on citing a few examples—a usage that is quite different from that of logicians and many contemporary rhetoricians.

Clauss does not appear to be orienting himself from the work of contemporary logicians, rhetoricians or argumentations theorists, but rather from the textbooks that are widely used in English composition courses. In short, Clauss situates himself within a very specialized tradition. For example, Clauss sees arguments from example as cases of synecdoche—more particularly as reasoning which proceeds from part to whole. In this regard, he appears to differ from many contemporary rhetoricians, who follow what is said in *Rhetoric* I, 2 (1357b25-27), where Aristotle insists that arguments from example do *not* proceed from part to whole, but rather from part to part.¹

¹ Aristotle has a different story about examples in *Rhetoric* II, 25 1402b13-18. See Hauser’s (1968) attempt to reconcile what’s said in *Rhetoric* I with what’s said in *Rhetoric* II on this point.

3. TEXTBOOK CONTENT

In section 5 of his paper, Clauss describes the ways in which several popular composition textbooks address argument, induction, and inferential reasoning. He reports (perhaps not surprisingly) that these topics are neither widespread nor detailed. Key to this exploration is the assumption that instructors rely on such textbooks; and furthermore he seems to assume that, when they use these textbooks, the instructors do not augment them with additional or other information and concepts—see, for example, what Apple & Christian-Smith (1991) have to say about the various ways textbooks can and should be used.

3. CONCLUSION

In recent years, there has been a great deal of concern and debate among students of argumentation about how to co-ordinate the very different approaches to the study of argument that have been making their presence felt over the last forty some odd years—a debate that usually centers on the relationships that hold among the logical, dialectical and rhetorical approaches to argument and argumentation. Clauss' paper has made me aware that, in addition to the three “usual suspects,” there are still other traditions and approaches that don't fall neatly under the three categories of logic, dialectic and rhetoric as these are usually understood. I am convinced that Clauss has done us all a great service by calling this fact to our attention—making us aware of what appears to be a tradition, with its own body of literature, that has developed among those who teach composition at the university level. Once we recognize this and take it seriously, as I think we should, several topics seem to me to cry out for further investigation. Permit me to close by calling attention to what I believe are three such topics.

- (1) The roots of parts of the “composition” tradition appear to lie in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. But the composition tradition appears to have developed an understanding of some of its elements which is clearly different from the understanding which many who identify their interest as rhetorical have of them. There is, I think, a need (a) to become much clearer about nature and extent of such similarities and differences and (b) to make sense of why those who are teaching composition and those engaged in more theoretical rhetorical studies have come to different understandings of key rhetorical elements.
- (2) Clauss has quite wisely called attention to the need to provide students with a “sound, specific, and practical tool” for appraising arguments, and has attention to Fulkerson's STAR framework as one such tool. As most of us know, proponents of other traditions have also attempted to supply such “specific and practical tools” for evaluation. For example, proponents of the informal logic traditions such as Johnson & Blair (2006) and Govier (2009) have offered an approach that turns on evaluating the acceptability, relevance and sufficiency of premises, implemented in part by a careful deployment of fallacy categories. For another example, Walton (1995) and Walton et al. (2008) have developed highly articulated but nevertheless manageable lists of “argumentation schemes”, in which each scheme is associated with a list of “critical questions” that can guide an evaluator in the appraisal of arguments. There are interesting and important

questions about the relative merits, as student aids, of these three and of other “tools for evaluating arguments.”

- (3) Clauss assumes the importance of textbooks, but says little about how such textbooks are to be employed. I mentioned above that Apple & Christian-Smith (1991) have much to say about the various ways textbooks can and should be used. There are, I believe, important and crucial questions about how textbooks can and should be used in composition courses that emphasize argumentation if the students in such courses are to acquire truly critical skills of argument appraisal.

This paper sheds light on a particular tradition of argumentation, as I indicated earlier. This difference is itself very interesting and clearly a laudable goal for composition instructors to take it seriously. Moreover, the similarities and differences between these different conceptions of the role of example and induction deserve detailed and serious study.

Finally, the paper raises a number of potentially fruitful areas for future investigation, including:

- Tracing the development of this textbook tradition to see how the earlier Aristotelian ideas came to take the form that they take in the composition textbook tradition. Bryant (1999) has reported on this to some degree, though a more recent investigation on how this has evolved in the last decade would be a timely addition to the literature.
- A fuller account of the extent to which argument is addressed within existing introductory composition courses, as well as how popular textbooks and additional supplementary instructional materials are used in those classes.

REFERENCES

- Apple, M.W., and Christian-Smith, L.K. (1991). The politics of the textbook. In: Apple, M.W. and Christian-Smith, L.K. (eds). *The politics of the textbook*. London: Routledge.
- Bryant, L.A. (1999). A textbook’s theory: Current composition theory in argument textbooks. In: Gale, X.L., and Gale, F.G. (eds). *(Re)visioning composition textbooks: Conflicts of culture, ideology, and pedagogy* (pp. 113-133). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Govier, Trudy (2009). *A Practical Study of Argument*, 7th edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth,
- Hauser, G.E. (1968). The example in Aristotle’s Rhetoric: bifurcation or contradiction? *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, 78-90.
- Johnson, R.H., and Blair, J.A. (2006). *Logical Self-Defense*. International Debate Education Association.
- Walton, D. (1995). *Argumentation Schemes for Presumptive Reasoning*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Walton, D., Reed, C, and Macagno, F. (2008). *Argumentation Schemes*. Cambridge University Press.