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Argument in academic writing: a comparison of three disciplinary traditions

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Structure

- General points about academic writing from undergraduate to postgraduate and research levels
- Argumentation in higher education
- Three disciplinary traditions – and a fourth
- Academic writing in general – a summary and some issues for the future

General points about academic writing

- From essay to dissertation/thesis: a matter of scaling up
- Increasing importance of structure
- Scaling down: the abstract
- Writing for publication as opposed for assessment and examination: articles, reports, books
- Alternatives to the essay and dissertation

Argumentation in higher education

- A core skill/competence/capability
- Generic (field-independent) argument as opposed to discipline-specific (field-dependent)
- Habermas, Toulmin
- Suggestion that argumentation is not only relevant to higher education, but also to school education (5-18)

Three disciplines – and a fourth

- History
 - “argument *is* the discipline”
- Electrical Engineering
 - Used in presentations to justify a design
- Biology
 - “too high a term...”
- Education/Educational Studies
 - an interdisciplinary field of practice and enquiry

History 1

- One of the aims for the undergraduate course in History is “to show how you interpret the past”.
- “Because of the limitations upon what may be known, history is a matter for interpretation and debate. You will be encouraged to read (and listen) critically...You will have to formulate your own views and to substantiate them with evidence and argument.”
- One of the students suggested that you could identify a historian at a party by the way he or she talked with you.

History 2

- The course moves from broad historical and historiographical topics in year 1 to more narrowly focussed period modules in year 2; then to a module called 'Issues in historical thought', one on comparative studies and finally to a 10,000 word dissertation.
- "...increasing criticality, awareness of controversies...and via the process of drilling down at the points of dispute through tertiary, secondary and primary sources to the epistemological sub-strata" (Andrews 2009, p548)
- Argumentation is seen as central to the discipline

History 3

- Interesting to note that school level History is also interested in History-as-a-subject. See the work of Counsell (2004) on history and literacy for 11-12 year olds; Hammond (2007) on teaching 13-14 year olds to use theory and reflect on historical methodology; and Fordham (2007) about teaching post-16 students to argue.

An example

- “To speak of the ‘Long Peace’ of Europe in the mid- or late-20th century would have seemed bizarre to the populations who saw themselves as innocent pawns, trapped in the centre of an ongoing conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. Yet only a few years after its end, the Cold War period...is seen as the most peaceful period in modern European history. This essay will examine the peace and its ending in 1991 primarily in terms of the power and decline of the Soviet Union...”

An example from another discipline: literature studies

- ‘Discuss the presentation of women in one or more Shakespeare films.’
- “Ostensibly the role of women in Shakespeare’s writing seems a negligible one – they can be seen as purely wives, sisters, daughters, mistresses or servants of the male protagonists, functioning only as subservient confidants or messengers. Yet...”
- In film, they are often foregrounded.

Biology 1

- Some lecturers think that students cannot know enough at undergraduate level to argue a position
- The emphasis more on testing given concepts via scientific method
- It does appear in the latter years in essay-writing or small group tutorials; in combined courses like biochemistry; and in loose explorations of the application of biological knowledge in society
- But writing (language) is subjugated to concepts, procedures and practices

Biology 2

- “The ultimate test of their ability to construct an argument is in the written report of their 3rd year project. They are given a project to conduct by themselves...It normally involves a laboratory investigation but it can involve fieldwork, or...no gathering of data but just constructing an argument. That piece of work is a bit like a scientific paper where you ask the question and you answer it, and you debate whether you got the answer right or not...But if you look at most scientific papers, they are not really much about arguments. They are one-sided cases....It’s a very strange thing that they like to pretend that they like to debate. They don’t. They just want to be right.”

Electrical and mechanical engineering

1

- Dissertation: 60 pages of diagrams, mathematical calculations and computer programming on gear design.
- “The objective of the project was to develop a piece of software for use with gear design. It would act both as a learning aid for students studying engineering...and as a research tool to aid the stress analysis of gear teeth. The produced software was tested, first with students to measure its useability, then against example calculations from gear handbooks...”
- The argument is basically: ‘There is a need for new software. I created and tested it, and conclude that it makes an effective contribution. Here is the tested product’. Behind the simple claim is a wealth of data that provides evidence for the claim and the processes.

Electrical and mechanical engineering

2

- In one way, the whole project is an argument, with diagrams, photographs, the product itself, words, mathematical calculations and computer programming
- In another way, engineers see the ‘argument’ as an important part of their work, but the means by which they persuade an audience – in words - that their design is a worthy one.

A fourth field: Educational Studies

- Not a discipline as such; more an interdisciplinary field of enquiry
- In interdisciplinary fields, there may be more than one 'backing', and more than one 'warrant' operating
- The question – 'What counts as evidence in Education?' – is therefore a crucial one in the field
- The best work by students makes these values, theories and methods for linking propositions to evidence as clear as possible; and makes the connection to a field of practice

Different subjects and disciplines

- As subjects become disciplines, the ways in which they work become more differentiated
- Sometimes, these 'rules' remain hidden to students, and only implicitly expressed by lecturers and teachers
- And yet the 'rules' are a key to success.
- The implication is that academic writing needs to be addressed early in a degree; not just on the surface (e.g. How to write an essay in xx') but in terms of the epistemological nature of the discipline. Indeed, what distinguishes a discipline from a subject is partly the kind of discourses that go on.

Academic writing: summary

- From BA to PhD, it's a matter of scale
- Teachers, lecturers and students need to address the base of the iceberg as well as the tip, and it's best to do so early in the degree programme
- Different forms of writing could be introduced to better match the epistemological nature of the discipline
- Writing = composition, and could include images (still and moving), sound etc.
- See forthcoming *Sage Handbook of Digital Dissertations and Theses* (Andrews et al. 2011)

Some examples of chapters

- ‘Electronic dissertations in institutional repositories’, *Sarah Shreeves, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*
- ‘Mixed mode theatre and performance: a student perspective’, *Zoë Andrews, King’s College London/RADA*
- ‘A multimodal perspective on research in an age of provisionality’, *Gunther Kress, Institute of Education, London*
- ‘Adolescent literacies, multimodality, ethnographies/researching multimodally’, *Lalitha Vasudevan, Teachers College, Columbia University*

References 1

- Andrews, R. (2009a) *The Importance of Argument in Education*, London: Institute of Education
- Andrews, R. (2009b) 'A case study of argumentation in undergraduate level in History' in *Argumentation* 23: 4, 547-58.
- Andrews, R. (2009c) *Argumentation in Higher Education: improving practice through theory and research*, New York: Routledge.
- Andrews, R. and Hertzberg, F. (2009) special issue on argumentation and education in England and Scandinavia: *Argumentation* 23:4.

References 2

- Andrews, R., Borg, E., Boyd Davis, S., Domingo, M. and England, J. (eds) (2011) *The Sage Handbook of Digital Dissertations and Theses*, London: Sage
- Some of these and other publications on argument and academic writing in higher education are available at the Institute of Education repository:
<http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/cgi/search/>

References 3

- Counsell, C. (2004) *History and Literacy in Year 7: building the lesson around the text*, London: Hodder Murray
- Davies, I. (ed.) (2010) *Debates in History Teaching* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fordham, M. (2007) 'Slaying Dragons and sorcerers in year 12: in search of historical argument'. In *Teaching History*, 129: 31-8.
- Hammond, K. (2007) 'Teaching Year 9 about historical theories and methods'. In *Teaching History*, 128: 4-9.



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